



Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers

Jacques Barzun

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After a lifetime of writing and editing prose, Jacques Barzun has set down his view of the best ways to improve one's style. His discussions of diction, syntax, tone, meaning, composition, and revision guide the reader through the technique of making the written word clear and agreeable to read. Exercises, model passages both literary and casual, and hundreds of amusing examples of usage gone wrong show how to choose the right path to self-expression in forceful and distinctive words.

Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers Details

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Mark says

Very good so far

Akhil Jain says

- Every man has often found himself deficient in the power of expression, big with ideas which he could not utter, and unable to impress upon his reader the image existing in his own mind. —Dr. Johnson
- I sometimes think that writing is like driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate to the left or right, the readers will most certainly go into it. —C. S. Lewis
- here and there a touch of good grammar for picturesqueness. —Mark Twain

Christopher Rush says

I feel somewhat abashed giving a book by the superb Jacques Barzun only two stars, but according to the authoritative site Goodreads (or "goodreads" as it wants to be known on its own page), two stars equates to "it was okay," and since *Simple and Direct* was okay, two stars it gets. I'm not really sure what the ultimate function of this book is: surely it's not a textbook for classroom use, as entire hordes of young people posing as students collectively work through revising sentences with diction they've never heard (perhaps the original audience was familiar with his language, but none today); I certainly did not feel impelled to work through the exercises on paper - I was fine thinking through them while reading them. Toward the end Mr. Barzun gives us an extended survey of punctuation, but inscrutably he defines colons in contradistinction to his own usage throughout the book.

Not to harp on its deficiencies, but organization, another facet of writing upon which Mr. Barzun attempts to instruct us, is almost wholly useless in this work. True, it has distinct chapter headings covering divers aspects of writing, helpful enough, but beyond that ... utter chaos. Mr. Barzun traipses merrily from sub-point to sub-point, devoid of meaningful connection or reference-work ease of finding/accessibility/utility. Mr. Barzun gives us wonderfully trenchant tips on diction, tone, style, revision ... while you're reading through the book. Aside from a virtually meaningless index, we have no realistic way of using this book as a reference tool for attacking individual writing errors.

So read it ... once. Try to absorb as much as you can. Perhaps copy out the twenty basic rules for writing Mr. Barzun scatters throughout his pages for general guidelines of decent writing. Then ... give it to someone else. I doubt you're going to want to keep it for multiple uses.

Jocelyn says

This is a nice writing tutorial but not what I was looking for. Barzun takes a methodical approach, starting

with words and working his way out to paragraphs and compositions. He includes writing and reading exercises, for practice. I would say it's pitched to undergraduate and graduate students.

Ray Edwards says

Oddly bloated for a book about simple writing.

Kaleb Horton says

Stuff you already know, phrased lean and tough. Mechanically inspiring.

Jacob Aitken says

Very useful tips. Shows how language "works." Some stuff you would find in any common grammar on the English language. Further, he doesn't always elaborate some of the tips.

Jane says

To be honest I couldn't finish this. I'll try again another time. For a book on simple and direct writing it struck me as remarkably convoluted and flowery, not to mention snobbish. There are better style books out there.

Amber says

Some good take-always about things not to do, but a lot of this book felt stuffy and out-dated.

Gail Richmond says

A writers' guide to rhetoric first published in 1975, Barzun begins with fiction and covers most of the aspects of writing well: fiction; tone; audience; purpose; meaning; editing; and revision. Although some sections are dated, there is still valuable information included.

Graham Mumm says

Hard to read straight through (I suggest doing it lesson tip at a time) but overall a good guide to writing well.

Emily Giuffre says

This book is anything BUT simple and direct. This was a very difficult read and even though the author gave examples of jargon, misplaced or misused words, and unnecessary phrases, I don't feel like a better writer for having read it. I would have preferred to have "before and after" examples of clearly edited essays. Not entirely a bad book....just not for the layman.

Dave says

Chosen because I attempted read Barzun's From Dawn to Decadence; his magnus opus on western civilization. Much like From Dawn defends western civilization's splendor and value, Simple & Direct serves bulwark against bad writing. Barzun gives his take on diction, syntax, tone, meaning, composition, and revision to guide you like a college student through making your writing clear and pleasant to read. He also examples of bad writing and has a few soap box rants about the poor state of writing in our civilization. His exercises throughout helps you learn the key ideas and the 'Time out for good reading' passages exemplify how to instead of how not to.

kaelan says

Funnily enough, I didn't find Barzun that great of a writer, although he certainly isn't a bad one. But the general thrust of his advice—write with a clear idea in mind, choose your words with care, don't overtax your reader—rings true. And it was humbling to discover that I have committed many of the literary gaffs of which he complains.

Mark Bailey says

SIMPLE AND DIRECT is anything but.
