

use, where possible small words rather than long ones; to avoid both jargon and colloquialisms, since both of these tend to confuse rather than to clarify. Robert Louis Stevenson said that: 'The difficulty is not to write, but to write what you mean, not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish'.<sup>3</sup>

Language is in a state of constant change, possessing a momentum which is quite irresistible. It is impossible to stop the progress of language. During the progress of language the meanings of words change, new words become fashionable and are accepted into standard speech while others become moribund and disappear from the language. In Britain, unlike France, there is no committee of wise people which ratifies the addition of new words to the English language nor does such a body sign the death certificate for a word, finally consigning it to history. Public opinion decides all these questions. This country's vocabulary is part of its democratic institutions. What is generally accepted will ultimately be accepted as correct. Choosing the right word to convey a precise meaning using a language which is always changing is an art form, the practice of which requires regular revision and updating. Even some of the details in Gowers' excellent book, *The Complete Plain Words*, as he himself would admit, must be read with care. The book, however, is important for the principles of good writing which it presents. For this reason, it is essential reading for the writer of professional reports: '... it is the duty of the official in his use of English, neither to perpetuate what is obsolescent nor to give currency to what is novel, but, like a good servant, to follow what is generally regarded by his masters as the best practice for the time being. Among his readers will be vigilant guardians of the purity of English prose, and they must not be offended. So the official's vocabulary must contain only words that by general consent have passed the barrier, and he must not give a helping hand to any that are still trying to get through, even though he may think them deserving'.<sup>4</sup> Report writing for

urban design projects is conservative in its approach to language, being more like the prose of the Civil Service than that of the novel or even the text book where the use of English may be more innovative.

Reports are written in sentences. They are not presented in notes taking the form of unfinished phrases separated by a multitude of dashes and structured with interminable asterisks or 'bullet points'. Good prose is a careful mixture of long and short sentences. Most sentences, however, should be short. The short sentence is less confusing for the reader than the long sentence. It can therefore express the writer's meaning more precisely. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a sentence as: 'A series of words in connected speech or writing, forming the grammatically complete expression of a single thought ... such a portion of a composition or utterance as extends from one full stop to another'.<sup>5</sup> For those wishing to make their meaning clear the sentence should express one idea. This is most easily achieved using the short sentence. Long sentences tend to attract verbiage and end as a meandering stream of words.

Reports would be unreadable if they were not divided into paragraphs. A paragraph is essentially a unit of thought. Paragraphs should be composed with sentences having ideas which illuminate its main thought. The paragraph should have a beginning, a middle and an end. The first sentence of the paragraph introduces the main thought. Sentences in the middle of the paragraph expand the theme. The last sentence in the paragraph restates and rounds off the particular unit of thought. The chief thing to remember is that paragraphing is used to make the text readable and to facilitate precise understanding. Paragraphs of one sentence are unusual and should only be used to give emphasis to a particularly important statement. Generally, however, the use of the single sentence paragraph should be avoided and it should never be used in series. At the other extreme, paragraphing loses its point if the paragraphs are excessively long.

The report is arranged into sections. A section of the report is the equivalent of a chapter of a book. A section is a significant part of the report. It is usually an account of a particular step in the design process, such as a description of the survey or an account of its analysis. The section, like the paragraph, has a beginning, a middle part and an end. The first paragraph sets out the content of the section. The middle part is composed of paragraphs, each of which develop one theme of the section. The concluding paragraph summarizes the main contents of the section and points the way to the next section. The reason for structuring the report into sections is to present information in manageable and cohesive units for clarity and ease of reading. Before starting to compose a particular section it is useful to list the themes which will form the basis of the paragraphs. The list of these ideas should be organized so that one topic leads logically to the next. If the author cannot state the idea in each paragraph simply then it is unlikely that the reader will understand what he reads. If the idea in each paragraph is unclear, or if each paragraph does not lead rationally to the next idea then the text is unlikely to present a coherent and precise account to the reader.

The detailed structure of an urban design project may take a number of forms: it varies to suit the requirements of the type of project. Normally, however, it contains information on three main subject areas. The first subject is a description of the survey or investigation. The second main subject area covers the analysis of the survey material. The final subject area is the synthesis of ideas leading to the proposed solution. Urban design is an iterative process, that is, the designer does not follow the stages of the process in a linear fashion, completing the survey, then proceeding to its analysis, followed by synthesis or design. The nature of the problem may at first be unclear. The definition of the problem may be discovered by confronting the limited evidence available with a number of partial solutions. Both problem definition and

solution unfold together during this process of iteration. To describe this cyclical design process blow by blow would result in a confused and confusing report. For the sake of brevity and clarity the design process is presented as if it were a linear progression from project inception to the distillation of the solution. All the return loops and untidy abortive endeavours which are inevitable in the design process are simplified.

The report starts with an abstract, sometimes called an executive summary. This is the part of the report which most people read. It should therefore be composed with great care. The executive summary is written particularly for the busy politician who wants to know the key information in the report without taking time to read the full document. Others may read the executive summary and then turn to read particular sections of the report which they believe are of interest or are of greatest significance. Sir Winston Churchill is reported as saying that an idea which cannot be summarized on one side of foolscap is not worth considering. This may be an extreme position to take on this subject, nevertheless, the core of the idea should appear at the start of the executive summary. It should be brief and preferably

- **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**
- **CLIENT'S BRIEF** including goals, objectives and programme
- **INVESTIGATION** including site surveys and study of design precedents
- **ANALYSIS** of the survey and other evidence gathered
- **PROBLEM STATEMENT** including generation of alternative solutions
- **EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVES**
- **DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN**
- **IMPLEMENTATION** including cost, delivery of the plan, phasing and arrangements for monitoring

**Figure 7.1** Urban design report: list of contents.