



Simple & Direct

By Jacques Barzun

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After a lifetime of writing and editing prose, Jacques Barzun has set down his view of the best ways to improve one's style. His discussions of diction, syntax, tone, meaning, composition, and revision guide the reader through the technique of making the written word clear and agreeable to read. Exercises, model passages both literary and casual, and hundreds of amusing examples of usage gone wrong show how to choose the right path to self-expression in forceful and distinctive words.

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Editorial Review

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Rare is the book that causes one to consider--ponder? appraise? examine? inspect? contemplate?--one's every word. *Simple & Direct*, a classic text on the craft of writing by the educator Jacques Barzun, does so--with style. His object, says Barzun, is "to resensitize the mind to words." Do not use a word unless you know both its meaning and its connotations, its "quality" and its "atmosphere," and the ways in which it joins with other words. Barzun is an exacting taskmaster, railing against abstractions, "fancy" wordings, contemporary slang (which "prey[s] upon the vocabulary rather than nourish[es] it"), misprints ("it is rudeness to let them appear"), and the like. He bemoans what he sees as "a fury at work in the people to make war on hyphens," and he loathes those new words, such as condominium, that have been "cobbled together out of shavings and leftovers."

Still, no stodgy codger he. Barzun merely asks that you "have a point and make it by means of the best word." If that means splitting an infinitive or substituting a "which" for a "that," so be it. Just be sure that the decision to do so is conscious and informed. Once you've found the right word, you can move on to writing sentences and then leaning them against one another until they form paragraphs. Only when you've gotten it all down, says Barzun, should you allow yourself the pleasure of revision. "Unlike the sculptor," he says, "the writer can start carving and enjoying himself only after he has dug the marble out of his own head."

--Jane Steinberg

About the Author

Born in France in 1907, Jacques Barzun came to the United States in 1920. After graduating from Columbia College, he joined the faculty of the university, becoming Seth Low Professor of History and, for a decade, Dean of Faculties and Provost. The author of some thirty books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *From Dawn to Decadence*, he received the Gold Medal for Criticism from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, of which he was twice president. He lived in San Antonio, Texas, before passing away at age 104.

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