

# What Is Clarity in Composition?

## Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms

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*Clarity* is a characteristic of a [speech](#) or a [prose composition](#) that communicates effectively with its intended [audience](#). Also called *perspicuity*.

In general, the qualities of clearly written prose include a carefully defined [purpose](#), logical organization, well-constructed sentences, and precise word choice. Verb: *clarify*. Contrast with [gobbledygook](#).

### Etymology

From the Latin, "clear."

### Examples and Observations

"When asked what qualities they value most in writing, people who must read a great deal professionally put **clarity** at the top of their list. If they have to invest too much effort in figuring out the writer's [meaning](#), they will give up in dismay or annoyance."

(Maxine C. Hairston, *Successful Writing*. Norton, 1992)

"All men are really attracted by the beauty of [plain](#) speech [but they] write in a florid [style](#) in imitation of this."

(Henry David Thoreau, quoted by J.M. Williams in *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 1981)

"The main thing I try to do is write as **clearly** as I can. I [rewrite](#) a good deal to make it clear."

(E.B. White, *The New York Times*. Aug. 3, 1942)

"It is bad manners to give [readers] needless trouble. Therefore **clarity**. . . . And how is clarity to be achieved? Mainly by taking trouble and by writing to serve people rather than to impress them."

([F.L. Lucas, \*Style\*](#). Cassell, 1955)

"For any kind of [public speaking](#), as for any kind of literary communication, **clarity** is the highest beauty."

(Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004)

### Clear Beginnings

"Meek or bold, a good [beginning](#) achieves **clarity**. A sensible line threads through the [prose](#); things follow one another with literal logic or with the logic of feeling. Clarity isn't an exciting virtue, but it's a virtue always, and especially at the beginning of a piece of prose. Some writers seem to resist clarity, even to write confusingly on purpose. Not many would admit to this.

"One who did was the wonderful-thought-not-to-be-imitated Gertrude Stein: 'My writing is clear as mud, but mud settles and clear streams run on and disappear.' Oddly, it's one of the clearest sentences she ever wrote.

"For many other writers, clarity simply falls victim to a desire to achieve other things, to dazzle with style or

to bombard with information. It's one thing for the reader to take pleasure in the writer's achievements, another when the writer's own pleasure is apparent. Skill, talent, inventiveness, all can become overbearing and intrusive. The [image](#) that calls attention to itself is often the image you can do without." (Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd, "The Best Beginning: Clarity." *The Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2013)

### **The Challenge of Writing Clearly**

"It's good to write **clearly**, and anyone can. . . .

"Of course, writing fails for reasons more serious than unclear sentences. We bewilder our readers when we can't organize complex ideas coherently, and we cannot hope for their assent when we ignore their reasonable questions and objections. But once we've formulated our [claims](#), organized their supporting reasons logically, and grounded those reasons on sound [evidence](#), we still have to express it all in clear and [coherent](#) language, a difficult task for most writers, and a daunting one for many.

"It is a problem that has afflicted generations of writers who, instead of communicating their ideas in clear and direct language, hide them not only from their readers, but sometimes even from themselves. When we read that kind of writing in government regulations, we call it [bureaucratese](#) . . . . Written deliberately or carelessly, it is a language of exclusion that a diverse and democratic society cannot tolerate."

(Joseph M. Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. Addison Wesley Longman, 2003)

### **Lanham on Clarity**

"There are so many ways of being clear! So many different [audiences](#) to be clear to! When I tell you to 'Be clear!' I am simply telling you to 'Succeed,' 'Get the message across.' Again, good advice but not much real help. I have not solved your problem, I've simply restated it. '**Clarity**,' in such a formulation, refers not to words on a page but to responses, yours or your reader's. And the writer has to write words on a page, not ideas in a mind. . . .

"The 'successful communication' that 'clarity' points to is finally our success in getting someone else to share our view of the world, a view we have composed by perceiving it. And if this is true of perception it must hold true for [prose](#) too. To write is to *compose* a world as well as *view* one."

(Richard Lanham, *Analyzing Prose*. Continuum, 2003)

### **Also see:**

[How to Write an Effective Ad, by Ulysses G. Manning](#)

[Kurt Vonnegut on Writing With Style](#)

[Plain English](#)

[Plain Style](#)

[Pompous Proverbs: An Exercise in Brevity and Clarity](#)

[Practice in Cutting the Clutter](#)

[Samuel Johnson on the Bugbear Style](#)

[Skotison](#)

[Ten Principles of Effective Writing](#)