

**REVIEW:**

**STYLE AND READABILITY IN BUSINESS WRITING**

**Michael Keene**

Sentence combining has been around for twenty years or more, but it has been slow to find a secure place in writing textbooks. *Style and Readability in Business Writing*<sup>1</sup> (along with its near twin, *Style and Readability in Technical Writing*), by Gary A. Olson, James DeGeorge, and Richard Ray (Random House, 1985), is the kind of book one wishes to see more of. It takes a particular approach to teaching writing (albeit in this case an approach still in some areas hotly debated), one with much in the literature to recommend it, and gives it a full, book-length presentation. At 212 pages and \$8.85, *Style and Readability* can be either a supplemental or a main text; in either setting, it should enhance any class in which it is used. While one might question or quibble with a number of things about the book, in the main it is a clear presentation of useful and important material. Whether it can successfully defy what has become a publishing convention—single-approach books don't sell—is beyond the scope of this review.

Of the book's two self-proclaimed focal points—style and readability—it is much stronger on the former. The material on sentence combining is thoroughly and systematically presented. But no particular readability measures are presented, and the book consistently downplays (by omission) the important components of readability that exist beyond the sentence, beyond the paragraph, and beyond the text. Other important factors such as purpose, audience and the role the writer plays are not discussed at length in *Style and*

*Readability.* The kind of attention characteristically given to readability (as opposed to sentence combining) in this book may be seen in the following passage, the introduction to Unit Nine, Nominalizations: “*Nominalizations* are nouns formed from verbs or adjectives that have been turned into *nominals*, another word for nouns. We call this noun form special, not to praise it, but because it often leads to special writing problems—the kinds of problems that make sentences hard to read” (113). Unit Eight, Readability Guidelines, offers ten excellent guidelines for improving the readability of sentences (“Use Personal Pronouns,” “Avoid Difficult Words When You Can,” etc.), but—as the authors themselves state—the guidelines are all on the sentence level. On that level, however, *Style and Readability* makes a thorough and effective presentation.

The book has nine “units” (actually chapters): Combining with Addition/Deletion, Combining with the Wh-Connection, Combining with the Noun/Noun Connection, Combining with the Ing/Ed-Connection, Miscellaneous Addition/Deletion Strategies, Embedding Clauses and Phrases, Transposing Strategies, Readability Guidelines, Nominalizations, Paragraph Cohesion, and Open Exercises. Most of the units follow about the same pattern: an initial presentation of the particular strategy to be discussed (with examples), “Trial Run Exercises,” and “Combining in Context” (with fifteen or so consecutive sentences from a report on an appropriate topic, e.g., Theory Z, offered one sentence per line). The general approach is typical to sentence combining: instructions are given about how to combine elements (“Combine the following sentences. ... Use the noun/noun connection wherever possible.”), and groups of sentences are then offered to combine:

1. Theory Z encourages workers and managers to share.  
Theory Z is a Japanese labor and management theory.  
The workers are blue-collar workers.  
The sharing is in decision making. (27)

This “Combining in Context” part of most units also offers examples of typical kinds of business documents: for example, twenty-four sentences from a letter of complaint, and eighteen from a response to such a letter. Documents shown in the book include many kinds of routine correspondence, various short reports, memoranda, legal briefs, and the summary.

Later units of the book present elements of writing that are per-

haps too sophisticated for many students. Consider, for example, this section from Unit Nine, Nominalizations:

#### Revising Nominalized Sentences

Using nominalizations as subjects leads to reduced verb options, but it also leads to fewer options for structuring the rest of the sentence. A writer, having chosen a nominalization as a subject, risks losing control of the entire sentence.

Most any heavily nominalized sentence will demonstrate this, but let’s look at example I again (nominalizations are in italics):

1. *A reduction* in the company’s work forte was the result of the lack of a favorable response by too many customers to its new *products*.

Here, the nominalized subject, *reduction*, produced the verb *was*. With this subject and this verb, what options remain for continuing the sentence? Not very many. If you choose to tinker with the verb, you might consider such options as *came about* or *became inevitable* (119).

The discussion of this sentence alone occupies two pages, and one wonders whether most students have sufficient interest in this one heavily nominalized sentence to sustain such a lengthy presentation. While earlier units are not so wordy, the book as a whole has about it that air of scholarly presentation (as opposed to textbook breeziness) that says with every line it is not for freshmen, or for unmotivated undergraduates either.

Just as the book’s style and manner of presentation in general seem to be aimed at the very top part of the college population, so the nature of its content places some tough intellectual challenges in front of its readers. Unit Ten, Paragraph Cohesion, is an excellent presentation of the subject (if its audience is taken to be writing *teachers*), but its appropriateness for undergraduates is a little questionable. It covers (1) cohesion in general, (2) repetitions, variations, and substitutes, (3) location markers, signpost binders, and old and new information—all key elements in cohesion—but the presentation alone takes thirteen pages, all before the exercises start. This is *Style and Readability* at its most demanding, quite possibly too demanding for most undergraduates.

In the main, then, *Style and Readability* is a clear and coherent

presentation of the elements of sentence combining applied to business writing. Before adopting it, one would want to consider whether its singleminded focus on sentence combining is a strength or a weakness (is it the sole text or a supplementary text?) and whether the level of its content is appropriate for the students in question (it is definitely not for freshmen). These comments, however, could be made in one form or another about nearly any sentence combining textbook. An excellent extended discussion of sentence combining is William Strong's "Linguistics and Writing," Chapter Five in *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition* (MLA forthcoming). *Style and Readability* has both the strengths and the weaknesses characteristic of its approach—if you like sentence combining, you'll like this book.

University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, Tennessee

#### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>STYLE AND READABILITY IN BUSINESS WRITING, Gary A. Olson, et al. (New York Random House, 1985, 212 pages, \$8.95, ISBN-0-394-33151-6).