

# Introduction to *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*

Patricia T. O'Conner

**Abstract:** This is the introduction to the Seven Stories Press reissue of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, a writing handbook co-authored by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, published originally in 1943. The Seven Stories Press edition with this introduction appeared in 2018.

**Keywords:** writing, English, handbooks, readers

---

This is the best book on writing ever published. It's the sanest, most rigorous examination of English prose style to be found anywhere, and it may also be the most peculiar. I doubt that we'll see its like again.

An extraordinary book written in extraordinary times, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* was begun in the summer of 1940, just after the fall of France and the evacuation of Allied forces at Dunkirk. Europe was now overrun by demagogues. Robert Graves, the celebrated English poet, novelist, and man of letters, had already fled his home in Majorca ahead of Franco's troops and returned to England, a country that now feared for its life.

Graves and Alan Hodge, his researcher and collaborator, had just finished writing *The Long Week-End*, a social history of Britain between the wars. It was an overview of life in the twenties and thirties, and might be summarized as 'How the British let their hair down in peacetime'. The authors now felt that a similar laxity had crept into writing, which even at the highest levels had become 'loose, confused and ungraceful'. With a new war to be won, the kingdom couldn't afford careless, sloppy English. Good communication was critical, but Graves and Hodge were afraid that English prose in its current state was not up to the task: 'We regard the present crisis as acute enough to excuse this book'.

Their proposal, put simply, is that writers should anticipate readers' questions, then answer them clearly, logically, and with a minimum of fuss. Some assembly is required, but instructions are included.

Modestly subtitled 'A Handbook for Writers of English Prose', the book was never merely that. *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* has been called the authors' contribution to the war effort. It would be too much to say that they thought good English could save the world. But to Graves and Hodge, clear and logical prose was not a mere nicety: 'The writing of good English is [...] a moral matter, as the Romans held that the writing of good Latin was'.

The title sums up their theme, stated early in the book: 'We suggest that whenever anyone sits down to write he should imagine a crowd of his prospective readers (rather than a grammarian in cap and gown) looking over his shoulder'. By imagining readers' questions, the authors say, 'the writer will discover certain tests of intelligibility'. These tests, outlined in Part I, consist of forty-one principles for writing, twenty-five devoted to clarity and sixteen to grace of expression. Each principle is carefully defined, then illustrated by snippets of writing that fail the test.

In Part II, Graves and Hodge reverse this process. They analyse more than fifty short passages by eminent contemporary writers, applying line by line the principles laid out in Part I. But they don't just point out shortcomings. They actually rewrite the passages. This took a lot of nerve, considering that they were correcting people like T. S. Eliot, Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, Ernest Hemingway, John Maynard Keynes, Cecil Day-Lewis, Ezra Pound, Stephen Spender, H. G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw. (One of their friends suggested as a subtitle 'A Short Cut to Unpopularity'.)

Their purpose was not to sneer at the mighty, but to show that occasionally even the best writers are careless or inattentive. In choosing their samples, the authors explain, they simply took up a book or article by each writer, then 'read on at our usual speed until we found ourselves bogged in a difficult passage. This passage became the subject of our analysis'.

Each sample – whether from a prime minister or a popular novelist – is subjected to the same forty-one principles. There should be no

---

doubt in the reader's mind as to who, what, when, where, how much, how long, and so on. No word or phrase should be ambiguous or out of place. Sentences should be linked logically and intelligibly. Ideas should follow one another in a natural order. Metaphors should be handled with care. Nothing unnecessary should be included, nothing necessary omitted.

After rewriting each sample Graves and Hodge add a general comment, sometimes excusing a writer because of extenuating circumstances, sometimes adding insult to injury. But the comments are fair (even the acerbic ones) and infuse the book with a personality all its own.

After finding thirty-three faults in a paragraph by Pound, the authors tartly remark, 'Ezra Pound's writing is wilfully loose – not a natural half-apologetic "barbaric yawp" like Walt Whitman's, but yawp for yawp's sake'. The head of Harrow School also gets demerits: 'Headmasters, like bishops, suffer from an occupational disability: it is very seldom that people venture to criticize their literary style. The headmaster style is usually an uneasy mixture of semi-ecclesiastical oratory, Government Department English, and colloquialisms intended to disarm the natural hostility of schoolboys'. And after dissecting an excerpt by Alfred North Whitehead, they conclude: 'Professor Whitehead is generally acknowledged to be the most thorough, acute and original of contemporary British philosophers. It is strange to find him unbending in this popular work: becoming as conversationally loose as any feather-headed undergraduate'.

At times, Graves and Hodge can't resist slyly poking fun. Citing a garbled announcement from the Ministry of Agriculture, they write: 'This paragraph has suffered from collective authorship; no single person could possibly have written so confusedly by himself'. In illustrating the need to avoid distraction, they point to the poet Hart Crane, who 'decided that he could not write his best except with a radio or victrola playing jazz at him and street-noises coming up through the open window. He considered that distraction was the chief principle of modern living; he cultivated it, distractedly, and committed suicide in his early thirties'. In demonstrating how not

to use metaphors, they quote a line from a Graham Greene novel: 'Kay Rimmer sat with her head in her hands and her eyes on the floor'. Their reply: 'And her teeth on the mantelpiece?'

Perhaps anticipating objections, the authors pledge that 'we have wrenched no quotation unfairly from its context'. In fact, they sometimes soften a critique by putting a writer's faults into perspective. 'This passage is in the table-talk tradition, and has the hit-or-miss charm of the dessert course', they comment on an excerpt by Clive Bell. 'It was written during the most prosperous and care-free period between the two World Wars'. Here they sympathize with a bureaucrat who's forced to pussyfoot around a topic: 'Lord Halifax in making this speech, as a Minister without portfolio, was restrained by many considerations from saying frankly what he meant'. Their revision, they add, 'represents what he would no doubt have said, had he been in a less delicate position'.

Always they come down on the side of sober common sense. In explaining Principle Nine, 'No word or phrase should be ambiguous', they quote this vague line from a travel book: 'The Socialist authorities in Vienna built cheap modern flats for the workers'. Graves and Hodge raise the natural objection that any reader would: 'Were they cheap to build? Or cheap to live in? Or both?' A fault like this, they point out, can have graver consequences: 'The disastrous charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava in the Crimean War was made because of a carelessly worded order'.

Some of their forty-one principles may appear to overlap, the authors note, 'but look into any carpenter's tool-bag and see how many different hammers, chisels, planes and screwdrivers he keeps there – not for ostentation or luxury, but for different sorts of jobs'.

This workmanlike approach is typical of the book. To the claim that 'English is an illogical, chaotic language, unsuited for clear thinking', Graves and Hodge reply that 'often the apparent chaos is only the untidiness of a workshop in which a great deal of repair and other work is in progress', one in which 'the old workman can lay his hand on whatever spare parts or accessories he needs or at least on the right tools and materials for improvising them'.

---

The message: Given patience and the proper tools, any of us can write better, clearer English. Furthermore, we have a responsibility to do so.

Because the authors reflect the Britain of their time, there are references to food rationing, air raids, and naval blockades. But whiffs of the past detract in no way from the book. If anything, they add to its eccentric charm and testify to its durability. In the power of its arguments, its clear-eyed good sense, its practical wisdom, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* is timeless.

Fortunately, the first edition, published in London and New York in 1943, is the version you're about to read. We're lucky to have it back.

The only disservice that Graves and Hodge did to *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* was to abridge it for a second edition in 1947. They deleted big chunks of the text – 156 pages in all. In the process, a handful of errors crept in, and thirty-six of the passages examined in Part II were eliminated, including those by Hemingway, Pound, Huxley, Lewis, and Spender.

The authors also discarded five absorbing chapters showing how English prose style developed from Anglo-Saxon times to the twentieth century. This section amounts to a highly opinionated, and typically Gravesian, history of English writing, and it's a pleasure in itself. As the authors demonstrate in the first edition, 'Every social and political change was marked by a corresponding change in the character of prose'. The book lost something of its soul when it lost those chapters. Now all this has been restored and a new generation of writers can discover the book in its original form. I should add here 'a new generation of readers'. Those forty-one principles work both ways; they make for better reading as well as better writing. They can show a reader what's wrong with something that rings false or doesn't make sense or leaves questions unanswered. In a climate where rumours, impressions, and outright lies are sometimes treated as fact, informed readers are more important than ever. No democracy can afford to be without readers who can ask the right questions, who can critically judge what they read, who can mentally peer over an author's shoulder.

'Faults in English prose', Graves and Hodge write, 'derive not so much from lack of knowledge, intelligence or art as from lack of thought, patience or goodwill'. A world that still suffers from thoughtless, impatient, and manipulative prose still needs *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*. Long may it live.

**Patricia T. O'Conner** is a former staff editor at *The New York Times Book Review*, and the author of five books on language, most recently *Origins of the Specious*.

*Editor's note:* We would like to thank Ms O'Conner and The Seven Stories Press for permission to reprint this text.