

A Very Short Essay on the Protection of the Long Sentence

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With much of what we read today coming to us in short form: news flashes, texts and hurriedly written messages, and with our ever decreasing attention spans, we are in danger of losing the beauty, the excitement and the adventurous possibilities of the long complex sentence. While short sentences have their place and can be powerful, a well-formed long sentence provides movement, flow, and shape to a story.

I asked my nine-year-old grandson if, when he was writing a story, he liked long or short sentences. Given his age, I expected his answer to be ‘short’, but to my surprise, he answered, ‘long.’ ‘Why?’ I asked, and without pause he replied, ‘I don’t like being stopped.’ Punctuation as an active participant in one’s writing: what a wonderful concept! Immediately some of the other characters have danced onto my page and demanded to be acknowledged: the little comma is gently running its hand up its chest, sighing, ‘Breath’; the semicolon has turned itself into a stile, inviting me to take time to climb over, and with one foot either side of the fence, to look at what is behind me and what I’m connecting it to in front; while the colon has arrived with arms up, exclaiming, ‘Look at this expansion of all before you’; now it’s turned into a wide-mouthed tuber, trumpeting all it can see. But the full stop has arrived with a determined look, its hand up, ‘Halt, you’ve reached the end of this sentence’. OK. A few little bat-like creatures are hanging around too. I think they may be speech marks, but I’ll wait till nighttime to see what they want.

Let’s go on a walk:

It’s a cold day; it will be a long walk, and we have first to leave town. Several traffic lights frequently, but necessarily, interrupt our stride. We have reached a country lane now and we begin to wander through the bush: up a gentle slope, protected by dense undergrowth and high eucalypts that wave freely above us; pausing briefly to look and to listen to the birds, little birds secretly camouflaged amongst the low silver scrub; the bird song reminding me of walking with my dad in the coastal walks around Sydney; how he would have loved this. The hill is steeper now: dark, bald rocks, little vegetation, and with our heads down, and out of breath; each in-breath seeming to suck us closer to the dark clouds that have appeared on the horizon, we push on against the wind, a wind that comes from the cold south, reminding us that we have no shelter here. Suddenly, almost without warning, we have reached the summit,

and with the wind behind us, lifting our heads, there it is, the sea: big rolling waves crashing to the shore; the spray forming a fine veil across the beach; the long call of the seagulls mewing overhead; the sun glimpsing through the clouds, bouncing as silver on the water. We breathe deeply at the wonder of it all.

The long sentence allows us, the writer, to explore, to ponder and to reflect; to offer anticipation, anticipation that creates for the reader some tension, uncertainty, uncertainty that in the end must be resolved.

Let's protect and enjoy the long sentence and all the punctuation that the English language gives us: to breathe, to pause a little, perhaps to pause or to think a little longer, to turn back and reflect, to expand our thoughts and when we do reach the end, only then to stop.