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Newspaper English by Prof Dr Kiran Thakur

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Renowned British linguist Roger Fowler once famously described language as ‘not a clear window but a refracting and structuring medium’. There are different ways of saying the same thing; different expressions carry ideological distinctions.

Many popular journalists use specific words and grammatical devices to make some events appear more significant while downplaying the importance of others. Through skilful use of language, it is possible to render certain issues and events more significant to the readers, and at other times to make it appear less significant.

Language forms take on particular meanings in specific contexts. In certain situations, a statement could simply represent a fact while in other circumstances it could even be interpreted as a challenge. Certain texts open up the possibility of interaction with the participants while others impede such participation. Apart from these more sophisticated concerns, it is vital for young journalists and writers to be aware of the more mundane pitfalls of obtuse and turgid writing.

Writing techniques do not get the importance they deserve in most Indian universities and institutions offering media studies. The result is many young writers and journalists are seriously deficient in professional writing skills. Apart from Jyoti Sanyal’s extremely useful book on writing good Indian English, there are very few available Indian texts on

writing more readable articles for newspapers. Dr Kiran Thakur drawing on his vast experience as a journalist and researcher has come up with this extremely useful book. Starting with the well-known 21-point Oxford Guide to Plain English and Robert Gunning's Ten Principles of Clear Writing, Thakur provides an interesting backdrop to his own passion for writing simple English. As a news agency journalist for many years, he had to write simple so that the English piece could be easily translated by non-English sub-editors into regional languages. Another important parameter was —not to let the intro exceed 25 words.

The first chapter starts off with tips for editing out unnecessary words. The author provides an interesting technique — described as Thakur's rule of the thumb — to seek out unnecessary words and phrases. If you cover a word or a phrase with your thumb and the sentence still makes sense, the covered word or phrase can be deleted.

The second chapter provides an accessible introduction to the relative advantages of various readability indices. The Flesch-Kincaid Readability Ease formulae for example is useful for writers since it helps decide whether your article will be actually read. The Gunning Fox Index on the other hand is used to provide a second opinion in case the Flesch-Kincaid test gives 'bizarre results'. The SMOG index is valuable since it can be measured without the use of computers. A very useful tip from the author is to use the *proofing option* in Microsoft Word to calculate the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level, along with the percentage of Passive Sentences used in a piece. Though purists regard this technique as blunt, it nonetheless provides an accessible insight into readability.

Chapter 3 of the book provides interesting insights into the methods adopted to make writing easier to understand. Thakur takes intros from different English newspapers to first demonstrate using the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level, the turgidity in the prose. He then performs basic sub-editing on the intros — removing the redundant words and unnecessary detail and splitting up larger sentences into two or three. This generally improves the readability indices substantially.

As part of Thakur's research, readers were provided the two versions of the intros and asked to choose the one they found more readable. In most cases the readers chose the edited version, which in turn had a higher readability index. In the same chapter he demonstrates the futility of using more 'difficult words'.

This demonstration of the existence of obtuse intros in existing newspapers is novel and interesting. It is also a reminder of the need for innovative pedagogies for writing classes in journalism schools. The importance of shorter, simpler, concise and active sentences needs to be demonstrated in the classroom in as many interesting ways as possible. The use of the simple proofing indicators on the word processing software is repeated elsewhere in the book. If students and readers make it a regular habit to check the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level, it will provide them an instant feedback about their writing. Though not a conclusive method by any means, it is an important indicator to measure their progress towards better readability.

Chapter 4 of the book discusses the problems with using subsidiary clauses at the beginning of sentences. Using the same techniques described in earlier chapters, the author removes unnecessary subsidiary clauses, from carefully selected articles, and splits the longer sentences into shorter ones. This is followed by turning on the MS Word proofing tools to corroborate a higher Flesch Reading Ease and a lower Flesch Kincaid Grade Level for the edited versions. A lower FKGL is always more desirable. If for an article the FKGL is eight for example, an eighth grader can easily read and decipher the article.

The next chapter of the book illustrates the other common writing pitfalls — the uninformed use of adjectives and adverbs, redundant words, jargons, officialese and clichés.

Rather than providing staid prescriptions on writing, the author skilfully demonstrates the differences in the good and the bad versions and invites the readers to validate the readability indices themselves, with the use of very simple computer proofing tools.

Another welcome technique in the book is the use of current articles from Indian newspapers. This provides a more recognisable context to the readers.

The book is a welcome addition to original books on Indian journalism in recent times. The use of a demonstrable technique for young writers to increase the readability of their articles is an important contribution of the book.