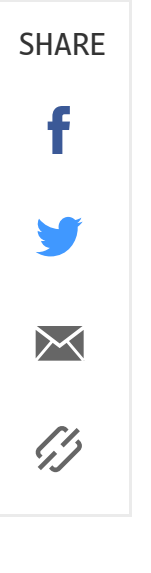
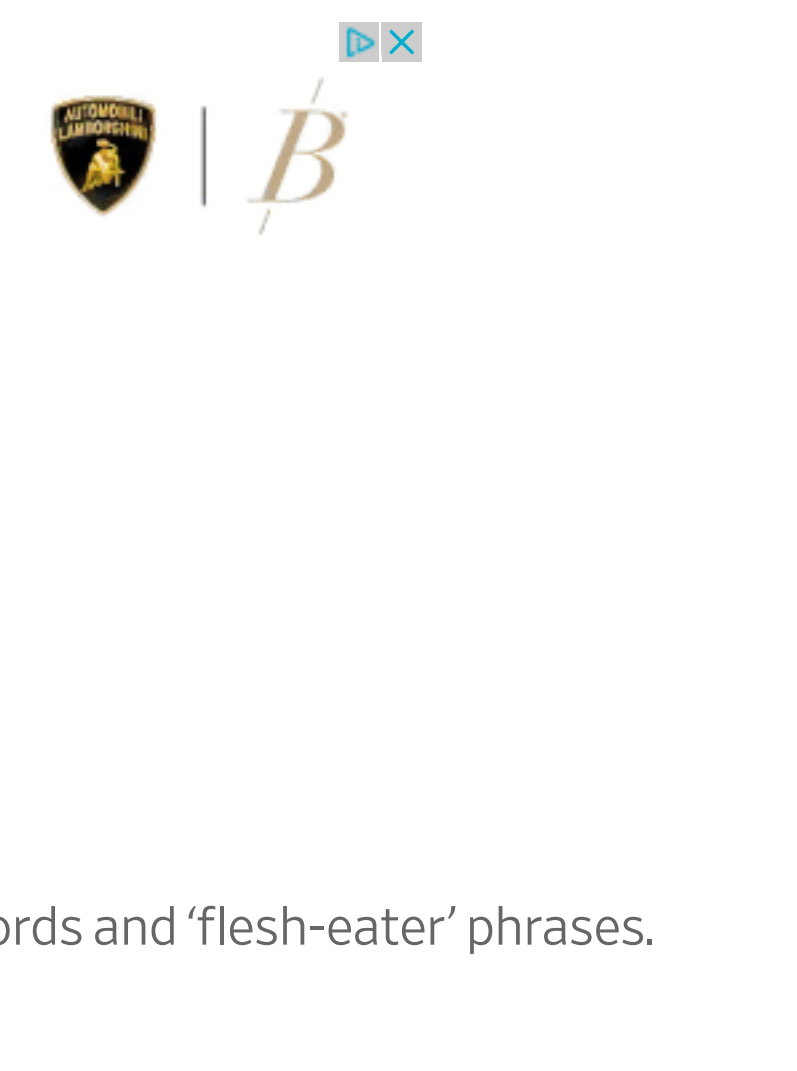




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The Wordsmith Shares His Craft

Cut the fat and check your math, the veteran editor Harold Evans counsels writers—and avoid ‘zombie’ words and ‘flesh-eater’ phrases. Edward Kosner reviews “Do I Make Myself Clear?: Why Writing Well Matters” by Harold Evans.



Sunday Times editor Harold Evans, 1970. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner
May 17, 2017 6:49 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT 32

Harold Evans is one of the most accomplished editors of his time. Most star editors hold one or two big jobs in their careers. Mr. Evans has done it all—a paragon of adroit industry.

He has run two great British newspapers (the Times and the Sunday Times), created a slick American magazine (Condé Nast Traveler) and overseen a major book publisher (Random House). In his spare time, he has filled a bookshelf with memoirs, a series of guides to all aspects of newspaper work, and illustrated histories of America in the 20th century and of the inventors who helped build it. And he has long maintained a sideline as a discreet news-whisperer to media proprietors like Katharine Graham and Mortimer Zuckerman.

Sir Harold—he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 2004 for services to journalism—has been able to pull all this off because he’s smart and focused. An elfin presence now in his 80s, he has lost none of his edge. Confront him with a page or two of sludgy journalistic or bureaucratic prose and he can purée it into a pleasurable readable passage that conveys its meaning in half the word count.

Mr. Evans’s skills are on display on nearly every page of “Do I Make Myself Clear? Why Writing Well Matters.” Writing a book about writing well can be hazardous for the author—reviewing one is risky, too—but in this case at least the author and his readers have nothing to fear. (Mr. Evans’s agile pencil would likely cut that last sentence in half or thirds.)

He starts with an epic evocation of fog from Dickens’s “Bleak House” and promptly observes: “But never come there fog too thick, never come there mud and mire too deep, never come there bureaucratic waffle so gross as to withstand the clean invigorating wind of a sound English sentence.”

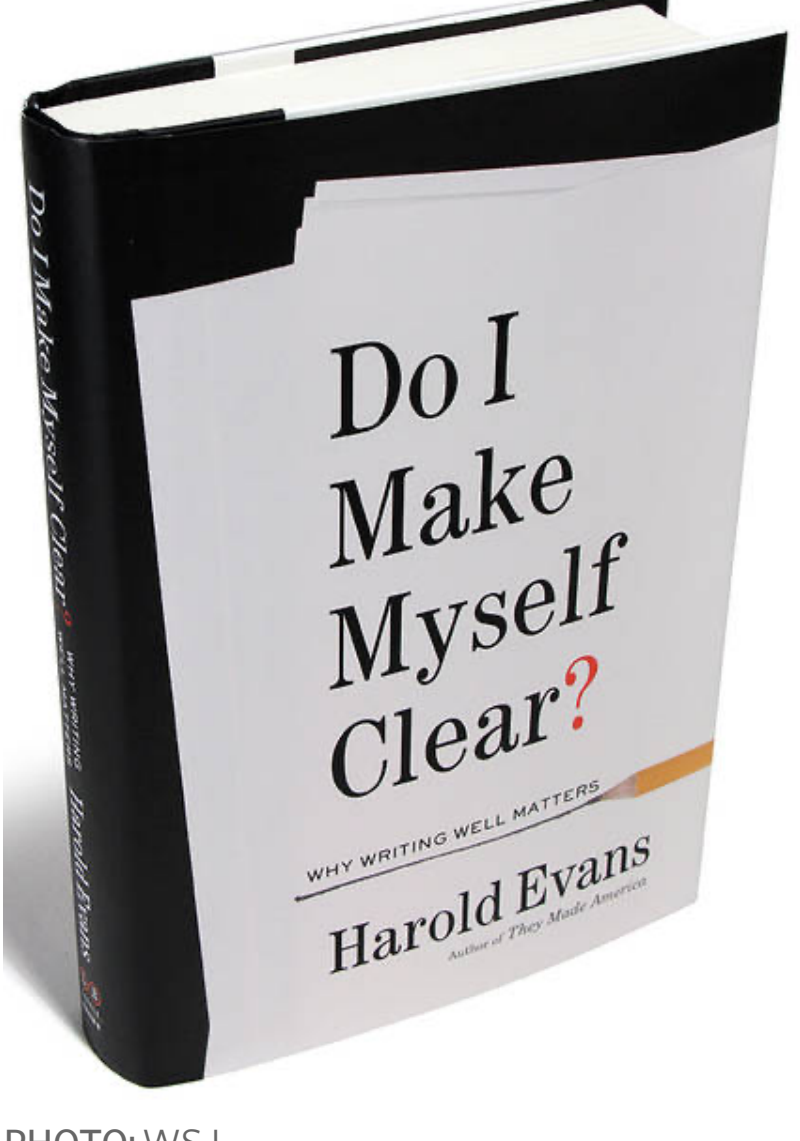


PHOTO: WSJ

DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?
By Harold Evans
Little, Brown, 408 pages, \$27

That slyly windy sentence out of the way, Mr. Evans introduces a crisp curriculum of do’s and don’ts for the aspiring clear writer. He counsels the active voice over the passive, the parsimonious use of adjectives and the near banishment of adverbs. (Not as easily practiced as preached.) He also urges writers to cut fat, check their math, be specific, organize their material for clarity, accentuate the positive and never be boring.

He identifies “zombies” (nouns that swallow a verb, like “implementation”) and provides lists of 150 “flesh-eater” phrases (“subsequent to” for “after”), 250 redundant “pleonasm” (“ascend up,” “circular shape”), 169 clichés (from “acid test” to “writing on the wall”), and 161 commonly misused words (“flaunt/flout”).

The best part of “Do I Make Myself Clear?” is the author’s virtuoso line editing of opaque texts, including a 2,500-word Obama administration report on security glitches in the case of the “Underwear Bomber,” and paragraphs from the thousands of pages of Obamacare regulations. He shows how the passive voice, abstract language, legalese and other dodges intentionally confuse the reader and, more to the point, can deflect responsibility for failure.

“This report reflects preliminary findings to facilitate immediate corrective action” reads one passage in the “Underwear Bomber” paper. “Neither the report nor its findings obviate the need for continued review and analysis to ensure that we have the fullest possible understanding of the systemic problems that led to the attempted terrorist attack on December 25, 2009.” The Evans rewrite: “This preliminary report identifies areas for immediate correction. We recognize that we need to investigate more to understand the systemic problems.” His edit clarifies the text—and cuts it to 1,030 words. In another section, he shows how insurance companies use slippery definitions of common-sense terms like “restore,” “medical necessity” and “collapse” to deprive eligible people of treatment or recompense.

He has plenty of examples of good writing, too, quoting purists, among them, Jonathan Swift and George Orwell. He does a postmortem on Franklin Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor speech to Congress. Examining successive drafts and edits, he shows how FDR changed the phrase “a date which will live in world history” to “a date which will live in infamy”—and propelled the speech into the pantheon of American oratory. He also gives a tip of the old green eyeshade to New Yorker writer Roger Angell, Reagan biographer Edmund Morris, columnist Richard Cohen and others with samples of their distinctive work.

Ever on the news, Mr. Evans inevitably turns his laser gaze on Donald Trump and that hallmark of the new era, “fake news.” He champions Amherst law professor Lawrence Douglas’s neologism “meta-lie.” These, says Mr. Evans, “are insidious untruths aimed at changing—subverting—the way we think of institutions we rely on for exposing lies, error, and corruptions—media, academia, judiciary. The drip-feed of the poison is the suggestion that the monitors are corrupt, dishonest, and lying—part of the elitist plot against the common man.”

Mr. Evans knows as well as anyone that following the admonitions in his book—or any of the others in the thick pile of such manuals (Published over the years—won’t turn a muddier thinker into a crystalline prose stylist. (This review might not score all that well with him. It’s commendably short on passive-voice sentences, but there are probably too many adjectives and dread adverbs.) You can’t write clearly if you don’t think clearly. It’s as simple—and complicated—as that.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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