

## is your writing advice practical? or... FLERD?

(No, you probably do not know what *Flerd* means. We chose it just for its attention-getting value. A now unused--or rarely used-- word, it means "Deceit. Fraud.")

Well, other than gimmicks like mental mapping, probably very little writing advice is truly fraudulent. That is, most of it is well meant. But much of it is harmful, in that it encourages counterproductive approaches to writing *at the expense of useful ones*.

The fair questions to ask about the writing advice you're getting are: "Is it useful? Does it work? Will it change my habits for the better?"

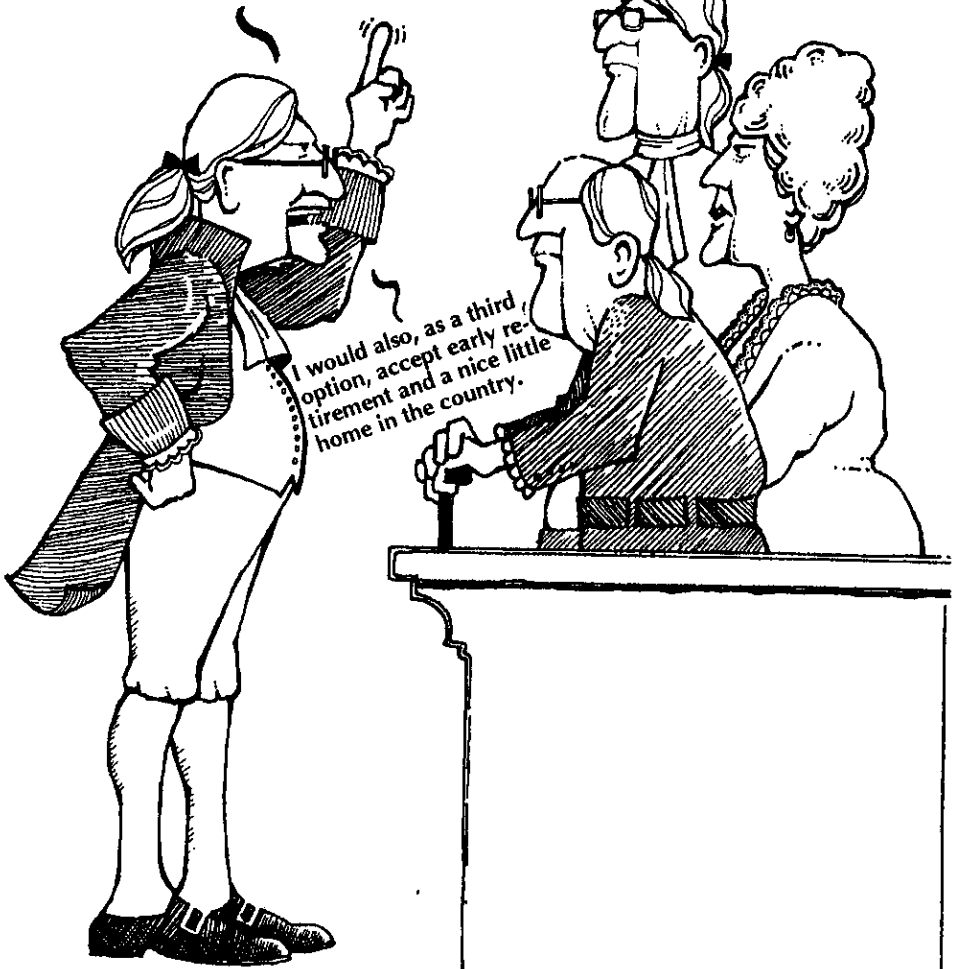
Writing advice should change the writer's habits for the better. The reason it doesn't is that it is too general, even simplistic.

For example, almost all writing courses endorse use of simpler, smaller words. Who would argue with that? But does the simpler, smaller word always fit? Is it always better? Does it always exist? What short, simple word would you substitute for *civilization*? For *republic*, *catastrophe* or *paralysis*?

**Here's a simple point that almost every writing program ignores:**

One of the big problems with our own writing is that *we're so close to it for so long*; it becomes hard to tell when we're using big words thoughtfully and when we're using them simply out of habit.

I know not what course  
others may take, but, as for me,  
**GIVE ME LIBERTY  
OR GIVE ME DEATH!!**



'RULES' HALF-REMEMBERED from school hamper most writers. Remember this one: "A paragraph must have more than one sentence"? If Patrick Henry had followed it, he'd have watered-down his strongest speech.

Here's how Twain advises writers to evaluate their choice of words: (Compare this counsel to the usefulness of the advice you're now receiving.)

### ❖ **Be SURE of Your Big Words**

It is simplistic and wrong to say or imply that big words are bad and small words good.

Small words, though often powerful, have limitations. And big words, though often ponderous, have specific values in certain instances.

You would agree, for instance, that each big word should be carefully chosen, so it will have some communication value, and not selected capriciously or troweled on without thought.

But so much of our writing is routine and repetitive that we can easily have trouble telling the well-chosen big word from the "freebie," the habitual big word.

The SURE test is a guaranteed way to double-check your big words, to separate the legitimate ones from the freebies. This is the test:

- ❖ Is the big word **Simpler** than a small one would be?

*Sponsorship* is simpler than *aegis*; *understanding* than *ken*; and *condescend* than *deign*.

- ❖ Is the big word **Unique**?

In addition to much of your technical vocabulary, you use many non-technical big words because they

have no small-word substitutes: *Geography, politics, government, establishment, constitution, communication, civilization, heredity...*

❖ Does the big word add **Richness**?

That is, is it a fresh, colorful or high-impact way to make your point or put the subject? For instance, you might on purpose use *envelop* for *surround*, *concurrence* for *consent*, *exacerbate* for *aggravate*, *idiosyncratic* for *odd and* *skullduggery* for *corruption*.

(Of course, it's easy to justify almost any word under the Richness label. If you find yourself tending to do this, ask: "Is this the word I almost always use in this sense? Is this the one almost everyone else uses?" If the answer to either question is "Yes," odds are that the word is a freebie: *Utilization* always means *use*; *immediately* always means *at once*; *consequently* always means *so*.)

❖ Is the big word **Economical**?

Does it save you the use of many small words? For instance, ***management*** for *the people who manage the company*; ***my destination*** for *the place to which I am going*; ***disarmament*** for *the act of discarding all weapons*, and so on.

If the big word is not simpler (S), unique (U), rich (R) or economical (E), it falls outside the SURE test and is a habitual big word, a freebie.

**If you employ this test, you may find that 15 to 20 per cent of your big words fail it.**

About that portion--up to one-fifth--of the typical writer's large words are freebies. They're used simply because *he or she has learned them and has gotten into the habit of using them.*

Somewhere in our schooling we were told (or allowed to infer) that the proper function of our large-word vocabulary is to substitute for our small-word vocabulary. The truth is, the role of a large-word vocabulary is to supplement our small words. That's how language grows, creating and using a big word only when a small word or words won't do the job.

But it's human, once having gone to the trouble of learning the big word, to start using it in writing, and let the small word lie there and rot. So it is that some companies never "do" anything; they *accomplish* it. Certainly they never "try to do" anything; they *endeavor* to *accomplish* it. Nor do they "start" anything; they *initiate* whatever it may be: a plan, negotiations, a conversation, some paper work. Someday you'll hear a worker complain he's having trouble initiating his automobile. He probably bought it at a utilized car lot.

If you're mired in the big-word habit, you may at first have trouble coming up with small ones. But, as the old saying goes: If at first you are not successful, endeavor, endeavor repeatedly!

Or however that there old saying goes.

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***Is the writing advice you've been receiving just nice stuff--or is it usable? Could you immediately***

*follow the advice, or is it only information to think about?*

*Does the instruction enhance the style, flavor or tone of your writing?*

*If not, what is its value?*