

FLUTTER BY, BUTTERFLY: OR WONDER-FULL WRITING TOOLS

a review of

Technique in Nonfiction: The Tools of the Trade, by Steven Darian.
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reviewed by

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*“How many great ideas were lost because their authors could not present their findings, their discoveries, their ideas...clearly. Understandably. Intelligibly. Interestingly.”
Steven Darian*

*“I'm a great believer that any tool that enhances communication has profound effects in terms of how people can learn from each other, and how they can achieve the kind of freedoms that they're interested in.”
Bill Gates*

I am a great believer that writing can be brilliant. But how can one master this art? Some say it's even impossible... Or is it? Perhaps the answer to this question is learning from the best teachers who generously share with us their tools of the trade.

“Technique in Nonfiction: The Tools of the Trade” by Professor Steven Darian is doing exactly this. But first, why butterflies? Well, they will be mentioned thrice throughout the review, but each time to convey a slightly different thing. Let's start by saying that some books do have the so-called “butterfly effect” – the potential to significantly influence the future for years ahead.

As a writing professor (in both senses of this somewhat ambiguous phrase), with English as my third language, I cherish time-tested classics, like “Strunk & White” or William Zinsser, to name a few. I also keep an eye on more recent developments in the area, for instance, writings by Helen Sword, Joshua Schimel, Hilary Glasman-Deal, Paula LaRocque, Adrian Wallwork. And, of course Steven Darian, whose seminal work on “Understanding the Language of Science” has become a true eye-opener for many scholars.

In his new book, “Technique in Nonfiction: The Tools of the Trade,” the author provides information and tips critical to the success of new and experienced writers. It's another eye-opener. “Tools” will enlighten you about the writing techniques you never knew existed. It will also enrich your language and writing skills immensely.

In a review, a detailed discussion of each of the chapters seems possible only to a certain extent. Therefore, I'll describe and discuss the major sections of the book that resonate with my own teaching and research interests.

“Tools” contains ten parts, each broken into several logically structured subchapters to facilitate navigating the book.

Part One, “Audience, Audience, & Above All...” focuses on the reader, with successful communication in mind. Here, the author stresses one important point: there's always more than one audience for the book.

Part Two, “Style is Substance,” attempts to answer important questions: how can I make it easier for the reader – easier to understand, and to remember; considering that miscommunication is the rule...not the exception (p.12). Darian suggests using conversational language. He means using active voice and contractions. The author suggests opting for active voice, but not in all cases. One such exception is using passive voice to emphasize something: “X was made by...” (p.13). Darian's examples of transforming passive voice into active, to make the information “more easily digestible”, are extremely useful. As for contractions, Darian emphasizes their potential to improve the rhythm of the sentence.

The next subchapter deals with empathy and “opening doors to people's hearts”. He emphasizes the use of aphorisms, as a technique, and uses it in his own writing:

“Experience is not just the best teacher. In the long run, it’s the only teacher.”

“What we write is not necessarily what people read.”

They add charm to the book, they make the reader think. Such reflections can definitely “humanize” the “scientified” (as Darian aptly – and humorously – puts it) writing so common everywhere.

Part Three, “Words: First, the Caviar,” is about the heart of semantics: “no word means exactly the same for two people, because we bring our own meanings and experiences to them.” Some useful suggestions here are about making the reader feel what’s happening – not just read about it. A small subchapter I especially like is about euphemisms, that go hand in glove with dysphemisms. Now that I’ve read “Tools”, my favorite dysphemism-euphemism conversion-example is the following one:

“In short, the manuscript is a piece of shit strictly substandard.”

Professor Darian warns us of melodramatic exaggerations. On the other hand, he stresses the importance of mild imperatives

Consider...

Look at it from another point of view.

You can’t assume ... vs. Don’t assume ...

Remember vs. One must not forget

Here I would suggest adding – for the sake of non-native speakers – some cases of implied negation that, in fact, involve the reader in the imaginary dialog. Namely:

You might think otherwise, (but)...

Don’t get me wrong...

It is tempting to...

The author also pays due attention to the softeners (“you’ve probably noticed”; auxiliary words “may”, “might”, “could”, “possible”). There are some excellent examples of emphasers, like rhetorical questions:

What’s the best way to...?

Does it seem odd, somehow? A bit radical?

It was bound to happen. Or was it? What if...?

And stock phrases: “the key to this is...”; “here’s the best part”; “and that’s not the whole story.”

Part Four, “Words: Then – the Caveats,” deals with buzz words, slang, jargon, obsolete words, and “he or she”, “which” and “whom” conundrums. The author does a good job – to avoid what he humorously – and metaphorically – nails as unnatural “pretzel prose.” However, I would add just one lexical bundle, that is, “speaking of which...” in a relevant context.

Then comes the subchapter on the human tone. As Darian puts it, “Science is a living thing. But at times you’d never think so, judging by a lot of scientific writing.” Example:

Original: It is important to recognize how strategically important and vulnerable the Korean peninsula has been in world history.

Rewrite: Throughout history, we can observe how strategically important and vulnerable the Korean peninsula has been.

Other subchapters deal with various types of definitions, the language of quantifying, hedging, tentativeness and probability (from “my guess is” to “I’d bet”).

Part Five, “Life Sentences”, reminds us one more time how important it is to keep subject and verb close together. It also deals with “old” vs. “new” information positioning: new information usually comes at the end of a sentence.

Part Six, “Cutting Up the Pie: Paragraphs. Beginnings and Endings. Openings and Closings. Headings and Titles,” delivers on what the title promises.

Part Seven, “The Big Picture,” is about semantic frameworks and architecture: titles, subtitles, forecasting statements and reminders etc.

Part Eight, “Some Writers’ Techniques,” highlights rhythm, repetition, parallelism, and figurative language.

Part Nine, “Quoting, Referring, Citing in the Text: A Slightly Heretical View,” is about established practices of quoting (especially strict in academic world), and actually offering more variety and avoiding too many quotes in the text.

Part Ten, “Revising, Devising, Conniving,” gives a rather comprehensive list of transition words a.k.a. logical connectors. A special treat is the subchapter on playing with language and language creativity, e.g.:

watch the butterfly flutter by

Vary? Good. Vary Good.

Again, the importance of good storytelling and dialoguing is emphasized, and more witty narratives follow. Darian suggests reading Thomas Friedman's "The World is Flat" as an example of using all the techniques discussed in the book. I have already done it.

The author also reminds us of Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara Tuchman's discovery: an essential element for good writing is a good ear – one must listen to the sound of one's writing. And here I'm going to mention butterflies again, for the third time. To me, English has always sounded a bit like jazz. "Flutter By, Butterfly" is not only an example of a word play, it is also a studio album by Kenny Wheeler Quintet, released in 1988. The Allmusic review of the album highly rated the score, and stated that each of the performances was worth hearing.

Just like this brilliant music, that is still worth listening to, each of Darian's chapters of "The Tools of the Trade" are worth reading. This book has charismatic, crisp writing, engaging style, and lots of useful and thought-provoking material for both native and non-native speakers – and writers – of English. For all involved in scholarly (and not just scholarly) writing. "The Tools" is intended to improve the writing skills in their totality. It shows us the thousand faces of the English language. It demystifies the process of writing. It really is in a league of its own. This is definitely a read-it-again, think-about-it-again, use-it-again book, and I'm delighted to recommend it. Because, borrowing another line from the book, "It's the best way. Not the only way. But the best way."

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