UNIT 4 READABILITY

Structure

4.0 *AIMS AND OBJECTIVES*

In this Unit, yau will learn the importance of readability as the **ultimate** objective of .
all successful writing. Some of the strategies you will learn to employ to achieve this
effect are listed below.
- You should make your openings and endings as dramatic and interesting as
  possible.
- In order to capture and sustain your reader's interest, you may also use ambiguity
  and suspense.
- A skilful use of little details may also help you to lend an aura of credibility to
  your writing.
- You should avoid using complex sentences and heavy diction, since stilted
  language invariably hurts readability.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, you learnt how to use images and symbols to **dramatise** ideas;
and in the first two **Units** of this Block you were told how to **dramatise situations**
through the use of dialogues and monologues. In brief, as a creative writer, you
should employ every possible device to make your writing readable. You may recall
what Lewis Carroll makes Alice say in the course of her adventures in the
Wonderland:

> 'What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?

Well, this c'asual remark of a little girl seems to sum up ideally the role of 'pictures'
(i.e., images and symbols) and 'conversation' (i.e., dialogues and monologues) in any
form of creative writing. These are the ingredients that enable a writer to seize and
hold his reader's attention.

4.2 READABILITY—A WRITER'S ULTIMATE GOAL

Let's now examine the concept of readability in the context of creative writing. If a
short-story writer, a playwright, a feature-writer or a poet, cannot arrest his reader's
interest and sustain it till the end, he has obviously failed. 'Of all the needs a book
has, the chief need is that it be readable,' observes Anthony Trollope—although

, paradoxically, his own fiction and miscellaneous writings fall short of this ideal. His writing was often too thin, and he let his reader's interest wander away from the central theme. How very rightly has Emerson stressed the need to keep your reader under your constant spell. 'Books take their place,' he says, 'according to their specific gravity as surely as potatoes in a tub.' So you should always remember that, in order to turn out anything really readable, you must have something exciting to say—not just a vague idea, a half-baked character, a nebulous scene. A story that hasn't yet taken any concrete shape in the writer's mind can never work out successfully. No wonder, if a story or a poem is called an artefact, it's because it's always skilfully structured, as a product of 'human workmanship'.

4.3 MAKE YOUR BEGINNING INTERESTING

It's always a dramatic beginning that makes your writing readable. So you should work out your beginnings as carefully as possible. Although you will subsequently learn more about an 'opening' as an important part of any form of writing (in Block 2, Unit 2), let us briefly understand its importance here. Remember that your editor or publisher is a very busy person, with piles of manuscripts waiting for his verdict. Most probably, he may not have the time to read through an entire piece before making his decision. And you are not present in his office to say: 'Please, wait till you get to the third page—that's where I've written something very exciting.' Often, he looks through just the first two or three paragraphs to decide whether he should read any further or not. So, if your opening hasn't done it, you have already lost the game. You will then get a politely phrased rejection slip: 'The editor thanks you for sending him your MS, but he regrets that he is unable to use it.' It is, therefore, essential that you shape your beginnings with discrimination. Let even your opening sentence act as a sort of curtain-raiser. Plunge headlong into the thing itself, without beating about the bush. In order to learn how to begin your writing, study carefully as many opening paragraphs as possible of well-known writers—feature-writers, story-writers, poets, etc.

Activity 1
Read the following examples closely:

 i) Public spealung is a habit-forming activity, like coffee or tobacco; so many have now got into the habit that at present there are more speakers than listeners in our midst. (R.K. Narayan: 'The Need for Silence' from Next Sunday)

 ii) I know this is an odd story. I don't understand it myself and if I set it down in black and white it is only with a faint hope that when I have written it I may get a clearer view of it. ... (Somerset Maugham: 'The Kite')

 iii) Sir Hasan was surprised at the cordiality of the man's greeting as he looked out from the ferry-boat which was carrying him ashore to Gibralter from the steamer. (Mulk Raj Anand: 'Appearance and Reality')

 iv) I can smell violence in the air
     like the lash of coming rain—
     mass hatreds drifting grey across the moon.
(Keki Daruwalla: 'Ruminations')

Which of the openings given above is the most dramatic—and which the least? Write your comments in about a paragraph each. (140 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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4.4 AMBIGUITY AND SUSPENSE

Let's now consider two cardinal principles of readability, not only for a successful opening but to ensure the sustained interest of the reader from the beginning to the end.

First, we may consider ambiguity. What does it mean in this context? It just implies that a writer shouldn't give himself away completely in the course of his writing, more particularly in the opening. If your reader has picked up 'the thing itself' right at the start, why should he bother to read on till the end? It's like a detective story-writer who gives away the clue to the murder right in the beginning, letting the reader in on the central mystery. On the other hand, a skilful writer prefers to keep his reader on the hook; he keeps him guessing as to what is coming up next. He confronts the reader with all sorts of teasing ambiguities, riddles and traps.

And since ambiguity always generates suspense in the reader's mind, he keeps reading on and on. He pauses here and there to comprehend what an understatement might have implied. Did the answer to a question carry three meanings—or more? Did a character's nod signify assent or disagreement? In other words, a successful writer is like a young beautiful girl who never commits herself to her boy-friend, but just leads him on with nods, hums, sighs, smiles and mute whisperings. It's the same guessing game in courtship, as in creative writing.

4.5 MINUTIAE AND READABILITY

An ingenious manipulation of detail is another device to seize and hold a reader's interest. It's seldom the main theme that does it—the palpable story-line, the central argument, the basic tenor. On the other hand, it's often the little details that build up the reader's interest by investing the writing with credibility. Saul Bellow observes that classics will 'interest us in a scene, in a dialogue, a mood, an insight, in language, in the character, in the revelation of a design...' And such feats are often accomplished through a judicious handling of detail. This strategy, however, should never be overdone; a writer must ensure that each detail, in some way, relates itself to the central vision of the writer. Nothing hurts readability more than irrelevance.

This is, for instance, how Arnost Lustig, a well-known Czechoslovakian story-writer, describes his protagonist looking intently at a young woman, without wasting a single detail. Everything here is grist to the mill.

He narrowed his eyes and saw her clearly like the white summit of some snow-capped mountain. Hex brow was smooth, and her skin well-nigh transparent; she had loosely flowing golden hair and an equally fair nape. The violence with which her image kept returning to him frightened him. (Arnost Lustig: 'Stephen and Anne')

Similarly, an interviewer should try to make the image of his interviewee come alive through such details as his dress, the tonal modulations of his voice, his gesticulations, etc. Only then will the reader be able to conjure up the man behind his words. Who is it the reader wishes to 'meet'? Is it a celebrity masked in affectation, or an authentic human being behind his public utterances? That's why the detail plays an important role in any interview story.

4.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINING THE READER'S INTEREST

If you have been able to start off on a dramatic note, it is equally important that you keep up the reader's interest from beginning to end. It's like keeping the fire burning—poking, pushing the wood into a steady flame. In other words, each part of your writing must hold on its own—each para, nay, each sentence. This is the mark of a successful writer. If you let the reader's interest flag at any point, your writing will fall apart, the illusion will break, and your reader may turn to something else. A successful writer, therefore, should bring into play all his senses. Let the reader feel as though he is participating in an exciting experience. This was Joseph Conrad's main credo as a writer:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is above all, to make you see.

If you can make your reader see and hear what you are writing, you would ensure readability—and credibility. You would then be able to carry you reader dong as if he'were your fellow-traveller. He will then follow you all the way not so much interested in what you are saying but in just enjoying your company. 'To read a writer for me,' says André Gide, 'is not merely to get an idea of what he says, but to go off, with him, and travel in his company. . . .' (André Gide: Pretexts—Third Imaginary Interview')

4.7 LANGUAGE AND READABILITY

One of the main impediments to easy readability is a language that is opaque—loaded with heavy, latinised diction, and sentences that groan under involved clauses. Such a style invariably turns the reader away. Even if a story has an interesting plot, a feature-article an exciting subject, it will not come through unless it is written in a lucid and forthright style. There is a great deal of truth in George Orwell's observation that insincerity leads to artificial writing. On the other hand, honest feeling and intense imagination always seek expression in a language that is unburdened with ornate diction or prolixity. 'The great enemy of clear language,' says Orwell, 'is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns, as it were instinctively, to long words and exhausted idioms like a cuttlefish, squirting out irk. ('Politics and the English Language' in Shooting an *Elephant*). And whenever a writer lapses into insincere and ostentatious language, he also loses the reader's sympathy and his attention. For instance, imagine someone condoling with a friend on his mother's death in such cliched expressions as: 'I have come with a heavy heart to offer you my deepest condolences over your mother's tragic demise. . . .' Such a formal, stylised sharing of grief is most likely to leave the bereaved party cold and unmoved. On the other hand, one is likely to touch a deep chord if one just says: 'I don't know what to say. . . this must have been a temble blow to you. I am only reminded to my own mother's loss, two years ago, . . .' And then let silence take over let the reader fill in the gap himself.

Activity 2

Read the following passages closely and answer the questions given at the end.

i) Mother died today. Or, may be, yesterday: I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: **Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep Sympathy.** Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.
(Albert Camus: The Outsider)

ii) It was Sunday. Chance was in the garden. He moved slowly, dragging the green hose from one path to the next, carefully watching the flow of the water. Very gently he let the stream touch every plant, every flower, every branch of the garden. Plants were like people; they need care to live, to survive their diseases, and to die peacefully.
(Jerzy Kosinski: *Being There*)

iii) It had a gloomy grandeur, but owed its character almost all to its noble shape and to the fine architectural doors, as high as those of grand frontages, which, leading into various rooms, repeated themselves on either side at intervals. They were surmounted with old faded painted escutcheons, and here and there in the spaces between them hung brown pictures, which I noted as speciously bad, in battered and tarnished frames that were yet more desirable than the canvasses themselves.
(Henry James: The *Aspern* Papers)

iv) The Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa has emerged as a formidable voice, especially after the critically renowned. Aunt *Julia and* the Scriptwriter which broke through the barriers of translatorial dilution, to establish its credentials as a veritable **tour de force.** Llosa's newest novel repeats the feat in spite of the patently complex structure and style that constantly threaten to undermine the cogency of the theme. (From a review of The Real Life of Alajandra Mayta in The *Indian* Express, May 31, 1987).

v) An old woman grabs
   hold of your sleeve
   and tags along.
   She wants a fifty paise coin.
(Arun Kolatkar: An Old Woman)

a) Which of the passages quoted above is most readable—and why? Write your comments in one paragraph. (50 words)
b) And now rewrite, in a simpler style, either passage (iii) or (iv). (70 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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4.8 HOW TO CONCLUDE?

If you have learnt the importance of a dramatic opening in any form of writing, you should also learn how to finish off a piece—a feature article, a story or a poem. In other words, your ending should be worked out with the same meticulous care as your beginning. There are two types of ending, and an open ending.

4.8.1 Closed ending

A closed ending is the type of conclusion that attempts to round off a theme neatly, leaving nothing to the reader's imagination. It's like solving a mathematical problem with authoritarian assertion. This sort of ending may work sometimes in a feature article—a book-review, or an interview story, but it never works in a short story or a poem. A tame ending often reads like this: 'To sum up, therefore...' . 'in brief... .' Such conclusions sound too simplistic and dogmatic. Take, for instance, this conclusion from an article on 'India at the Crossroads':

> To reiterate, therefore, it is necessary that India, while advancing technologically, should not forsake her great spiritual heritage because her destiny lies in maintaining a balance between science and morality, between change and tradition.. . .

4.8.2 Open ending

This is the kind of ending that enhances readability because it respects the reader by inviting him to join in the creative process. Here the reader works almost as the writer's collaborator since Be is free to imagine the story or the poem taking any shape—after the 'ending', which in fact, reads like the beginning of another story or a poem. One may here quote T.S. Eliot's famous line: 'In the end is my beginning', since it aptly seems to define the nature of a suggestive ending. Take, for instance,— the open ended conclusion of the story titled 'Ariadne' by the famous Russian story-writer Chekhov:

> 'I'm beginning to believe in spirits,' he called to me, looking back. 'The spirit of Ilarion seems to have uttered a true prophecy. Oh, if only... .'

> The day after this meeting I left Yalta, and how Shamokhin's love affair ended I don't know.

4.9 SUMMING UP

In brief, this Unit has stressed the significance of readability as the cardinal feature of every successful form of writing—a feature article, a story or a poem. A writer should not only make his beginnings and endings interesting, but should also use other devices to capture and sustain the reader's interest—such as (a) the use of suspense, (b) the use of little details, and (c) simple and forthright language, unencumbered with latinised diction and involved sentence structure.

4.10 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1
Hint:
Where do you 'plunge headlang into the thing itself?
Which one of the four passages sounds as if the author's introduction will run on for a while?

Activity 2
Hints
a) In which passage is the language difficult and involved, insincere and ostentatious? Where does the! writer's personal involvement show through?

b) Start off which breaking up the complex sentences, substituting **simpler** words for the difficult ones. For example, take the last sentence from (iii). Break it up **into** three shorter sentences thus:

   i) The frontages had old painted family crests hung above them.

  ii) Between the crests were hung badly painted and faded brown pictures in battered and tarnished frames.

 iii) Yet these frames were more attractive than the paintings themselves.

Now do the same for the rest of the sentences.

4.11 GLOSSARY

You will find in the glossary a short list of the literary terms in this Unit.

Ambiguity: A word or a passage becomes ambiguous when it is open to several interpretations.

Artefact: A product of artistic endeavour

Diction: The vocabulary used by a writer

Minutiae: A collection of precise, trivial or minor details (which in a literary work often plays an **important** role)

Suspense: The result achieved by a literary writer who may use certain devices to sustain the reader's interest

Understatement: Deliberate underplaying of a statement for **emphasis—e.g.,** 'not bad' to mean 'very good'

4.12 ADDITIONAL READINGS FOR BLOCK 3

Cohn, Jill W., *Writing, the Personal Voice,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, **1975.**

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Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style.*

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