

UNIT 4 LANGUAGE AND ILLUSTRATION

Structure

4.0 Aims and Objectives

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Choice of words

4.2.1 Appropriateness

4.2.2 How to introduce 'difficult' words

4.2.3 Use fresh imagery

4.2.4 Avoid verbiage

4.2.5 How to tighten one's writing

4.3 Sentence structure

4.3.1 Avoid very long or obscurely brief sentences

4.3.2 Vary sentence structure

4.3.3 Avoid grammatical and syntactic pitfalls

4.4 Style and tone

4.4.1 Importance of rewriting

4.4.2 Avoid too many modifiers and generalities

4.4.3 Avoid Latin derivatives

4.5 Tone

4.6 Dialogue in fiction

4.7 Summing up

4.8 Activities : aids to answers

4.9 Additional readings for Block 2

4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this last Unit of the Block, we pass on from the question of themes (including Fantasy) and values to that of language to be employed in writing for children. We talk to you here about the choice of words, sentence-structure, style and tone. Your choice of words should be ruled by considerations of:

- appropriateness and precision,
- vividness,
- avoidance of clichés,
- suitability to the character of the speaker, and
- economy of expression.

Your sentences should:

- not be too lengthy and rambling,
- be varied in structure,
- be free from grammatical lapses and obscurity,
- be simple and clear.

Your style should be easy and lively, and free from hackneyed expressions, cluttering, and heaviness. You should avoid too many qualifying words, Latinisms and redundant phrases.

Your tone should accord with the subject and the characters of your story, and should be sympathetic to the child.

When you finish reading the Unit, you will

- learn to make your writing simple, compact and communicative;
- also cultivate the art of revising and rewriting your story in an attempt to cut out all verbiage and give it the proper flavour.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we consider the question of the language that should be used in writing for children.

All authors of children's books know that writing for children is more difficult than writing for adults. Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of language. By language we

mean not only the choice of words (vocabulary), sentence structure, word order (syntax), and grammatical correctness, but also tone and style.

Writing for adults allows us to speak in our own voice, as adults. But when we write for children, we should be aware of our readers, who belong to a phase of life we have already passed. This implies that we put ourselves back in time, and remember what it was like when we were eight or nine or ten years old, what our concerns then were, and what passions moved us before we entered adulthood.

Writers for children are reminded that they shall never 'write down' to their readers. Emphasis needs to be placed on the positive principles of writing. This means using the most telling word, the freshest imagery, the most effective symbols possible.

4.2 CHOICE OF WORDS

The first important thing is to choose the right words. The choice of words is dictated by the ideas which the words must convey.

4.2.1 Appropriateness

Concepts, attitudes and points of view must be conveyed in appropriate terms. If a word or term has an adult 'ring', it is advisable to turn to an alternative phrase. The idea or concept itself should be appropriate and comprehensible to the child. We should constantly ask ourselves the question: are we foisting a concept on our child reader that is intrinsically adult?

4.2.2 How to introduce 'difficult' words

Occasionally, it is necessary to use a 'big' word, a technical expression, or a formal utterance. In such a case, however, we must introduce the difficult or unfamiliar word skilfully. It can be done in a graceful, unobtrusive way, so that the unfamiliar word gets explained within the context of the story. No writer for children has done this more expertly than that master of style, E.B. White. The following passage from his classic *Charlotte's Web* shows how he does it:

'Salutations!' said a voice.
 Wilbur jumped to his feet. 'Saluwhat?' he cried.
 'Salutations!' repeated the voice.
 'What are they, and where are you?' screamed Wilbur.
 'Please, please, tell me where you are. And what are salutations?'
 'Salutations are greetings', said the voice. 'When I say 'salutations', it's just my fancy way of saying hello or good morning. Actually, it's a silly expression, and I am surprised that I used it at all...'

Here, the word **salutations** is not one that children could be expected to understand. But it is an elegant expression that is rather nice to know—so White includes it. More importantly, it is a word that the elegant, formal Charlotte of the novel's title would naturally use: it is a clue to her character and is thus apt. White makes it clear through Charlotte's own explanation, what the word means, and by judicious repetition, enforces it.

4.2.3 Use fresh imagery

Since the force of words in any written work lies in the imagery chosen, the importance of creating fresh similes and metaphors cannot be overemphasised. One may be tempted to reach for a phrase that is near at hand to describe a situation or object, since it is easier to do so than to find a new expression for it. But the effort to overcome this temptation is worth it. It is better to give up the ease that lures the writer into using such clichés as

thin as a rail
 happy as a lark
 cold as ice
 fit as a fiddle
 cool as cucumber
 eat like a horse, or a bird
 eager as a beaver.

Other hackneyed phrases, like those listed below, should be shunned:

high and dry
 crying need.

burning question
hit the nail on the head
trials and tribulations
sick and tired.

One way to accomplish this, in the case of hackneyed phrases, is to retain the first half of the phrase, and create a fresh second half, e.g. happy as a.... (anything but lark!); cold as.... (anything but ice!). Instead of a **burning question**, why not simply say a big question? Or instead of a **crying need**, why not simply a **need**?

4.2.4 Avoid verbiage

Related to these are phrases that consist of words which, when joined together, appear to be stale and commonplace.

golden ... sunset
engaging ... grin
infectious ... smile/laugh/grin
winding ... paths
gentle ... breeze
pale ... moon

Furthermore, expressions like 'silhouetted against the sky', 'freezing with fear' and 'blinding flashes' (referring, usually, to lightning) need to be re-imagined into something original and exciting. Yet another consideration in the use of words is the need to avoid unnecessary prepositions. Let's consider redundancies like

win(out)
meet(up with)
(past)history
merge(together)
erupt(violently)
lose(out)
join(together)
small(in size), etc.

Such redundancies should be kept out.

4.2.5 How to tighten one's writing

Tight writing demands that we avoid using the same word too many times in the same paragraph. Tightening also involves finding one or two words that will do the job of several, e.g.,

I found a letter on a bush. A berry bush it was. It was a red berry bush.
should be shortened to:

I found a letter on a red berry bush.

Further, a phrase can often be turned into an adjective, with good effect, e.g.

things that are useful—useful things

An awkward description like

He looked at Ashok. Ashok was his brother.

can be improved by changing it to

He looked at his brother Ashok.

Rid your writing of needless repetition. But remember that not all repetition is needless; occasionally, it lends force, but only occasionally.

Here is another example of how one can use too many words:

Srnita scrutinised the letter carefully.

Here, **carefully**, is redundant, since to scrutinise already contains that meaning within itself.

Which, who, and that are words to beware of when looking for ways to cut down verbiage. They often merely add clutter:

Ram (is the type of man who) always makes sure his clothes are well pressed before he goes out.

(The people that) I would like to tell you about (are) Father and Mother.

Words are the building blocks of sentences. They should be used economically and discriminately.

Running out into the storm, her eyes saw a strange sight.

Avoid also improper use of pronouns:

Mother called Ram and I inside.

Correct usage demands that subjects and verbs, as well as pronouns and their antecedents, agree in number and person.

4.4 STYLE AND TONE

The discussion of style and tone had to be deferred till the second half of this Unit, because style and tone are delicate and complex elements, and often require a great amount of rewriting.

4.4.1 Importance of rewriting

While working out the first draft of a story, one should remember that the rhythm and flow of ideas are very important. Stopping to consider punctuation or paragraphing at this stage may interfere with the creative flow. Eventually, however, these considerations demand attention and choices have to be made. Should we retain the word or phrase that came so readily to mind in the heat of the first draft? But upon re-reading, several of these words and phrases may sound trite and stale. We should then ask: can we find an alternative expression that is more precise and original?

It is a truism to say that our own way of saying something becomes our 'voice', our style. With each rewriting, we become more confident in using it. At the same time, our sense of language grows, and along with it, our skill in using it effectively.

4.4.2 Avoid too many modifiers and generalities

New writers tend to rely heavily on adjectives and adverbs to lend strength and vividness to their writing. They use the modifiers to prop up weak nouns or verbs: nouns and verbs that do not really 'say' much:

She gently picked up her pretty, blue parasol and slowly walked towards the beautiful cottage as the sun set gloriously behind it.

In developing one's style, one needs to look around as if seeing the world for the first time. Abstractions won't do. Broad generalities beginning with 'Life is ...' 'Love is ...' 'Courage is ...' get us bogged down in worn-out platitudes and betray flabbiness of thought. They are sure to turn off the child reader. Particularly beginners often feel 'safe' couching their ideas in phrases that give away their lack of conviction. Expressions like 'it seems', 'it looked as if', and 'so to speak', weaken rather than strengthen an idea. The passive voice, when overused, likewise creates a tone of dullness.

4.4.3 Avoid Latin derivatives

Whether writing for children or adults (but particularly for children) long Latin derivatives must be replaced by their Anglo-Saxon synonyms. Hence rain (not precipitation), ruin (not dilapidation), end (not culmination) and lie (not prevarication) should be used.

4.5 TONE

Style is the writer's individuality, his particular flair. Tone is what he strives for in rendering a mood, a setting or a scene. Before writing a children's story, then, the author needs to decide what he/she wants his/her reader to feel. If the events that form the story are happy, then the tone needs to be light and cheerful.

This may be done chiefly through the choice of words and the quick pace of the sentences. If the matter is serious, it requires a quieter 'voice', slow-paced sentences and sombre images. The time and place of the story likewise make their own demands. To set the tone of the 'long ago and far away' of a fairy tale, the writer needs to 'speak' in the 'ancient story—teller's voice'. This, again, is achieved by a judicious choice of words.

An equally important consideration is the nature of persons the writer is writing about. If urban children in present-day India are the main characters of the story, the tone must be

4.8 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- i) It requires that we should (a) not speak as adults, (b) keep our readers (children) always in mind and write from their point of view, (c) never adopt a condescending tone, and (d) use simple but vivid language.
- ii) The following considerations should rule your choice of words : (a) appropriateness, (b) clarity, (c) avoidance of an adult tone, (d) freshness, (e) suitability to the speaker (e.g. a pompous character will use high sounding words), (f) avoidance of hackneyed phrases and verbiage.
- iii) You can do that by : (a) avoiding repetition, (b) not using two words where one will do, (c) cutting out redundancies, and (d) avoiding too many qualifying clauses or phrases.

Activity 2

- i) We should avoid long sentences with parenthetical clauses. A short sentence is always preferable but it should not be so short as to obscure the meaning. Sentences should have variety in structure and tone. Unnecessary prepositions and obscure subject-verb relationship should be avoided.
- ii) Our style should be : (a) fresh, (b) free from platitudes, (c) free from uncertainties of tone, (d) free from too many qualifying words or phrases and from heavy Latin derivatives, (e) give sensory details, and (f) be vivid. The tone should : (a) be appropriate to the mood of the story, (b) give the reader a feel of the events narrated, and (c) be in keeping with the time period of the story and the nature of persons who form the characters.

Activity 3

Hints

Keep in mind : Vocabulary (which varies with age and social class of the speaker); sentence structure (the uneducated, for example, will have interesting grammatical deviations in their speech); tone (which will be determined by pauses, abrupt breaks, or easy flow of words depending on who the speaker is).

4.9 ADDITIONAL READINGS FOR BLOCK 2

- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York : Random House Inc. Vintage Books edition, 1977, ©1975.
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- Children's Literature, Contemporary Trends and Patterns*, "Thursday's Child", American Library Association, 1981.
- Creative Writing for Juniors*, London : Batsford, 1981.
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- Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, eds. Carpenter and Prichard, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Southall, Ivan. *A Journey of Discovery on Writing for Children*, Harmondsworth : Kestrel Books, 1975.
- The Development of Children's Imaginative Writing*, ed. Helen Cowie, St. Martin, 1984.
- Writers, Critics and Children*, eds. Geoff Fox et al., London : Heinemann Educational Books, © 1976.