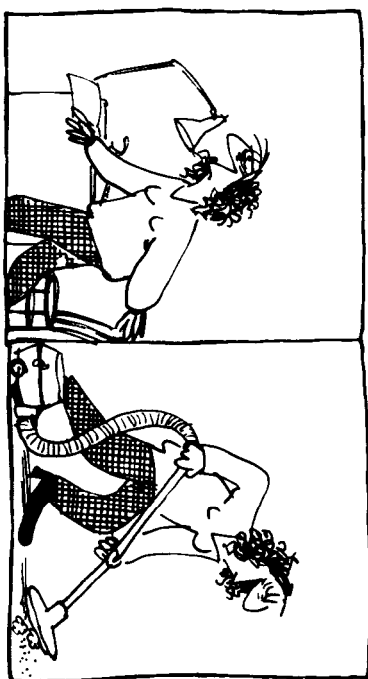# Persona and Authority

Rosanna Hertz, now a colleague but then a very advanced student, came into my office one day and said she'd like to talk to me about a chapter of her thesis-in-progress, which I had edited for her. She said, in a careful tone which I supposed hid a certain amount of irritation, that she agreed that the writing was improved—shorter, clearer, on the whole much better. But, she said, she didn't quite understand the principles that governed what I had done. Could I go over the document with her and explain them? I told her that I wasn't sure what principles governed my editorial judgment, that I really edited by ear (I'll explain that expression, which does not mean that there are no rules at all, in Chapter 4). But I agreed to do my best. I wondered whether I actually did follow any general principles of editing and thought that, if I did, I might discover them by trying to explain them to her.

Rosanna brought her chapter in a few days later. I had rewritten it extensively, cutting a lot of words but, I hoped, not losing any of her thought. It was a very good piece of work—rich data, imaginatively analyzed, well-organized—but it was very wordy and academic. I had removed as much of the redundancy and academic flourish as I thought she would stand for. We went over it, a page at a time, and she quizzed me on each point. None of my changes involved technical sociological terms. Where she wrote "unified stance" I substituted "agreement," because it was shorter. I replaced "confronted the issue" with "talked about," because it was less pretentious. A longer example: where she wrote "This chapter will examine the impact of money or, more specifically, independent incomes on relations between husbands and wives with particular regard to the realm of financial affairs," I substituted "This chapter will show that independent incomes change the way husbands and wives handle financial affairs," for similar reasons. I removed meaningless qualifications ("tends to"), combined sentences that repeated long phrases, and when she said the same thing in two ways in successive sentences, took out the less effective version, explaining what I was doing and why as I went along.

She agreed with each of my ad hoc explanations, but we weren't discovering any general principles. I asked her to take over and work on a page of text I hadn't done anything to. We went over a few lines and then came to a sentence which said that the people she was studying "could afford not to have to be concerned with" certain things. I asked how she thought she could change that. She looked and looked at the sentence and finally said that she couldn't see any way to improve that phrasing. I finally asked if she could just say that they "needn't worry" about those things.

She thought about it, set her jaw, and decided that this was the place to make her stand. "Well, yes, that is shorter, and it certainly is clearer. . . ." The thought

hung unfinished as blatantly as if she had spoken the four dots aloud. After a prolonged and momentous silence, I said, "But what?" "Well," she said, "the other way is classier."

My intuition told me the word was important. I said that she could repay all the favors she owed me by writing five pages explaining exactly what she meant when she said "classier." She looked embarrassed—it's obvious now that I was taking unfair advantage both of friendship and professorial authority—and said she would. I couldn't blame her for making me wait a couple of months for those pages. She told me later that it was the hardest thing she had ever had to write because she knew she had to tell the truth.

I am going to quote from her letter at length. But this is not just a matter of one author's character and language. "Classier" was an important clue precisely because Rosanna was saying out loud what many students and professionals in the scholarly disciplines believed and felt but, less courageous, were less willing to admit. They had hinted at what she finally wrote and the hints convinced me her attitude was widespread.

The letter I got was four double-spaced pages, and I won't quote all of it or quote it in sequence because Rosanna was thinking out loud when she wrote it and the order is not crucial. She began by remarking,

Somewhere along the line, probably in college, I picked up on the fact that articulate people used big words, which impressed me. I remember taking two classes from a philosophy professor simply because I figured he must be really smart since I didn't know the meaning of the words he used in class. My notes from these classes are almost non-existent. I spent class time writing down the words he used that I didn't know, going home and looking them up. He sounded so smart to me simply because I didn't understand him.... The way someone writes—the more difficult the writing style—the more intellectual they sound.

It is no accident, as they say, that she learned to think this way in college. The excerpt expresses the perspective of a subordinate in a highly stratified organization. Colleges and universities, pretending to be communities of intellectuals who discuss matters of common interest freely and disinterestedly, are no such thing. Professors know more, have the degrees to prove it, test students and grade their papers, and in every imaginable way sit on top of the heap while students stand at the bottom. Some resent the inequality, but intelligent students who hope to be intellectuals themselves accept it wholeheartedly. They believe, like Rosanna, that the professors who teach them know more and should be imitated, whether what they do makes sense or not. The principle of hierarchy assures them that they are wrong and the teacher right. They grant the same privileges to authors:

When I read something and I don't know immediately what it means, I always give the author the benefit of the doubt. I assume this is a smart person and the problem with my not understanding the ideas is that I'm not as smart. I don't assume either that the author is not as smart. I don't assume either that the emperor has no clothes or that the author is not clear because of their own confusion about what they have to say. I always assume that it is my inability to understand or that there is something more going on than I'm capable of understanding.... I assume if it got into the AJS [American Journal of Sociology], for example, chances are it's good and it's important and if I don't understand it that's my problem since the journal has already legitimated it.

She makes a further point, which other people mentioned as well. (Sociologists will recognize it as a specific instance of the general problem of socialization into professional worlds, as discussed, for example, in Becker and Carper 1956a and 1956b.) Graduate students learning to be academics know that they are not

real intellectuals yet—just as medical students know they are not yet real doctors—and search eagerly for signs of progress. The arcane vocabulary and syntax of stereotypical academic prose clearly distinguish lay people from professional intellectuals, just as the ability of professional ballet dancers to stand on their toes distinguishes them from ordinary folks. Learning to write like an academic moves students toward membership in that elite:

> While I personally find scholarly writing boring and prefer to spend my time reading novels, academic elitism is a part of every graduate student's socialization. I mean that academic writing is not English but written in a shorthand that only members of the profession can decipher.... I think it is a way to . . . maintain group boundaries of elitism. . . . Ideas are supposed to be written in such a fashion that they are difficult for untrained people to understand. This is scholarly writing. And if you want to be a scholar you need to learn to reproduce this way of writing.

(This is as good a place as any to note that, in writing the excerpts I have been quoting, Rosanna deliberately adopted a point of view she has since abandoned. When I asked her, she said that she no longer thinks that writing style has anything to do with intelligence or the complexity of ideas.)

She gave some examples of "classy" writing she had caught herself at, with explanations of why she found these locutions attractive:

> Instead of choosing to write "he lives at" I prefer "he resides at." Instead of saying "Couples spend their extra money" (or "additional money" or even "disposable income") I'd choose "surplus income." It sounds more grown-up. Here's a favorite of mine: "predicated upon the availability of" is classier than saying "exists because of" [or,

for that matter, "depends on"]. Maybe it sounds more awesome. Here's another one. I could say "domestic help," but what I choose to do is say "third party labor." The first time I use it I put a "that is" after the phrase and explain it. Then I am at liberty to use "third party labor" throughout, and it sounds fancier. I think the point here is that I am looking for a writing style that makes me sound smart.

None of these classy locutions mean anything different from the simpler ones they replace. They work ceremonially, not semantically.

Writing in a classy way to sound smart means writing to sound like, maybe even be, a certain kind of person. Sociologists, and other scholars, do that because they think (or hope) that being the right kind of person will persuade others to accept what they say as a persuasive social science argument. C. Wright Mills said that the

> lack of ready intelligibility [in scholarly writing], I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of the subject matter, and nothing at all with profundity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.... In large part sociological habits of style stem from the time when sociologists had little status even with other academic men. Desire for status is one reason why academic men slip so easily into unintelligibility.... To overcome the <u>academic prose you have first to overcome the academic pose.</u> (Mills 1959, 218–19, emphasis in the original.)

Living as an intellectual or academic makes people want to appear smart, in the sense of clever or intelligent, to themselves and others. But not only smart. They also want to appear knowledgeable or worldly or sophisticated or down-home or professional—all sorts

of things, many of which they can hint at in the details of their writing. They hope that being taken for such a person will make what they say believeable. We can explore what people mean when they talk or think about writing in a "classy" way, or in any other way, through the idea of a persona (Campbell 1975), if I can be forgiven that classy term. Although writers display their personae through the devices of style, I will not discuss style at length. Strunk and White (1959) and Williams (1981) analyze style and show writers how to use its elements effectively, and readers should pursue the subject there. (Earlier readers of this manuscript added Bernstein 1965; Follet 1966; Fowler 1965; and Shaw 1975 as useful guides to stylistic problems.) I want to emphasize how writers use personae to try to get readers to accept their arguments.

Just as a Briton's accent tells listeners the speaker's class, a scholar's prose tells readers what kind of person is doing the writing. Many sociologists and other scholars, both students and professionals, want to be "classy" people, the kind of people who talk and write that way. Writing classy prose, they try to be or at least create the appearance of being classy.

But what is a classy person, to a young or even middle-aged scholar? My guesses about the content of these fantasies may be wrong. In fact, fantasies of classiness must vary considerably, so no one characterization will do justice to all of them. I imagine it this way: a classy person, to a young professorial type, wears a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbow, smokes a pipe (the men, anyway), and sits around the senior common room swilling port and discussing the latest issue of the Times Literary Supplement or the New York Review of Books with a bunch of similar people. Mind you, I don't mean that the people who have these fantasies really want to be like that. The stylish young woman whose remark provoked this meditation wouldn't be caught dead in such an outfit.

But they want to talk like such a person. Perhaps not that person exactly, but the image gives the flavor.

Whether or not some young academics and academics-in-training want to be classy, the possibility reminds us that everyone writes as someone, affects a character, adopts a persona who does the talking for them. Literary analysts know that, but seldom examine its implications for academic writing. Academics favor a few classic personae whose traits color academic prose, shape academic arguments, and make the resulting writing more or less persuasive to various audiences. Those personae inhabit a world of scholars, researchers, and intellectuals in which it is useful or comfortable to be one or another of these people.

The academic-intellectual world has an ambiguous and uneasy relation to the ordinary world, and many academics worry about their own relation to ordinary people. Do we really differ from them enough to warrant the privileged lives we feel entitled to and often actually lead? When we claim to be thinking hard about something, although visibly just loafing in a chair, should other people let us do that? Why should we have months off from regular work "just to think?" And, especially, should anyone pay any attention to what we think? Why? The persona we adopt when we write tells readers (and by extension all the potential skeptics) who we are and why we should be believed, and that answers all the other questions.

Some personae authors adopt—general human types—deal with the problem of the relations between intellectuals and laypeople directly. Many personae emphasize the differences between us and them—our superiority in important areas—that justify our lives and show why everyone should believe us. When we present ourselves as classy, we want to see ourselves and have others see us as worldly, sophisticated, "smart" in both commonsense meanings. (Becoming an intellectual has helped enough people move up in the class system that it would be silly to ignore that

meaning of "classy.") If we write in a classy way, then, we show that we are generally smarter than ordinary people, have finer sensibilities, understand things they don't, and thus should be believed.

This persona is the one that leads us to use the fancy language, big words for little ones, esoteric words for commonplace ones, and elaborate sentences making subtle distinctions that Rosanna used to find so compelling. Our language strives for the elegance we would like to embody and feel.

Other writers adopt personae which emphasize their esoteric expertise. They like to appear knowledgeable, to be the kind of person who knows "inside stuff" ordinary folks will have to wait to read about in next week's newspaper. Most specialists in matters that concern lay people in some way—labor relations, domestic politics, or perhaps some country which gets itself into the news—love to let people in on what only they know. "Inside dopesters," as David Riesman called them, let readers know who they are by a wealth of detail, mostly unexplained. They write as though their audience consisted of people who knew almost as much about it, or at least about its background— whatever it is—as they do. They mention dates, names, and places only a specialist will recognize, and don't explain. The barrage of detailed knowledge overwhelms readers, who feel compelled to accept the author's argument. How could someone who knows all that be wrong? (I have foregone including detailed examples both because they are so easily available and because each field has its own variations, which I hope readers will find and analyze for themselves.)

James Clifford has described the classic anthropological persona, invented (more or less) by Bronislaw Malinowski, which persuades the reader that the argument being made is correct because, after all, the anthropologist was there: "Malinowski gives us the imago of the new 'anthropologist'—squatting by the campfire, looking, listening and questioning, recording

and interpreting Trobriand life. The literary charter of this new authority is the first chapter of Argonauts [of the Western Pacific], with its prominently displayed photographs of the ethnographer's tent pitched among the Kiriwinian dwellings" (Clifford 1983, 123).

Clifford identifies some of the stylistic devices Malinowski used to project the I-was-there persona: sixty-six photographs, a "Chronological List of Kula Events Witnessed by the Writer," and a "constant alternation between impersonal description of typical behavior and statements on the order of 'I witnessed . . .' and 'Our party, sailing from the North . . .'" He calls these devices claims to "experiential authority":

based on a "feel" for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy and sense of the style of a people or place. . . . Margaret Mead's claim to grasp the underlying principle or ethos of a culture through a heightened sensitivity to form, tone, gesture, and behavioral styles, or Malinowski's stress on his life in the village and the comprehension derived from the "imponderibilia" of daily existence are cases in point (Clifford 1983, 128).

Sociologists who do fieldwork in the anthropological style use similar devices to display a persona whose claim to authority rests on intimate knowledge. William Foote Whyte's description (1943, 14–25) of bowling with the out-of-work men he studied, known to every sociologist, is a classic example.

I gave samples of classy writing from Rosanna Hertz. It is much harder to give examples of writing that project the authoritative persona. Writing only has that character in relation to an audience. Naming the first president of the Bagel Makers' Union and giving the date of the passage of the Wagner Act will not affect a labor relations expert as it does a less specialized reader. So authoritativeness is not inherent in any piece

of writing. These devices only work on an audience unfamiliar with the area. (But it might be necessary to use the same devices to convince experts that you know what you are talking about. An expert in photographic history once warned me that a paper I had written about photography would be ignored by her colleagues because I had incorrectly spelled Mathew Brady's name with two ts and Georgia O'Keeffe's with one f.)

Many academic personae make authors appear generally authoritative, entitled to the last word on whatever they are talking about. Authors who adopt these personae love to correct lay errors, to tell readers definitively what will happen in some delicate international situation whose outcome we can't imagine, to explain what "we scientists" or "we sociologists" know about things lay people have the wrong idea about.

These authorities speak in imperatives: "We must recognize . . ." "We cannot ignore . . ." They speak impersonally, talk about "one" doing things rather than using the first person. (Some grammarians think that "one" substitutes for the second person and cannot be used in place of the first person. They must never have met authorities like the ones I know.) These authorities use the passive voice to convey how little what they say depends on them personally, how much, rather, it reflects the reality their unique knowledge gives them access to. Latour and Woolgar (1979) show that laboratory scientists habitually use a typical authoritative style which conceals any traces of the ordinary human activity which produced their results. (Gusfield 1981 and Latour and Bastide 1983 explore this problem further and give additional examples.)

Some writers—I favor this persona myself—take a Will Rogers line. We are just plain folks who emphasize our similarity to ordinary people, rather than the differences. We may know a few things others don't, but it's nothing special. "Shucks, you'd of thought the same as me if you'd just been there to see what I seen. It's just

that I had the time or took the trouble to be there, and you didn't or couldn't, but let me tell you about it." Something like that. (In fact, this whole book is an extended example of that persona.)

Such writers want to use their similarity to others, their ordinariness, to persuade readers that what they are saying is right. We write more informally, favor the personal pronoun, and appeal to what we-and-the-reader know in common rather than what we know and the reader doesn't.

Every style, then, is the voice of someone the author wants to be, or be taken for. I haven't explored all the types here, and a proper study would begin with a thorough analysis of the major voices in which academics and intellectuals write. That ambitious study is more than this book needs. (A number of social scientists have begun the job. In addition to Clifford 1983, see Geertz 1983 on anthropology and McCloskey 1983 and McCloskey in an unpublished paper on economics.)

This analysis of personae may suggest that there is something illegitimate about speaking in any of these ways. Clearly, you can use these devices illegitimately, to disguise inadequacies of evidence or argument. But we will often, quite reasonably if not logically, accept an argument in part just because the author clearly knows the field (including presidents of the Bagel Makers' Union) or has a general cultural sophistication we respect. The author can't be nobody, so every author will necessarily be somebody. It might as well be someone readers respect and believe.

The list of available personae varies among academic disciplines, because one source of personae is famous teachers or characters in a field. Admiring their teachers, students imitate not only their personal mannerisms, but also the way they write, especially when that style projects a distinctive personality. Thus, many philosophers adopted the diffident, tentative, arrogant persona and the worrying, conversational prose style of

Ludwig Wittgenstein, just as many sociologists who took up ethnomethodology decorated their papers with the endless lists and qualifications of its founder, Harold Garfinkel.

Imitating teachers is the specific form of a general tendency to indicate theoretical and political allegiances by the way one writes. Scholars worry a lot about which "school" they belong to, with good reason, for many fields, highly factionalized, reward and punish people by the allegiances they display. Disciplines seldom do that as rigorously or ruthlessly as authors think, but nervous scholars do not wholly imagine the dangers. You can easily demonstrate your allegiances by using a school's code words, which differ from the words adherents of other schools use, in part, because the theories they belong to in fact give them a slightly different meaning. Most sociological theories rely, for instance, on the idea that people remake society continuously by doing, day in and day out, the things that reaffirm that that is the way things are done. You might say that people create society by acting as though it existed. You might say, if you were a Marxist theorist, that people reproduce social relations through daily practice. If you were a symbolic interactionist, or an adherent of Berger and Luckmann, you might speak of the social construction of reality.

These are not just different words. They express different thoughts. Still, not that different. Code words don't always contain a core of unique meaning, but we still want to use them rather than some other words that might lead people to think that we belong, or would like to belong, to some other school to. The allegiance-signalling purpose of stylistic devices is clearest when the author says things that conflict with the theory the language signals, when the desire to say "I am a functionalist" or "I am a Marxist" overcomes the desire to say what you mean. (Stinchcombe elaborates this idea in an article cited and discussed in Chapter 8.)

John Walton, reading an earlier version of this material and thinking over his experience teaching a seminar something like mine, points out that often

People want very much to show their theoretical colors, to signal to the hip reader (professor or editor) that they are on the right side of a controversial issue. I see that most with writing that wants to communicate sophistication in Marxism without appearing as orthodoxy or susceptible to being branded as such. A term like "social formation" dropped in the right place says what you want to other sophisticates, without carrying much risk.

Walton puts an important point into that parenthesis—that we want to signal somebody in particular, not an abstraction. Whom we want to signal depends on the arena we are operating in, and arenas are often more local than scholarly writers realize, particularly for students. The sociologists and other professors I see in Chicago have different worries and make different criticisms than those Walton sees in Davis, California, and we both have larger professional audiences which differ as well.

Remember that academic writers take on many allegiances to schools and political positions while still in graduate school. That accounts for another major source of stylistic problems. When I argued with students about how they wrote—when I suggested to Rosanna that she write in a way she thought not classy—they told me that I was wrong because that was the way sociologists wrote. I spent a lot of time arguing about that before I saw their point.

The point is professionalization. Academics-in-training worry about whether they are yet, can ever be, or even want to be professional intellectuals of the kind they are changing themselves into. Second or third or fourth year graduate students have not taken

binding vows. They may have second thoughts. Nor have they been finally chosen. They might flunk out. Their committee might turn their theses down. Who knows what might happen?

That uncertainty creates another reason (beyond those discussed earlier) for magical thinking and practice. If you act as though you already were a sociologist, you might fool everyone into accepting you as one, and even take it seriously yourself. Writing is one of the few ways a graduate student can act like a professional. Just as medical students can only do a few of things real doctors routinely do, graduate students do not become professionals until they get their Ph.D. degrees. Until then, they can teach as graduate assistants and work on other people's projects, but will not be taken as seriously as people with degrees. At least, they think that's true, and they are mostly right, so they adopt what they see around them, the style professional journal articles and books are written in, as an appropriate signal of their guild membership.

What kind of writing will do that for them? Not writing plain English prose. Anyone can do that. Students share the attitudes of many art audiences toward "ordinary" modes of expression:

Artistic innovators frequently try to avoid what they regard as the excessive formalism, sterility, and hermeticism of their medium by exploiting the actions and objects of everyday life. Choreographers like Paul Taylor and Brenda Way use running, jumping, and falling down as conventionalized dance movements, instead of the more formal movements of classical ballet, or even of traditional modern dance. . . . [But] less involved audiences look precisely for the conventional formal elements the innovators replace to distinguish art from nonart. They do not go to the ballet to see people run, jump, and fall down; they can see that anywhere. They go instead to see people do the difficult and esoteric formal movements

that signify "real dancing." The ability to see ordinary material as art material—to see that the running, jumping, and falling down are not just that, but are the elements of a different language of the medium—thus distinguishes serious audience members from the well-socialized member of the culture, the irony being that these materials are perfectly well known to the latter, although not as art materials (Becker 1982a, 49–50).

Students are like that. They know plain English but don't want to use it to express their hard-earned knowledge. Remember the student who said, "Gee, Howie, if you say it that way it sounds like something anyone could say." If you want to convince yourself that the time and effort spent getting your degree are worth it, that you are changing in some way that will change your life, then you want to look different from everyone else, not the same. That accounts for a truly crazy cycle in which students repeat the worst stylistic excesses the journals contain, learn that those very excesses are what makes their work different from what every damn fool knows and says, write more articles like those they learned from, submit them to journals whose editors publish them because nothing better is available (and because academic journals cannot afford expensive copy editing) and thus provide the raw material for another generation to learn bad habits from.

I thought the idea that "they" made you write that way was only student paranoia. When I published chapter 1 in *The Sociological Quarterly*, the editors received a letter which made some of the same points:

We suggest that a new voice, an "unknown" in the field today has to earn the "respect" of the profession through a compilation of notable research *and traditional writing* before s/he receives the license to adopt the direct, uncluttered style advocated by Becker. Some journal editors may be "licensed" to use this style, and thus receptive to

it, by the time they achieve editorial positions; however, the receptiveness of editors may be a moot point since most journals are refereed. Perhaps some referees are receptive to this writing style, but perhaps most are not. Articles that are verbose, pretentious, and dull still abound in sociology. . . . We question the wisdom of advising students and faculty just entering the world of "publish or perish" to abandon the ponderous, rigid style of the discipline. . . . Currently, and in the probable future, graduate students . . . will "learn" to write by reading what is written. They generally find dull, verbose, pretentious writing, perpetuating the problem and suggesting that most referees expect such a stilted style (Hummel and Foster 1984, 429–31 [my emphasis]).

Three
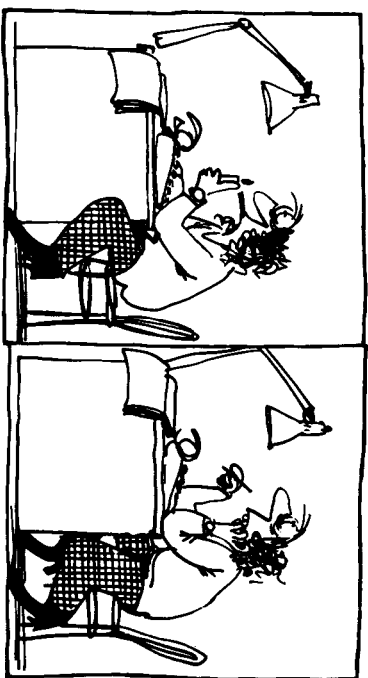
One Right Way

Scholarly writers have to organize their material, express an argument clearly enough that readers can follow the reasoning and accept the conclusions. They make this job harder than it need be when they think that there is only One Right Way to do it, that each paper they write has a preordained structure they must find. They simplify their work, on the other hand, when they recognize that there are many effective ways to say something and that their job is only to choose one and execute it so that readers will know what they are doing.

I have a lot of trouble with students (and not just students) when I go over their papers and suggest revisions. They get tongue-tied and act ashamed and upset when I say that this is a good start, all you have to do is this, that, and the other and it will be in good shape. Why do they think there is something wrong with changing what they have written? Why are they so leery of rewriting?

Four
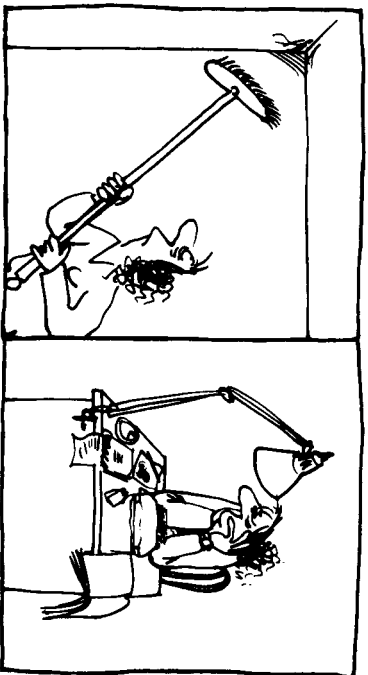
Editing by Ear

W hen I edit people's work, or talk about editing to them, they usually want to know (as my friend Rosanna did) what the principles of editing are. What rules do I use to decide, for instance, when to leave a word out or delete a phrase? No one does anything creative by merely following rules (although rules are necessary and helpful), and even the most routine and trivial writing is creative, whether it's a letter to a friend or a note to a delivery person. Unless you are copying a form letter out of a book or writing the fiftieth thank-you note in exactly the words you used for the other forty-nine, you are creating new language, new combinations, something that didn't exist until you put it down that way.

Grammarians and composition teachers recommend several kinds of rules and guidelines. Many rules, like those requiring that a declarative sentence end with a period or that writing proceed from left to right, do

what conventions typically do in the arts: make it possible to communicate a thought by providing a minimum of shared understanding between creator and consumer. Other rules make it possible to communicate with less chance of unintended confusion and misunderstanding: rules requiring that pronouns agree with their antecedents, for instance. Still others are not rules at all, but rather guidelines to conventional usage and precise meaning (distinguishing, say, between reticent and reluctant). Some, finally, are truly matters of taste, about which reasonable people differ, usually along conservative-progressive lines: should I have used the word bullshit in chapter 1?

What role do these rules and guidelines play in the creation of a piece of writing? It might work like this: we put down whatever comes into our heads, then go back over the result with a rulebook in hand, find all the violations of rules, and bring the text into line with the rulebook. Isn't that what we do when we rewrite?

No. We might do something a little like that, but bringing the text into line with the rulebook cannot be so automatic. Bringing it into line is creative too. Furthermore, sociologists' studies of obedience to rules show that rules are never so clear and unambiguous that we can simply follow them. We always have to decide whether a rule exists at all, whether what we have is really covered by the rule, or whether there might not be some exception that isn't in the book but one the rulemakers, we think, must have intended. We also need to interpret rules so that the result we get is reasonable, not some foolishness resulting from blind rule-following. (Harold Garfinkel [1967, 21–4] describes this practice, which he calls ad hocing, as a fundamental feature of all human activity.)

Mike Rose, drawing on his experience in advising students with writer's block, distinguishes two kinds of rules, one clearly better suited to the activity of rewriting:

Algorithms are precise rules that will always result in a specific answer if applied to an appropriate problem. Most mathematical rules, for example, are algorithms. Functions are constant (e.g., *pi*), procedures are routine (squaring the radius), and outcomes are completely predictable. However, few day-to-day situations are mathematically circumscribed enough to warrant the application of algorithms. Most often we function with the aid of fairly general heuristics or "rules of thumb," guidelines that allow varying degrees of flexibility when approaching problems. Rather than operating with algorithmic precision and certainty, we search, critically, through alternatives, using our heuristic as a divining rod—"if a math problem stumps you, try working backwards to solution"; "if the car won't start, check x, y, or z," and so forth. Heuristics won't allow the precision or the certitude afforded by algorithmic operations; heuristics can even be so "loose" as to be vague. But in a world where tasks and problems are rarely mathematically precise, heuristic rules become the most appropriate, the most functional rules available to us. (Rose 1983, 391–2)

Not surprisingly, students who thought rules about writing were algorithms (I'm not inventing straw men—some did) had trouble, while students who used them as heuristics didn't.

We can't, then, write or even rewrite by treating whatever rules we might decide on as algorithms. If not that way, how? We do it by ear. What does that mean? Looking at a blank sheet of paper, or one with writing on it, we use what "sounds good" or "looks good" to us. We use heuristics, some precise, some quite vague.

Most of the time, when social scientists write, they don't think about rules or guidelines at all. Although they don't consult a rulebook, they do consult something: a standard of taste, a generalized notion of what something ought to look or sound like. If the result doesn't conflict too much with that generalized picture

they let it stand. They work, in other words, like artists, who

often find it difficult to verbalize the general principles on which they make their choices, or even to give any reasons at all. They often resort to such noncommunicative statements as "it sounds better that way," "it looked good to me," or "it works."

That inarticulateness frustrates the researcher. But every art's [read "academic discipline's"] practitioners use words whose meanings they cannot define exactly which are nevertheless intelligible to all knowledgeable members of their worlds. Jazz musicians say that something does or does not "swing"; theater people say that a scene "works" or does not "work." In neither case can even the most knowledgeable participant explain to someone not already familiar with the terms' uses what they mean. Yet everyone who uses them understands them and can apply them with great reliability, agreeing about what swings or works, even though they cannot say what they mean.

[This] suggests that they do not work by consulting a set of rules or criteria. Rather, they respond as they imagine others might respond, and construct those imaginings from their repeated experiences of hearing people apply the undefined terms in concrete situations. (Becker 1982a, 199–200)

Sociologists' standards of taste do not include rules they learned in composition classes, which they have trained themselves to apply almost automatically. I habitually scan almost anything I read for passive constructions; if it is my prose, I immediately consider whether and how to change them. I am not aware of applying a rule or heuristic and don't consult a book to know when or how to do it. But I know what I am doing and can state the relevant principle if asked (as I did for

Rosanna). Most sociologists use some such rules, many of which unfortunately work as unanalyzed algorithmic stumbling blocks rather than aids.

Most sociologists, however, have few consciously formulated heuristics. More often, they rely on the fallible and uninspected judgments of their ear. They develop that ear, their standards of prose, mainly from what they read. They read work they admire and want what they write to resemble it, to look that way on the page. That probably explains why scholarly writing so often deteriorates as students move through graduate school and into an academic career. They read the professional journals and want their work to look like what they read, for reasons I've already discussed. That suggests an immediate remedy for bad academic writing: read outside your professional field, and when you do, choose good models.

We are not stuck forever with the standard of taste we acquired when we entered our discipline. In fact, we change it considerably, even in the short run. We develop our taste not only from reading, but also from what our friends and peers say to us or what we fear they might say. A colleague of mine feared, when he wrote, the unlikely possibility that his prose would end up at the bottom of a *New Yorker* column as a hideous example of academic writing. Such fears can move a sensitive victim to study a book on style in order to incorporate the heuristics they recommend into his or her standard of taste.

But most sociologists (and probably most academic writers) don't hear many critical remarks about their prose or, if they do, don't hear them from anyone they have to pay attention to. Since ignoring problems of writing causes them no immediate and obvious trouble, they spend their time on statistics and methods and theory, which can and do. Editors and professors reject papers that use statistics incorrectly, but only sigh over those badly written. Because content matters more to a field's progress than style, professors will not flunk

smart students who write badly, and some highly esteemed sociologists were notoriously incomprehensible.

The spectacle of a field which cares so little for decent prose may shock outsiders as much it tires insiders, but that is sociology (and probably many other scholarly disciplines), now and in the likely future. As a result, young sociologists have no reason to learn any more about writing than they knew when they began graduate school, and will probably lose some of the skills they do have. If their college English classes have not given them a standard of taste that includes, as working rules, the elements of grammar and style, they will not spend the time to study them seriously. So they will learn to do their editing by ear, if they learn to do it at all.

Since I learned what little I know about writing and editing that way, fortuitously and haphazardly, I find it hard to produce general editorial principles on request. I can, however, give examples, preferably from the work of the person asking the question, and suggest general ideas that seem to be relevant to their problems. Of course, these notions can't be stated algorithmically. I can't say that you must never use passive constructions, but I can say that a particular passive construction misstates an important sociological idea. Nor is it always wrong to use long, abstract words. I have nevertheless, later in this chapter, stated such rules dogmatically because, while passive constructions are sometimes useful, sociologists do not need to be advised to use them, or long, abstract words either. They do those things automatically.

What follow are some examples of how I edit, with some discussion of the choices made, the reasoning behind them, and the guidelines those choices imply. This will put some more flesh on the prescriptions I gave my class. The examples come from early drafts of an article I wrote on photography (Becker 1982b; the published version differs from that quoted here.) The

examples are not remarkable; I can find their like in anything I have ever written and in much that I have published.

To begin, consider the following paragraph, which discusses the strategy of describing social groups through photographic portraits of their members:

Whatever part they [photographers] let stand for the person, the strategy implies a theory and a method. The theory is a simple one, but it is important to make its steps explicit, so that we can see how it works. The theory is that the life a person has lived, its good times and bad, leaves its marks. Someone who has lived a happy life will have a face that shows that. Someone who has managed to maintain their human dignity in the face of trouble will have a face that shows that.... This is a daring strategy, because it makes the little that the photograph does contain carry an enormous weight. We must, if the theory is to work and help us to produce effective images, choose faces, details of them, and moments in their history which, recorded on film and printed on paper, allow viewers to infer everything else they are interested in. Viewers, that is, look at the lines on a face and infer from them a life spent in hard work in the sun.

When I began rewriting this passage, the phrase "it is important to," in the second sentence, caught my attention as typical throat clearing. If it's important to do it, don't talk about it, do it. (This is a typical guideline which is by no means a rule.) I first changed "it is important to" to "we need to." That made the sentence more active, and slightly stronger, and introduced an agent, someone actually doing it. Things that are not done by anyone, but "just are," have a fuzzy quality I don't like.

Having made that change, I still wasn't happy. The sentence had three clauses which were just strung

together. If I can rearrange a sentence so that its organization displays and thus reinforces the connections I am describing, I do. So I cut the first clause, putting its content into an adjectival phrase. Instead of saying the theory was a simple one, I replaced "its steps" in the second clause with "the steps of this simple theory." A few words less, and the simplicity of the theory reduced to a small descriptive point: "We need to make the steps of this simple theory explicit...." Having done it, I no longer had to say that we needed to do it, which was no better than saying it was important to do it. The rewritten sentence reads, "If we make the steps of this simple theory explicit, we can see how it works." It has sixteen words instead of twenty-three. The three strung-together clauses now make an if-then argument that is more interesting than the list it replaced.

Now look at the fourth sentence. I changed "Someone" to "People" for no very good reason, mainly because I wanted to get at "managed to maintain." Wordy phrases like "manage to maintain" try to make simple statements sound profound. Talking about people's ability to act evokes the academic urge to profundity. It seems trivial to say that people "can" do something. We prefer to say that they "had the capability of" or "the ability to" or even, striving for simplicity, that they "were able to." I almost invariably use such constructions in early drafts and replace them with "can" when I rewrite. So I changed the sentence to "People who have kept ...."

Finally, consider the sentence about lines on a face: "Viewers, that is, look at the lines on a face and infer from them a life spent in hard work in the sun." I cut some words that weren't doing much work. I proved that "that is" was meaningless by taking it out and seeing that the sentence lost no meaning. Applying the same test, I changed "a life spent in hard work" to a "life of hard work." But I also saw a way to add a few words and make the image more concrete: "Viewers

look at the lines on a face and infer that they were baked in during a life of hard work in the sun." A slight transposition remedies the ambiguity of "they" and reads even better: "Looking at the lines on a face, viewers infer that...."

The final version, as published, went like this:

Whatever part a photographer chooses to stand for the person, he or she is employing a strategy that relies on a theory and a method. This strategy depends on the assumption that the experiences of life are recorded in faces, that the life a person has lived leaves physical marks.

Photographers, accordingly, choose faces, details of faces, and moments in their histories which, recorded on film and printed on paper, allow viewers to deduce what they don't see but want to know about. Portraits often contain a wealth of detail, so that careful study allows us to make complex and subtle readings of the character of the person and of the life-in-society of that person. Looking at the lines on a face, viewers may conclude that that these were baked in during a life of hard work in the sun. From these same lines, they can infer wisdom produced by hard work and age or, alternatively, senility and decay. To make any of these conclusions, a viewer must bring to bear on the image one of several possible theories of facial lines.

That doesn't exhaust what might be done here. Two sentences, farther on in the article, combined several common difficulties. I gave an example of how a well-known contemporary photographed the interiors of buildings with people in them: "Some of Robert Frank's most compelling images are of offices after hours, with no one there—no one but the janitor cleaning up. A bank looks different when it is occupied by a janitor than when it is occupied by bankers." I might almost leave this, in the style of a mathemat-

ics text, as an exercise for the reader to repair. Not to be a tease about it, however, I began by stating the first phrase more actively: "Robert Frank made some of his most compelling images...." That let me rearrange and simplify the next construction: "Robert Frank made some of his most compelling images in offices after hours," and went on, cutting a repetition I thought forceful when I first wrote it, "when no one was there but the janitors." Why did I cut the "cleaning up" that followed "janitors"? Because I now meant to put that thought into a more concrete image in the next sentence, which I changed to: "A bank occupied only by a janitor pushing a mop looks different from one filled with bankers on the phone." That let me contrast the bankers' telephoning and the janitors' mop-pushing, rather than just mentioning their job titles and letting the reader fill in their characteristic actions. The rewritten sentence also eliminates the repetition of something being "occupied by" somebody. Saying that bankers "filled" the space emphasized the contrast between the bustle of daytime business and the quiet of night-time cleaning that Frank's photograph called attention to.

Here are some further short illustrations. I changed "If you do the former [there is no point in explaining the specifics of these examples], you may be able to" to "The former lets you." I changed "Older houses have lots of [if I had said, less colloquially, "many," it wouldn't have made any difference] rooms with doors on them" to "The rooms in older houses have doors on them." (And now, after publication, I realize that I should have deleted "on them" too.) I changed "according to the method just described" and "the change that has occurred in conceptions of privacy" to "the change in conceptions of privacy."

We spend a lot of time in my writing seminar making similar changes in specimens donated by friends, colleagues, and eventually the students themselves. Stu-

dents find it difficult at first to understand why, having rewritten a sentence, I then rewrite it again, and even a third or fourth time. Why don't I get it right the first time? I say, and try to show them, that each change opens the way to other changes, that when you clear away nonworking words and phrases, you can see more easily what the sentence is about and can phrase it more succinctly and accurately.

They also wonder if picking away at such tiny matters of wording really affects the result. They find the exercise tedious at first, and to be truthful, I prolong the first session unforgiveably. I want them to see that there is always something more to discuss, some further possible change; that I can and probably will question every word and punctuation mark; and that they should learn to do likewise. They find the exercise unnerving. They cannot imagine raising all those questions about every sentence. Eventually I reassure them, as does their own experience. They discover that the process doesn't take as much time as they feared, that you can quickly spot the obvious problems and need worry only about a few that are truly difficult to solve. They learn that line by line editing is easy because the things to fix fall into classes. When you understand the nature of a class, you know how to fix the problems of the sentences that belong to it. (This is, I guess, my way of talking about rules and guidelines.)

What the students accept less easily is that, however long it takes, such detailed editing is worth doing. They can see that each change makes things marginally clearer and cuts out a few words that probably weren't doing much work anyway. But what good is that? I know that when I finished Art Worlds, I thought I had done all the editing the prose needed or could stand. A gifted copy editor, Helen Tartar, went over it and made hundreds of further changes, few as extensive as the ones I have just discussed. When I read the material with her changes, I felt the way I do when, looking through the viewfinder of my camera, I give the lens

that last quarter turn that brings everything into perfect focus. Good editing does that, and it's worth doing. The unnecessary words take up room and are thus uneconomic. They cheat, demanding attention by hinting at profundities and sophistication they don't contain. Seeming to mean something, those extra words mislead readers about what is being said.

The sentences we just considered exemplify classes of problems and the way the problems can be solved. None of the guidelines I am going to give is original. It would be a wonder if they were. Generations of English teachers, editors, and writers have discovered and rediscovered them, taught them to students, and recommended them to writers. Some word-processing programs even find typical stylistic faults and suggest corrections. Here is my version, tailored to the needs of sociologists, but perhaps useful to scholars in other disciplines as well.

1. Active/passive. Every writing text insists that you substitute active verbs for passive ones when you can. (Doesn't that sound better than saying "The necessity of replacing passive verbs with active ones is emphasized in every book on writing"?) What matters more than the grammatical distinction between active and passive is the simple act of putting the crucial actions into verbs and making some important character in the story you are telling the subject of the verb. But paying attention to the grammatical distinction starts you on the right road. Active verbs almost always force you to name the person who did whatever was done (although gifted obfuscators can avoid the requirement). We seldom think that things just happen all by themselves, as passive verbs suggest, because in our daily lives people do things and make them happen. Sentences that name active agents make our representations of social life more understandable and believable. "The criminal was sentenced" hides the judge who, we know, did the sentencing and, not incidentally, thus makes the criminal's fate seem the operation of impersonal forces

rather than the result of people acting together to imprison him or her. Almost every version of social theory insists that we act to produce social life. Karl Marx and George Herbert Mead both thought that, but their followers' syntax often betrays that theory.

2. *Fewer words.* Scholarly writers often insert words and whole phrases when they don't want to say something as flatly as it first came to them. They want to indicate a modesty, a reservation, a sense that they know they might be wrong. Sometimes they want to recognize that readers may disagree by suggesting politely, before actually saying whatever they are going to say, that it merits attention, instead of just saying it right out, as though it of course merited attention. That's why I had said at first "it was important" to make the theory's steps explicit. But if it isn't important, why bother to do it? And if it is, won't I doing it make that clear enough without a preliminary announcement?

We scholars also use unnecessary words because we think, like the student in my seminar, that if we say it plainly it will sound like something anybody could say rather than the profound statement only a social scientist could make. We give it that special importance by suggesting that some important process underlies what we are talking about. So I had at first spoken of people who "managed to maintain" their dignity. That hints, as "people who have kept" their dignity doesn't, that keeping their dignity was difficult and they had to work at it. But I was writing about photographers, not about people surmounting trouble. While people do maintain their dignity, just as the phrase suggests, this article doesn't talk about that, and it was therefore distracting and pointless to mention it. Similarly, "the change that has occurred in conceptions of privacy" makes the process of change in those conceptions important. If I delete the italicized words, the point I want to make is intact and I have removed a distracting reference to an unanalyzed process I won't mention again.

Sometimes we put those throat-clearing phrases in because the rhythm or structure of the sentence seems to require it, or because we want to remind ourselves that something is missing in the argument. We want to make an if-then argument, but we haven't consciously worked out the causal connection our intuition thinks is there. So we make the form and hope the content will appear to fill it. Or we do it out of habit. We get attached to locutions and formats. Like many scholarly writers, I often write sentences with three predicate clauses: "This book excites our curiosity, gives us some answers, and convinces us that the author is right." (The second sentence of the next paragraph is another good example, one that occurred naturally as I was writing.) But I often use that form whether I have three things to say or not, and then I have to scratch for the third thing, which is then vacuous. No harm. It comes out in editing.

An unnecessary word does no work. It doesn't further an argument, state an important qualification, or add a compelling detail. (See?) I find unnecessary words by a simple test. As I read through my draft, I check each word and phrase to see what happens if I remove it. If the meaning does not change, I take it out. The deletion often makes me see what I really wanted there, and I put it in. I seldom take unnecessary words out of early drafts. I'll see them when I rewrite and either replace them with working words or cut them.

3. *Repetition.* Scholars create some of their most impenetrable obscurities by trying to be clear. They know that vague pronouns and ambiguous syntax can leave what they mean unclear, so they repeat words and phrases if there is any possibility of confusion. That may not confuse readers, but it usually bores them. I am not simply repeating the mechanical rule we all learned in high school: don't repeat the same word within so-and-so many sentences. You may have to repeat words, but you shouldn't repeat words when you can get the same result without doing it. Remember

my sentence: "A bank looks different when it is occupied by a janitor than when it is occupied by bankers." "When it is occupied" doesn't require repetition and makes readers' minds wander. If I think about it, I can create a more compact and interesting sentence, as I tried to do in that example.

4. Structure/content. The thoughts conveyed in a sentence usually have a logical structure, stating or implying some sort of connection between the things it discusses. We might want to say that something resembles or actually is something else (state an identity): "A mental hospital is a total institution." We might want to describe an identifying characteristic of a class of phenomena: "People who move from the country are marginal to the urban society they enter." We might want to identify something as a member of a class: "Monet was an Impressionist." We might want to state a causal connection or an if-then relation: "Slums produce crime" or "If a child grows up in a broken home, that child will become delinquent." We can state these connections as I have just done. That will be enough to make our point clear. But we can be even clearer by reinforcing the point syntactically.

Syntax, the way we arrange the sentence's elements, indicates the relations between them. We can reinforce a sentence's thought by arranging its elements so that its syntax also makes the argument or, at least, does not interfere with the reader's understanding of it. We can, for example, put subordinate thoughts in subordinate positions in the sentence. If we put them in positions of importance, readers will think they are important. If we make every thought in the sentence equally important grammatically by stringing together coordinate clauses, readers will think they are equally important. That happens when, giving in to habit, I say I have three things to discuss and then label them one, two, and three or just list them one after the other. We can usually make our point more forcefully by going from

one to the next in a way that shows how they are connected other than by following one another in a list.

5. Concrete/abstract. Scholars generally, and sociologists particularly, use far too many abstract words. Sometimes we use abstractions because we don't have anything very specific in mind. Scholars have favorite abstract words which act as placeholders. Meaning nothing in themselves, they mark a place that needs a real idea. Complex or complicated and relation exemplify the type. We say that there is a complex relation between two things. What have we said? "Relation" is such a general concept that it means almost nothing, which is why it is so useful in very abstract branches of mathematics. All it says is that two things are connected somehow. But almost any two things are related somehow. In disciplines less abstract than mathematics we usually want to know how. That's what's worth knowing. Complex doesn't tell us, it just says, "Believe me, there's a lot to it," which most people would concede about almost anything. Most of the spatial metaphors used in discussions of social life and other scholarly topics—levels and positions in social organizations, for instance—cheat readers of concrete specificity that way. So do phrases which hint that what we are describing is part of a collection of similar things: "a set of" or "a kind of."

We also use abstractions to indicate the general application of our thought. We don't want anyone to think that what we have found out is only true of Chicago schoolteachers or a mental hospital in Washington. We want them to understand that what we found where we did our research can be found under similar circumstances anywhere in the world, any time in history. There is nothing wrong with that: it is a major reason for doing sociological research. We can best convince readers of the generality of our results by describing what we have studied in specific detail and then showing, in similar detail, what class of things it belongs to and what other things are likely to belong to

that class. If I show in detail how people learn to smoke marihuana from others and how that affects their experience of the drug's effects, I can go on to describe a class of similar phenomena in similar specificity: how people learn from others to understand their inner physical experiences. The specific case I have described in detail provides a model to which readers can refer my more general ideas. Without the specifics, the general ideas don't mean much.

Writing manuals tell us to use concrete details because they make the matter more alive to the reader, more memorable. Williams (1981), for instance, says: "Regardless of our audience, we can make writing readable and memorable by writing specifically and concretely. When we squeeze long, windy phrases into more compact phrases, we make diffuse ideas sharply specific. . . . The more narrow the reference, the more concrete the idea; the more concrete the idea, the clearer and more precise the idea (132–3)."

When we use concrete details to give body to abstractions, however, we should choose the details and examples carefully. The example that readers have in mind will bring in considerations not explicitly addressed in the general argument and color our understanding of it. Kathryn Pyne Addelson, a philosopher who has analyzed the ethical problems of abortion, says that philosophers typically concoct very fanciful examples—of hypothetical women impregnated by flying insects and the like—and that such a choice of examples lets them reach conclusions they would not support if they discussed the case of a pregnant forty-year-old woman with five children whose husband is out of work.

6. Metaphors. I am leafing through the current issues of a few journals in sociology (I don't think the results would differ if the journals were in history or psychology or English literature). On almost every page I find trite metaphorical talk. "Some cutting edge seems lacking" in a book being reviewed. Another book "covers a

huge terrain." A third deals with "a rich issue that has been impoverished by its context." My colleagues talk about "the growing body of literature," analyses that "penetrate to the heart" of the problem being discussed or "fall between two stools," and find "the seeds" of another society's institutional practices "planted in our own society." A theoretical approach leads to a "conceptual straitjacket." Researchers "mine" data or "ferret" or "tease" results out of them and get to "the bottom line." The most scientific document contains a lot of such metaphorical talk.

I usually cut such metaphors out of anything I am editing. All metaphors? No, only ones like the above. You can see their kind by comparing them to a masterful use of metaphor, Goffman's (1952) well-known paper "On Cooling the Mark Out," which uses the confidence game as a metaphor for those social situations in which someone cannot sustain the definition of self they have offered to themselves and the world. I would leave that metaphor in anything I edited.

The difference between the two kinds of metaphor lies in the seriousness and attention with which they are used. I don't mean how seriously authors take their subject, but how seriously they take the details of their metaphor. Goffman took the con game metaphor seriously. He compared the other situations he analyzed—the lover whose proposal is rejected, the big shot who can't get a table in a crowded restaurant, the person who can't manage the ordinary routines of everyday life well enough to avoid drawing attention to himself—to the con game point for point. In particular, he noted that the marks who lost their money to confidence men realized (and supposed that others would also see) that they were not nearly as smart as they had thought when they tried to get rich quick. Criminal tradition suggested to con men that they could avoid trouble by helping the angry victims restore their self-esteem, by cooling them out. So con men routinely assigned a team member to use well-established methods for achieving

that result. Goffman used the metaphor to discover and describe the same job and the same role in restaurants and other places where people were likely to be so exposed, and even suggested that, since some people suffered such exposure in many areas of life, we could probably find professionals who dealt with such problems in a more general way. He identified psychiatry as a discipline devoted to cooling out people whose pretensions social life had unveiled as phony. That discovery validated the metaphor for many readers. But the metaphor validated itself by being serious, by meaning that these other situations were like the con game in all sorts of ways, large and small.

The earlier metaphors I quoted from sociology journals weren't serious about their ramifications. When we say an argument has a "cutting edge," what tool are we comparing it to and what material is it supposed to be cutting? Who "covers terrain" in real life, how do they cover it, and what are the problems of terrain-covering? Is the literature being compared to a human body? Does that mean we should look for its heart, its liver, its stomach, its brain? The authors never meant us to take their metaphors that seriously. The comparisons these "tired metaphors" make no longer live in the minds of those who write them or read them.

A metaphor that works is still alive. Reading it shows you a new aspect of what you are reading about, how that aspect appears in something superficially quite different. Using a metaphor is a serious theoretical exercise in which you assert that two different empirical phenomena belong to the same general class, and general classes always imply a theory. But metaphors work that way only if they are fresh enough to attract attention. If they have been used repeatedly enough to be clichés, you don't see anything new. In fact, you think that they actually mean, literally, what they allude to metaphorically. Take the common expression, "to take the wind out of someone's sails." I had used that, read it, and heard it for years, but it never

meant any more to me than that you somehow deflated the person you did it to. Then I learned to sail. In sailing races, your opponents try to come between you and the wind, so that their sail keeps the wind from hitting yours. When they do that successfully, your sails, full of wind and pushing you along briskly a moment before, suddenly begin to flap emptily. The hull's friction in the water, now that no wind is pushing to counteract it, brings the boat to a sudden halt. The metaphor came to life for me, recalling an irritating experience in all its fullness. But the metaphor means little or nothing to people who haven't had that experience.

All the tired metaphors once lived. As metaphors age, they lose their force from sheer repetition, so that they take up space but contribute less than a plain, nonmetaphorical statement. It is clearer and more pointed to say that a book's argument is diffuse than to say that "some cutting edge is lacking." If an author is lucky, no one pays any attention to the literal meaning of the metaphorical statement. When I hear about "babies being thrown out with the bathwater"—and I still do—I find it hard to keep a straight face. The same is true with "falling between two stools." What were those people trying to do with those stools, anyway?

Metaphors also deteriorate from misuse. People who don't know and understand the phenomenon well, who may really not know what they are talking about when they use the words, use them incorrectly, thinking they mean something else. The common metaphor of "the bottom line," for instance, refers to the bottom line of an accountant's report which, summarizing all the previous computations, lets you know whether you made or lost money that year. Metaphorically, it could refer to the final result of any series of calculations: the 1980 Census or the correlation between income and education in someone's study. But people often use it to indicate a final offer, the price they will not lower,

the indignity they will not suffer: "That's the bottom line! I quit!" People who say that don't know, or don't remember, that the words have a financial referent. They probably use the expression because they like the air of finality "bottom" conveys, implying a point beyond which you can't go.

We can't, and shouldn't try to, avoid using another kind of metaphor, the ones permanently built into our language, which Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have analyzed in great detail. I'll give one example, of what they call

> orientational metaphors, since most of them have to do with spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral. These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment. Orientational metaphors give a concept a spatial orientation; for example, HAPPY IS UP. The fact that the concept HAPPY is oriented UP leads to English expressions like "I'm feeling up today." (14)

Lakoff and Johnson go on to show how ubiquitously UP and DOWN and their relatives appear in our speech:

> CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN
> HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP; SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN
> HAVING CONTROL or FORCE IS UP; BEING SUBJECT TO CONTROL or FORCE IS DOWN
> MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN
> FORESEEABLE FUTURE EVENTS ARE UP (AND AHEAD)
> HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN
> GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN
> VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN
> RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN

Here is their analysis of the last example:

> RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN
>
> The discussion fell to the emotional level, but I raised it back up to the rational plane. We put our feelings aside and had a high-level intellectual discussion of the matter. He couldn't rise above his emotions.
>
> Physical and cultural basis: In our culture people view themselves as being in control over animals, plants, and their physical environment, and it is their unique ability to reason that places human beings above other animals and gives them this control. CONTROL IS UP thus provides a basis for MAN IS UP and therefore for RATIONAL IS UP. (17)

The book contains over 200 pages of such analyses and examples. As I said, you can't avoid such metaphors. But being aware of them lets you use their overtones purposefully. If you ignore the overtones your prose will fight with itself, the language conveying one idea, the metaphors another, and readers won't be sure what you mean.

This chapter barely touches what goes into creating a standard of taste that will let you edit your own work, and that of others, successfully. The main lesson is not the specifics of what I have said but the Zen lesson of paying attention. Writers need to pay close attention to what they have written as they revise, looking at every word as if they meant it to be taken seriously. You can write first drafts quickly and carelessly exactly because you know you will be critical later. When you pay close attention the problems start taking care of themselves.