

The Elements of Expression: Putting Thoughts into Words

Arthur Plotnik

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This isn't a book about grammar, punctuation, rules, or even about getting anything "right" on the page; as the author points out, there are plenty of those books around. Rather, what Plotnik is concerned about—no, make that fervent, ardent, zealous, even fanatical about—is making the language of the written word as interesting and precise as possible. He wants writers to put together words, phrases, and sentences that capture the tiniest nuance, paint the biggest picture. This book roots for language that is not just right but bright, which communicates the truest tone and shading and the finest distinctions possible. He yearns for writers to craft work that is irresistible, engrossing, unpredictably original, and conveys the precise, specific thought in one's head.

And the fact that this is so rarely the case has him a little upset. "Twelve, sixteen, twenty years of schooling, inundated by verbiage every day, and we can't speak our hearts," he notes, the major obstacle being our collective tendency toward imitation. "Sometimes it seems a national echolalia has taken hold, with a handful of incessantly repeated terms cycling through and dominating." Beyond implying laziness, this reliance on stock language, he argues, mocks our humanity.

The answers, laid out in chapters crafted with wit and dry humor, have as much to do with word selection as thinking, planning, and recognizing our literary tendencies and bad habits. Plotnik urges we reconsider tired figures of speech, fatigued vocabularies, colloquialisms, and "geekish." The underlying point is what every writer knows but often forgets: Every word counts. Every one.

There is also a hefty section on rethinking oral presentations, and he addresses the underlying fear common to even the highly literate, and offers concrete tips and tricks. "Professional speakers deliver about 150 to 170 words a minute, but they vary the tempo for effect: Slow for transition, emphasis, gravity, dander, horror. Fast for comedy, urgency, excitement, dynamic action. Nervous amateurs use two gears: fast and frantic, losing much of their articulation, nuance and audience."

Plotnik's effort fulfills the writer's hope for such a book—to weather well on the shelf, from whence it can be plucked at moments of needed inspiration or dread perspiration, and skimmed, flipped through, thumbed.

LISA ROMEO (June 27, 2012)

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