HERBERT SPENCER'S PHILOSOPHY OF STYLE: CONSERVING MENTAL ENERGY

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ABSTRACT

My article traces the development, chronicles the impact, and explains the essence of Herbert Spencer’s “The Philosophy of Style” (1852). Spencer’s essay has had a significant influence on stylistics, especially in scientific and technical communication. Although in our generation Spencer’s contribution to stylistics is not widely remembered, it ought to be. His single essay on this subject was seminal to modern theories about effective communication, not because it introduced new knowledge but because it was such a rhetorically astute synthesis of stylistic lore, designed to connect traditional rhetorical theory with 19th-century ideas about science, technology, and evolution. It was also influential because it was part of Spencer’s grand “synthetic philosophy,” a prodigious body of books and essays that made him one of the most prominent thinkers of his time. Spencer’s “Philosophy of Style” carried the day, and many following decades, with its description of the human mind as a symbol-processing machine, with its description of cognitive and affective dimensions of communication, and with its scientifically considered distillation of the fundamental components of effective style. We should read Spencer’s essay and understand its impact not so much because we expect it to teach us new things about good style, but precisely because: 1) it’s at the root of some very important concepts now familiar to us; 2) it synthesizes these concepts so impressively; 3) we can use it heuristically as we continue thinking about style; and 4) it provides a compact, accessible touchstone for exploring—with students, clients, and colleagues—the techniques of effective style for scientific and technical communication.

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler [1, p. 314].

. . . the fewer the words are, provided neither propriety nor perspicuity be violated, the expression is always the more vivid [2, p. 333].
However influential the precepts thus dogmatically expressed, they would be much more influential if reduced to something like scientific ordination. In this as in other cases, conviction is strengthened when we understand the *why* [3, pp. 2-3].

The psychology of language reception is still very imperfectly understood [4, p. 77].

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, along with my university teaching, I’ve done some consulting in industry—which means I’ve taught business people and engineers the same arts of communication that I teach my students. One thing I’ve noticed about business people and folks in various technical trades is that they exalt efficiency. They love such things as lean manufacturing and just-in-time procedures. Managers, especially, thrill to the nouns “efficiency” and “economy,” and to the verb “conserve”—though perhaps not the noun form, conservation, as applied to environmental regulations. Tell these professional people you’ll teach them to communicate with greater efficiency or economy and you will sense immediate, agreeable equations forming behind their eyeballs: communication efficiency = greater savings of effort and time. Time (and effort) is money. Therefore, communication efficiency = money. This line of logic ends with money = happiness, but that’s a given.

When we’re talking about writing style, what we generally mean by efficient or economical communication is writing that people can read quickly, understand thoroughly, and remember well. It is also writing that people can read in volume while maintaining good speed, understanding, and retention. The expression “efficient communication” and its variants are generally seen as embracing the notion of rhetorical effectiveness. In other words, a passage of text is not made more efficient or economical by reducing the length, complexity, or subtlety of its components if its rhetorical impact is thereby reduced. This important proviso comes to us down the centuries from classical theories of style, especially in their discussion of brevity and clarity as virtues of speaking (*virtutes dicendi*). In brief: the classical tradition says that effective speech is adequate to the occasion. This means adequate in terms of audience adaptation, treatment of the subject, persuasive power, and so on. Defect—too little said—leads to obscurity and so is inadequate speech, just as excess—too much said, either in complexity of structure or difficulty of words or repetitions or examples or sheer number of words, such as

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1 Compare Klare’s definition of readability: “Ease of understanding or comprehension due to the style of writing” [5, p. 1]. Selzer expands: “In other words, readability is simply the efficiency with which a text can be comprehended by a reader, as measured by reading time, amount recalled, questions answered, or some other quantifiable measure of a reader’s ability to process text . . .” [6, p. 73].
I’ve used in this interjection—tires and confuses the listener, and so is again inadequate (inefficient, uneconomical).²

With this proviso in mind, some version of the goal of efficient writing style should appeal to all writers. We can even dare to call it a goal of good literature, especially when we consider the arts of writing poetry and short stories (today, even short short stories).³ But whether or not we can convince the average literature professor of this, it should not be difficult to make the case that certainly, for scientific and technical communication, “reading comprehensibility and reader efficiency [are] particularly defensible goals” [6, p. 72].

SOME LITERATURE ON STYLISTIC EFFICIENCY

There is a great deal of literature on the subject of efficient communication, not only under general headings like communication, rhetoric, composition, readability, plain language, and of course style, but also under psychology. Communication studies within this broad heading tend to fall under subheadings like cognitive psychology, educational (or learning) psychology, psychology of memory, psycholinguistics, and so on.⁴ Some well-known scholarship that draws on many of these fields appeared two decades ago in New Essays in Technical and Scientific Communication: Research, Theory, Practice; the Faigley/Witte [15], Selzer [6], and Huckin [16] essays in particular. Faigley and Witte, for example, examine “efficient transmission of information” by looking specifically at “discourse features that influence efficient communication” [15, p. 59]. Drawing upon linguistic theory about syntactic and topical structures in text, they conducted and reported upon an experiment in textual efficiency. Selzer’s article, drawing upon cognitive psychologists, psycholinguists, discourse analysts, readability experts, and others, explored the question of what constitutes a “readable technical style” [6, p. 71] (read: an efficient style), while Huckin’s “cognitive approach to readability” [16, p. 90] pursued the same goal.

During the past few decades, we have seen many books and articles on sci/tech style that draw on similar sources. Of course, there are also many style books not geared specifically to scientific and technical communication. If teachers of composition are asked to name some of these rather than style books “confined” to scientific and technical writing, with its focus on efficient communication, Strunk and White’s famous Elements of Style [17] is quickly mentioned, as are the many stylistic treatises of Joseph Williams, especially his influential Style: Ten Lessons

² See, for example, treatments of brevity in Aristotle’s Rhetoric Book III, chapter 7; Cicero’s De Oratore Book II chapters 39 and 80, and Book III, chapter 13; also his Brutus, chapter 13; and Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria Book IV, chapter 2 and Book VIII, chapter 2.


⁴ See Garner [8], Kellogg [9], Neisser [10], Rommetveit [11], and Weaver, as cited in Kingston [12]; collections by Myers et al. [13] and Smith [14].
in Clarity and Grace [18]. It’s interesting to note, however, that although such books are not dedicated specifically to style in scientific and technical writing, they are solidly applicable and widely used in our field. A glance at the tables of contents suggests why—from Strunk and White’s advice to “Use definite, specific, concrete language,” “Omit needless words,” “Avoid the use of qualifiers,” “Write with nouns and verbs,” “Avoid fancy words,” and “Be clear,” to Williams’s focus on “Correctness,” “Clarity,” “Concision,” and so on. These, and indeed many chapters and sections in these books, could fit under the general heading Efficient Communication. Hence their applicability to our field. Their debt to Spencer is perhaps negligible; I point out correspondences here not so much by way of showing Spencer as fountainhead as by way of observing the flow of multiple rivers on a watershed.

Within the sci/tech and professional writing style streams, many publications display a title directly announcing the theme of efficient or economical communication: for example, Deirdre McCloskey’s Economical Writing [19]. Others employ near synonyms: for example, Jefferson Bates’s Writing With Precision [20]. Another cousin of efficiency is the word “plain,” as in plain English, plain language, and plain style. Literature is legion on the topic of plain language as a legal and sociopolitical phenomenon; for a good sampling see Steinberg’s collection [21]. “Plain style,” in its traditional sense, has also generated a lot of literature; for discussion of this topic with reference to scientific and technical communication, see Whitburn [22], as well as Halloran and Whitburn [23].

**SPENCER’S INFLUENCE ON THEORISTS OF STYLE**

Some of the books and articles pursuing the theme of efficient or economical communication cite a heritage from Spencer, some don’t—at least, not directly. I am not suggesting that every style book or piece of scholarship on style in the last 150 years is obliged to acknowledge a deep debt to Herbert Spencer. The rhetorical traditions were around for a long time before he showed up, and it turns out that lots of people have dipped into them, and into the cognitive dimensions of efficient style, without depending upon Mr. Spencer. But it’s instructive to note how many scholars do acknowledge important encounters with Spencer the stylist—while others have benefited from his heritage through scholars who

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5 Example: Selzer, in his “readable technical style” essay, does not reference Spencer directly, but in support of his statement that “reading comprehensibility and reader efficiency [are] particularly defensible goals for technical writing,” he cites “E. D. Hirsch’s advocacy of ‘relative readability’ as a criterion for assessing the quality of all writing” [6, p. 72]. The reference is to Hirsch’s Philosophy of Composition, in which Hirsch makes explicit his own debt to Spencer as a founding father of readability theory.
came after him. I myself might not have named Spencer until a few years ago, when I was digging about in these broad fields of information for a single theoretical article on the topic of efficient communication. I wanted something clear, focused, fairly short, and directly relevant to scientific and technical communication. Something I could use as a touchstone for thinking about and teaching efficiency as the key to good style in both academic and industrial settings. I came up with “The Philosophy of Style.”

I found it interesting, when I looked around to see who had made reference to Spencer as a theorist of style, that quite a few disciplines either trace the notion of efficient communication directly to Spencer’s essay, or they refer to it as seminal to early thinking on the topic. For example, E. D. Hirsch began his Philosophy of Composition with an epigram from Spencer and used Spencer’s ideas about the psycholinguistics of style as valid springboards to modern investigations in readability and psycholinguistics. Hirsch pointed out that among the several seminal contributions of Spencer’s essay, it had “foreshadowed one of the epochal distinctions of modern linguistics—Saussure’s distinction between the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic aspects of language use, a distinction which, in some form or other, is required, to determine the actual psychic energy needed to interpret a stretch of written discourse” [4, p. 79].

Rudolf Flesch, in his well-known The Art of Readable Writing, cites Spencer’s contribution in a chapter entitled “The Pedigree of Plain Talk” [24, pp. 229-237]. Fellow readability expert Robert Gunning also acknowledges Spencer in the same way, citing research in readability, linguistics, and psycholinguistics that pursue the topics Spencer expounded in his essay on style [26, pp. 390-398]. Other scholars, such as the linguist Otto Jespersen, refer to Spencer’s ideas on the psychology of style as important in their early thinking, though they afterwards evolved beyond those ideas. Still others—the engineer and rhetorician T. A. Rickard, for example—trace doctrines about stylistic efficiency or economy directly to Spencer, whom they regard as

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6 Hereafter Philosophy of Style, omitting quotations and “The” for ease of reading, since I repeatedly refer to the essay by name.

7 Hirsch is persona non grata among many rhetoricians—it’s a long story that involves the subject of human pride—but we can’t deny his significant impact on our field.

8 Though recognizing its various errors, Hirsch referred to Spencer’s essay as “the best introduction to the subject of readability,” and opined that it “has never been superseded” [4, p. 76].

9 In essence (though many linguists will not be satisfied with this reductionist definition): Syntagmatics deals with the “horizontal” dimension of language, with sequences of words and phrases. Paradigmatics deals with the “vertical” dimension: categories or domains of understanding into which words and phrases fall—requiring of readers/listeners greater or lesser effort in interpretation and understanding.

10 Note especially their acknowledgment of Spencer for uncovering “the dilemma [that] arises from the different requirements for conveying the cognitive and affective impact of the message” [26, p. 391].
the most important synthesizer of stylistic theory for scientific and technical communication [28]. Indeed, in his day, Spencer was considered by some as having produced “the only scientific exposition of the problem of style that we have” [29, p. 28].

Philosophy of Style continues to be assigned in history of rhetoric courses, and sometimes even in technical communication courses, surprising students who have heard of the polymath Spencer in connection with various subjects, most notably evolution—but seldom rhetoric. Yet when they’ve finished reading Philosophy of Style, they often feel they’ve finally grasped the most important feature of good style. At least, this is the feeling I remember and which I persuade myself comes over my own students.

My article provides historical context important for understanding the significance of Spencer’s essay. I also discuss the essay’s major ideas, then consider some of its critical reception. I end with thoughts about, though not extensive demonstration of, its application to scientific and technical communication. For a look at an application of Spencer’s ideas to the teaching of scientific and technical communication at the undergraduate level, see the introductory sections to the style tutorials I’ve created for my technical editing class at http://web.utk.edu/~hirst. Click on the “460” link.

Also: I do not, in this article, discuss at length the anti-religious, racist, elitist, socially oppressive, or otherwise evil implications or historical uses of Spencer’s overall System of Philosophy. These are real and deeply lamentable, but they are beyond the scope of my essay, and they do not significantly impact Spencer’s theory of style or its historical trajectory and modern applications. However, since I’ve now mentioned the bad uses of some of Spencer’s political, anthropological, and social ideas, the reader unfamiliar with them may wonder what I mean. Briefly: Spencer’s ideas about the evolution of human beings and human societies have fed into various systems of human oppression. In various contexts and usages, they have helped give a “scientific” basis to racism and to policies that have turned away help from—or even directly attacked—the poor, under-privileged, handicapped, ill, and other “non-elite.” The most repulsive use of some of Spencer’s ideas was made by Nazi scientists, especially the “eugenics” scientists and social theorists, as they directed the tortures, castrations, and murders of Jews, Gypsies, the mentally and physically handicapped, and other...
groups deemed inferior. At the “production end” of their warped eugenics program was the rape of thousands of women in an effort to seed the human gene pool with more specimens of the most highly evolved humans, the Master Race. The Nazis did not, of course, rely on Spencer alone for theoretical support (or scientific guidance) for their horrors. But they did make him a contributor to the mix of scientific and social theory undergirding their policies and actions. Spencer himself would have been horrified by the uses to which the Nazis put his writings.

A HOUSEHOLD NAME

It may seem odd to include Herbert Spencer in any list of important rhetorical theorists, since of his five million published words, only 25,000 or so deal directly with the art of rhetoric. Philosophy of Style accounts for half of those. Spencer is best known for what he called his System of Synthetic Philosophy, or System of Philosophy for short. These are phrases he used to indicate the major corpus of his books and essays on biology, sociology, ethics, education, and psychology. The synthetic idea unifying all his works was his particular understanding of evolution. Spencer believed that evolution underlay, and explained, every knowable phenomenon in the universe, whether physical, social, or mental. It was Spencer’s development of the social implications of evolution that we call Social Darwinism, and though Darwin discovered natural selection, it was Spencer who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” Of the two preeminent builders of evolutionary theory, Darwin and Spencer, Spencer was arguably the greater architect, at least in the sense of showing the world how everything was built up (and should be allowed to proceed) on the basis

14 A scattering of statements about style appear in Spencer’s Autobiography [30], which incorporates a good bit of his correspondence and some other writings, and in half a dozen other essays. But outside Philosophy of Style, Spencer’s only other focused treatments of this topic appear in Facts and Comments, in the chapters “Style” and “Style Continued” [31, pps. 97-111].

15 This was the title he gave to his productions post 1850, when he conceived the idea of writing a series of books and articles that would synthesize “all knowledge” via the controlling theoretical idea of evolution. His writings are comprised largely of the ten volumes of the System proper (some of these titles embracing multiple volumes): First Principles, The Principles of Biology, The Principles of Psychology, The Principles of Sociology, and The Principles of Ethics. For the most part, his other writings may be seen as ancillary to the System, either because they were originally conceived and written in that vein, or because his mind was tending in that direction even before he articulated to himself his grand life project, or because he at some point revised those writings to enhance their consistency with his System, as he did with Philosophy of Style.

16 In First Principles (1862), Spencer conceded that ultimately, the very objects of scientific study (matter, motion, and force) are mysterious; science can push back the mystery by theorizing and experimenting upon the knowable aspects of the universe, but it can never completely penetrate the Unknowable. Religion, he granted, could address the Unknowable by its own methods (faith, spirituality), but this approach lay outside the domain of science.

17 It would be more accurate and more helpful, actually, to call it “Social Spencerism.”
of a single operative principle that was bringing everything into higher states of organization and sophistication. Of course, not every believer in evolution agreed with every aspect of Spencer’s evolutionary doctrines. Not even Spencer’s friend T. H. Huxley, nicknamed Darwin’s Bulldog, could refrain from barking a few objections. But in general, Spencer was more lionized than hounded.

It’s difficult for us now to conceive how influential Spencer was in his day, particularly in England and America. He was a household name in the Victorian era. Over the decades stretching from the mid 19th century to the early 20th century, his books and articles were read and admired by millions. Most scientists regarded him as a giant. Their prevailing sentiment was summed up by a contemporary of Spencer’s, Bernard Hollander, who referred to “the revered name of Herbert Spencer” [32, p. 142].

It is in part due to the other 5 million published words that Spencer’s rhetorical treatise gained its status as a significant piece of work. One might have expected this single plank of *HMS Spencer* to sink out of sight, since it was crafted by a 24-year-old, before he entered upon his massive Synthetic Philosophy and its unifying theme, and since the author produced little more on the subject of writing style or rhetoric in general. Yet there is a quality in this essay that causes biographers to refer to it as a classic [34, p. 27]. That quality is consistent with the appeal Spencer’s later writings carried for his Victorian contemporaries: synthetic appeal, the satisfaction derived from seeing a range of complex phenomena through the lens of a single, unifying principle—and a popular principle, at that.

As I mentioned, even though Spencer was much admired, he had, and continues to have, many critics—not only of his evolutionary opinions, but of his rhetorical theory. For example, Renwick accuses Spencer of “warping facts to fit his pet theories” [35, p. 434], and Huxley remarked famously that “Spencer’s definition of a tragedy is the spectacle of a deduction killed by a fact.” But a rhetorically astute synthesis can fend off quite a few facts and still exert a lot of influence—whether it be a classical treatise that explains how all efforts at human persuasion rely on a handful of principles; or a Synthetic Philosophy that shows how one principle underlies all change and development throughout the universe; or a more contained synthesis showing why *conservation of mental energy* is the key to good style. I’ll unpack that phrase shortly; first, a bit more background for Spencer’s essay.

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18 Mostly about applications of evolutionary theory to sociopolitical and ethical issues, not about the scientific exposition of the theory of organic evolution.

19 Though Spencer’s essay was not published until 1852, he maintained that he wrote most of it in 1844, titling it “The Force of Expression.” Although we don’t know with certainty how much of the essay Spencer wrote at the age of 24, Denton’s investigation [33] bears out Spencer’s claim.
THE MAKING OF “PHILOSOPHY OF STYLE”

The young Spencer, an engineer, was naturally interested in the concept of efficiency—though his interest in applying this principle to writing style was less typical of engineers. His early eagerness for efficiency in communication is seen in his brief “Notes on a Universal Language,”20 and in his involvement with his father’s System of Lucid Shorthand [36], both predating (by about a year) the composition of his essay on efficient style. The pillars of his proposed universal language were consistency, brevity, and instant signaling of semantic categories. For example:

All nouns to be perfect articulations, beginning and ending with consonants, and let them show their relationships to each other by the initial or terminal consonant. All abstract nouns might, for instance, commence with the nasals. All inanimate nouns with the mutes. All animate with the semi-vocals [30, p. 529].

While consonants would indicate categories, vowels would indicate differences in degree and quality. For example, in indicating “elevations of surface” from hillock to mound to hill to really big mountain, vowel sounds would progress from “thin unsonorous vowels” like the “ee” in “see” to “open and sonorous vowels” like “aw” and “oo.” This system, besides providing consistency and simplicity, would also be “suggestive”—that is, it would have an onomatopoetic quality that would help the mind instantly perceive the thing represented by the word. “The mental association would be rendered irresistible, both by its naturalness and by its perpetual recurrence” [30, p. 530]. These are Spencer’s earliest speculations in the field of psycholinguistics (a term unknown to him). He would very soon extend his thinking about brevity and mental association, and abstraction vs. concretion, in Philosophy of Style. As for the Lucid Shorthand: it simply outlined a way of representing language with letter forms that were, naturally, as quick and easy as possible to write and read. With words and letters represented as systematically, briefly, and economically as possible, there remained only the task of choosing the most efficient words and stringing them together into the most effective and economical sequences possible. This was Spencer’s meditation in Philosophy of Style.21

Philosophy of Style was published in 1852, when Spencer was 32. But in his autobiography, he asserts that he had composed the essay in all its major aspects

20Spencer did not actually go on to flesh out a universal language, but in articulating some of the guidelines for developing such a language and in pondering its great usefulness, he was in the company of many, in his century and right through to ours. His motivation for speculating in this direction was a desire for greater efficiency; he did not possess an accompanying desire to “dethrone English,” as some modern theorists/practitioners of universal languages seem to have (see for example the “Unish” universal language).

21For a more detailed look at Spencer’s pre-1844 interest in economy, see Denton [33].
in 1844, eight years before its first publication, calling it “The Force of Expression.” He grumbles that the editor of Westminster Review had insisted on renaming the essay. Spencer didn’t like the imposed title because he knew his essay did not offer a detailed philosophy of style, but instead focused tightly on the underlying psychological principle that makes for good style.

The essay on style that Spencer wrote in his early twenties was the result of his perusal of five treatises on rhetoric: Elements of Rhetoric by Richard Whately, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres by Hugh Blair, The Philosophy of Rhetoric by George Campbell, Elements of Criticism by Lord Kames, and The English Language by Robert Latham. What struck Spencer were the passages—scattered, not theoretically linked or properly analyzed passages, in his view—having to do with brevity, economy of expression, effective syntax, and the best choice of words and figures:

We are told that “brevity is the soul of wit.” We hear styles condemned as verbose or involved. Blair says that every needless part of a sentence “interrupts the description and clogs the image”; and again, that “long sentences fatigue the reader’s attention.” It is remarked by Lord Kames that, “to give the utmost force to a period, it ought, if possible, to be closed with the word that makes the greatest figure.” Avoidance of parentheses, and the use of Saxon words in preference to those of Latin origin, are often insisted upon. However influential the precepts thus dogmatically expressed, they would be much more influential if reduced to something like scientific ordination. In this as in other cases, conviction is strengthened when we understand the why [38, p. 334].

The influence and longevity of Spencer’s essay bear out his notion that reducing doctrines/maxims about good style to “something like scientific ordination” would make them more influential. The why behind the stylistic precepts of Blair and Kames and the other rhetoricians, says Spencer, is that these techniques tend to conserve our attention or mental energy, something we expend as we recognize, interpret, and process linguistic symbols. Spencer compared the mind’s labor with symbols to that of a machine doing mechanical work: in both cases, “the more simple and the better arranged its parts, the greater will be the effect produced” [3, p. 335]. That is, the linguistic data taken up by our minds, to the degree the data is well arranged and simple, will tax us less (as our minds achieve initial understanding) and impact us more (as, replete with energy, our minds register the import of what we have learned). In Spencer’s analogy, the energy required to run

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22 For more analysis of Spencer’s indebtedness to these and other authors, see Denton [37].

23 Quotations from “The Philosophy of Style” are taken from the essay as it appears in Spencer’s Essays: Scientific, Political, & Speculative [3].

24 From the age of 30 to the end of his life, Spencer suffered from painful “cerebral pressure” and trimmed to three hours his daily session of focused mental work (this, at least, was his claim). Thus, he had compelling personal reasons to remain interested in conservation of mental energy.
the device—mind or machine—must be “deducted from the result.” So, the more mental energy we must expend in understanding the form of a communication, the less remains to devote to its substance, while expending less energy on form leaves more to lavish on substance (hence the “greater effect”). In Spencer’s words:

> A reader or listener has at each moment but a limited amount of mental power available. To recognize and interpret the symbols presented to him, requires part of this power; to arrange and combine the images suggested by them requires a further part; and only that part which remains can be used for framing the thought expressed. Hence, the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea; and the less vividly will that idea be conceived [3, p. 335].

In Spencer’s youth, the conservation of energy (physical energy) and the mechanical theory of heat were becoming hot topics of scientific conversation, as theories of evolution were very soon to become. Although Spencer had not yet entered upon his life’s work of explaining all phenomena via evolutionary theory, Philosophy of Style is consistent with his later views, which still conceived of the human brain in mechanistic terms—although a very sophisticated mechanism—and regarded linguistic ability in humans to be a lengthy evolutionary development that favored increasing complexity and ever-improving cranial developments. In fact, Spencer returned to his essay years later, adding two long, final paragraphs that explicitly placed his stylistic theory within the context of his overall evolutionary theory—hence nailing that little plank even more securely to the massive *HMS Spencer*.25

**SPENCER’S STYLISTIC SYNTHESIS: THE ESSENCE OF ECONOMY**

Having introduced the theme of Philosophy of Style, Spencer invites his readers to follow him in his effort to:

> . . . inquire whether economy of the recipient’s attention is not the secret of effect alike in the right choice and collocation of words, in the best arrangement of clauses in a sentence, in the proper order of its principal and subordinate propositions, in the judicious use of simile, metaphor, and other parts of speech, and even in the rhythmical sequence of syllables [3, p. 336].

25In the *Prospectus* for his System of Philosophy (issued in March 1860), Spencer projected that in Volume 3 of his *Principles of Sociology*, he would have a chapter on “Aesthetic Progress” that would embody some of his ideas from “Philosophy of Style.” Although the published volumes on sociology did not end up including such a chapter, it is clear that Spencer’s synthetic grasp embraced “The Philosophy of Style.”
In essence, Spencer’s theory of style says that mental energy is conserved by writing that is, “other things equal,” 26 brief, familiar, suggestive, and well patterned. Energy is also conserved by writing that draws alternately upon distinct mental faculties, allowing the various faculties to rest between sessions of heavier activity.

For example, argued Spencer, for a native speaker of English, “Saxon English” is almost always a better conservator of mental energy than Latinate words, because native speakers of English have formed such a strong connection between a particular set of linguistic symbols (Saxon English) and the things they signify:

A child’s vocabulary is almost wholly Saxon. He says, I have, not I possess—
I wish, not I desire; he does not reflect, he thinks, he does not beg for
amusement, but for play; he calls things nice or nasty, not pleasant or
disagreeable. The synonyms learned in after years, never become so closely,
so organically, connected with the ideas signified, as do these original words
used in childhood; the association remains less strong [3, p. 336].

Spencer admitted that Latinate synonyms for Saxon words (if truly synony-
mous) may call up the same images in the mind of the Saxon reader, but Saxon
words will do it faster and with greater force. This is because the Latinate word,
having been learned later in life, “has not been so often followed by the ideal
sensation symbolized,” and therefore “does not so readily arouse that ideal
sensation”27 [3, p. 336].

A further reason why Saxon words excel Latinate words at conserving mental
energy is that they are usually shorter. Referring to the “cumulative fatigue” that
registers in the mind as we read or listen, Spencer reasoned that “If it be an
advantage to express an idea in the smallest number of words, then it must be an
advantage to express it in the smallest number of syllables” [3, p. 337]. Spencer’s
machine-mind metaphor for linguistic processing would likely have been a
computer-mind metaphor had he been writing in the latter half of the 20th century;
other things equal, the ComputerMind can process 500 bits of data more quickly
and economically than it can process 1,000 bits.

Another great conservator of mental energy, said Spencer, is proper
“collocation” of words and propositions: well-crafted syntax and sequences of
ideas. Here the fundamental idea is to reduce the recursive motion of the reader’s
mind, something the writer does (other things equal) by proceeding from the
abstract to the concrete and by “bringing the most nearly connected thoughts
closest together” [3, p. 345]. Spencer instances the normal modifying sequence,
in the English language, of adjective-noun: the adjective is generally the more
abstract or general concept, the noun more concrete and specific. His simple example is “black horse.” It saves the reader mental energy to read “black horse” rather than “horse black,” as the French have it (cheval noir) because this allows the reader first to conceive the abstract quality of blackness—relatively easy to do—and then, upon reading the word “horse,” to apply that abstraction to a concrete object. When that collocation of words is reversed, the reader first pictures to himself a horse (perhaps a brown or white or spotted one), and then upon reading the word “black,” must trot back and fix the mistaken impression. This reverse action wastes mental energy; hence, for the English writer or speaker, it is poor style.

How to Get to Sesame Street

Here’s my own illustration of this notion of “proper collocation of words” as conservator of energy. Imagine a younger you on Sesame Street, where a fascinating word game has been set up. You are standing at the big end of a huge, gradually sloping funnel, a funnel big enough for you to run through. At close intervals, all along the inside of the funnel, are thousands of words, each written with big letters on a separate card. These cards are Velcroed to the funnel, easily removable, and scattered here and there are a few words that are glowing. There is something down at the small end of the funnel; you don’t know what it is, but you understand that the glowing words describe that thing. You begin running through the funnel, grabbing the glowing words. You grab “Big,” “Friendly,” and “Yellow.” When you reach the end of the funnel, you pluck the final word, “Bird,” which is glowing brightest of all, and immediately you see standing before you a big, friendly, yellow bird. It’s Big Bird! He hugs you and hands you a prize.

Now imagine yourself at the mouth of another huge funnel that is lined with Velcroed words. You’re told there’s a horse at the other end of the funnel. Instantly, you start imagining what kind of horse this might be and what it might be doing. You run the length of the funnel, grabbing words you think might describe this horse: big, brown, and frisky. The game is that you’ve got to grab the right words. When you reach the end of the funnel, you see it’s not a horse that is big, brown, and frisky; it’s a small, white, sleepy horse. So you sprint back up the funnel to grab the right words and then hoof it back to the horse. Time expires; no prize.

Both funnel runs tapped your energy. In the first run, you picked up words and carried them to the end of the funnel; that definitely took energy. But not as much energy as you burned in the second run, when you were sprinting back and forth to correct mistakes.

Suspend, Advance, Apply

Carrying concepts forward is, Spencer explains, a necessary expenditure; reading is naturally a process of multiple mental suspensions and “applications”; this is
done at the level of the single adjective applied to the noun it modifies, to phrases and clauses, to whole sentences and paragraphs and sections and compositions. It also involves proper correspondence of textual sequences to the subjects or phenomena being discussed or described [3, p. 346]. But good style makes the labor of mental suspension as easy as possible, while maximizing the desired rhetorical impact: “Other things equal, force will be gained by so arranging the members of a sentence that these suspensions shall at any moment be the fewest in number; and shall also be of the shortest duration” [3, pp. 345-346].

Here is one of Spencer’s examples of energy-wasting versus energy-saving structure:

**energy-wasting**
A modern newspaper-statement, though probably true, would be laughed at, if quoted in a book as testimony; but the letter of a court gossip is thought good historical evidence if written some centuries ago.

**energy-saving**
Though probably true, a modern newspaper-statement quoted in a book as testimony, would be laughed at; but the letter of a court gossip, if written some centuries ago, is thought good historical evidence [3, p. 346].

Remember, conserving the reader’s mental energy is not done so that a reader can have the most relaxing possible mental experience; on the contrary, good style impacts the reader’s mind powerfully; it’s just the apprehension of the writer’s words that good style makes as easy as possible.

Consider Spencer’s example of the stylistic superiority of “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” over “Diana of the Ephesians is great.” The latter sentence requires the reader to form an impression of Diana of the Ephesians and then, when “is great” arrives, to go back and “form the image afresh, whence arises a loss of mental energy, and a corresponding diminution of effect.” But the original sentence causes the reader to start with the abstraction of greatness, “preparing the imagination to clothe with high attributes whatever follows,” and then to put those clothes right on Diana, “directly, and without error.” This saves mental energy in the processing of the words and applies greater force to the concept. The mind is more deeply impressed and may later expend all kinds of mental energy (via its various organs) in contemplating the greatness of Diana, but the initial task of reading and understanding the concept proceeded with a minimum of energetic expenditure.

Spencer recognized that the kind of sentence structure represented by his Biblical quotation was generally called the “inverted” style and that “the general habit of our language resists this arrangement.” But he insisted that very often, “effect is gained by placing first all words indicating the quality, conduct, or condition of the subject” [3, p. 342].

True, the payoff in force derived from the inverted syntax of the Diana quotation—which Spencer renamed the direct style, in conformity with his
theory, because it moves the mind ever forward—comes with a price tag. The mind must labor to suspend, in this case, the concept of greatness until Diana comes along to receive it. But, Spencer explains, the necessary labor of mental suspensions and the wasteful annoyance of mental backtracking must always be weighed against each other. As E. D. Hirsch was later to write, in Spencerian spirit, “good stylistic choices are based upon intelligent compromises between conflicting psychological factors” [4, p. 116].

**Adjusting for Subject and Audience**

So far, Spencer’s quotations have not required long, difficult mental suspensions. But what about much more difficult subject matter? And what about the readers themselves; how should style adjust to readers who are more and less intelligent, or simply more and less familiar with the subject matter? Here Spencer addresses the basic concerns of audience adaptation. Essentially, he says that good style will favor recursiveness over suspensions to the degree that readers are less intelligent or less familiar with the subject matter, and to the degree that the subject matter itself is inherently “complex or abstract in character.” Even though the direct style is in principle superior to the indirect, Spencer admits that as qualifying words and clauses and other suspensions stack up, “we reach a limit beyond which more is lost than gained” [3, p. 347].

And so stylistic choice, and choice in overall arrangement of concepts in a composition, becomes “a question whether most mental effort will be entailed by the many and long suspensions, or by the correction of successive misconceptions” [3, p. 347]. Spencer offers the metaphor of a strong man and a little boy each faced with the task of carrying a hundred-pound pile of stones from one room to another. The man can do it more efficiently by tossing all the stones into a bag (suspension) and carrying all 100 pounds at once, whereas the most efficient method for the boy will be to carry five or ten pounds at a time and make multiple trips between the two rooms: the recursive method.

As for dealing with the inherent difficulty of some subject matter—such as sophisticated material in science, technology, or philosophy, for example—Spencer concedes that his direct method, unrelieved, will not always serve even the strong man:

> It should be further remarked that, even when addressing vigorous intellects, the direct mode is unfit for communicating ideas of a complex or abstract character. So long as the mind has not much to do, it may be well able to grasp all the preparatory clauses of a sentence, and to use them effectively; but if some subtlety in the argument absorb the attention it may happen that the mind, doubly strained, will break down, and allow the elements of the thought to lapse into confusion [3, pp. 349-350].

Still, says Spencer, energy-saving style will use the direct method as much as possible, given the constraints of subject matter and audience. It will also make use
of selective detail, figures of speech, and rhythm. In brief: judiciously chosen
details conserve mental energy because they are suggestive of so much additional
information which the reader need not then actually read. In this sense, their virtue
is similar to that of figures of speech, which are a sort of supercharged language.
The reader expends just a little mental energy in reading the detail or figure, but
the words then unfold, “bringing the mind by a bound to the desired conception”
[3, p. 353]. Spencer instances various passages of literature—from Shakespeare,
Coleridge, Tennyson, Shelly, and others—to show effective choice of suggestive
detail, powerful metaphor, effective onomatopoeia, and so on. He goes on to
consider the energy-saving qualities of rhythm (as manifest in poetry): basically,
rhythm saves the reader’s mental effort because it sets up a pattern, allowing
the mind to anticipate the number and emphasis and other qualities of the syllables
it is processing.

There is, however, another vitally important psychological component of good
style. Beyond the necessity of modifying the “direct style” depending on difficulty
of subject matter and mental strength of reader, there is the matter of adjusting
the psychological effects of style so as to conserve the reader’s sensibilities. This
is the “affective” component of psycholinguistics, and it is largely for his early
incorporation of this with the cognitive dimension of psycholinguistics that
Spencer has been praised as a seminal thinker by modern scholars like Harris
and Jacobson. The best style, Spencer explained, is not achieved simply by
lining up, in sentence after sentence, the most energy-conserving—and therefore
forceful—presentation of materials which the writer can manage. The superior
stylist must also economize, in his overall orchestration of materials, the
reader’s sensibilities.

ECONOMIZING THE SENSIBILITIES

In the final section of his essay, Spencer considers stylistic techniques that
conserve mental energy by engaging, in alternation, different faculties of mind,
or more accurately, different organs of the brain. This aspect of Spencer’s
theory—as well as his overall theme of conserving “mental energy,” I must
now admit—is based in his early phrenological beliefs. As a boy, Spencer had
been converted to the fundamental tenets of this mental science by listening to
Dr. Johann Spurzheim28 speak on phrenology—which was a system based on the
belief that the brain is divided into separate organs with distinct, but interacting,
functions. These cerebral organs came to be named and grouped in various ways,
and many phrenologists, including the young Spencer, speculated and argued
about their exact number, function, development, balance, physical manifestation,

28 The major work of Johann Spurzheim (1776-1832) is Phrenology, or, The Doctrine of the Mind;
and of the Relations Between Its Manifestations and the Body [39].
and relationship to each other and to the body and mind. It was a complex science that, throughout the 19th century, exerted a powerful influence on sociopolitical philosophies and even influenced medical practice, historical interpretations, educational philosophies, marriage counseling, methods of self improvement, and many other fields. It also exerted its influence upon Spencer.

During the same time period when Spencer was writing “The Force of Expression” (which became Philosophy of Style), he was also writing a number of articles for The Zoist, a phrenological journal. In each of these articles, Spencer challenged some aspect of “orthodox” phrenology, but clearly, he believed its fundamental doctrines. In writing Philosophy of Style, he seems to have combined phrenological doctrines with doctrines from British faculty psychology, probably absorbing these largely from his reading of the five rhetorics I’ve mentioned, notably Kaimes and Campbell.  

It isn’t clear from Philosophy of Style just how many organs Spencer believed the brain held, but it was certainly more than four or five. Whatever their number (or location), the way to economize them was to rest them between energy-expending sessions. “Every organ is exhausted by exercise,” Spencer pointed out; mental energy is husbanded, and force gained, when mental faculties flex and then relax, as it were, handing off the heaviest work to another faculty before receiving it back again.

It is this alternation between the faculties, according to Spencer, that accounts for the effect of such stylistic techniques as climax, anticlimax, and antithesis. Consider the “impressive effect” of antithesis, for example:

If, after a series of ordinary images exciting in a moderate degree to the emotion of reverence, or approbation, or beauty, the mind has presented to it an insignificant, or unworthy, or ugly image; the structure [organ] which yields the emotion of reverence, or approbation, or beauty, having for the time nothing to do, tends to resume its full power; and will immediately afterwards appreciate anything vast, admirable, or beautiful better than it would otherwise do [3, pp. 363-364].

Does Spencer advise us, then, to fill our prose with antithesis after antithesis, or with persistent climaxes, or other forceful effects? No. He has simply been explaining the why of these effects in terms of his theory of mental energy, and he now warns us against the stylistic errors of writers like Pope and Bacon: “the error of constantly employing forcible forms of expression.” Such forms, used
constantly, are too fatiguing in their overall effect on the sensibilities, even though each individual effect does result from engaging the faculties in alternate fashion. Spencer explains:

\[ \ldots \] the most perfectly-constructed sentences unceasingly used must cause weariness, and relief will be given by using those of inferior kinds. Further, we may infer not only that we ought to avoid generally combining our words in one manner, however good, or working out our figures and illustrations in one way, however telling; but that we ought to avoid anything like uniform adherence to the wider conditions of effect. We should not make every division of our subject progress in interest; we should not always rise to a climax. As we saw that in single sentences it is but rarely allowable to fulfill all the conditions to strength; so, in the larger sections of a composition we must not often conform entirely to the principles indicated. We must subordinate the component effects to the total effect [3, p. 365].

So now, as if it weren’t hard enough constantly to choose the least-energy-consuming words and syntactic patterns and rhythmic patterns and arrangements and figures, we read that the excellent stylist must be alert to judiciously break these rules—in order to conserve the reader’s sensibilities. In other words, the excellent stylist is also an astute psychologist, familiar with the multiple organs in his reader’s mind and expert in conserving the energy expended by the various mental powers in order to best serve a “total effect.” That effect, when perfect, means complete rhetorical success with total efficiency. Who, then, can communicate in this ideal way?

**SPENCER’S STYLISTIC SUPERMAN**

It is of course the person with a superior mind who communicates perfectly, the genius, the “perfectly endowed man” [38, p. 365]—literally, the most highly evolved humanoid. Staying with Spencer’s gender designation: the perfectly endowed man is the man whose power of expression perfectly matches his intellectual and emotional states, as it also matches his subject and purpose in writing. His style will thus not be a “personal” or ideosyncratic one, but will be infinitely variable:

The perfect writer will be now rhythmical and now irregular; here his language will be plain and there ornate; sometimes his sentences will be balanced and at other times unsymmetrical; for a while there will be considerable sameness, and then again great variety. His mode of expression naturally responding to his thought and emotion, there will flow from his pen a composition changing as the aspects of this subject change. He will thus without effort conform to what we have seen to be the laws of effect [3, pp. 366-377].
The perfect writer will, naturally, conserve the mental energy of his reader, using spontaneously the techniques of direct and indirect style in the best proportion and sequence, and presenting “that variety needful to prevent continuous exertion of the same faculties. . . .” The resulting composition “will also answer to the description of all highly-organized products both of man and nature. It will be, not a series of like parts simply placed in juxtaposition, but one whole made up of unlike parts that are mutually dependent” [38, p. 367].

This last statement corresponds closely with Spencer’s later definitions of the essence of evolutionary theory: the tendency for everything in nature and society and mind to become more heterogeneous, complex, and interactive. This passage comes toward the end of Philosophy of Style, from those two pages or so that were added in 1852, when Spencer’s evolutionary doctrines were gaining momentum.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

A search in modern criticism of Spencer’s stylistic theory will quickly reveal the main problems many people have with Spencer’s essay. The first objection is that his “direct style” reverses or warps too much of our usual syntax. But the deeper criticism focuses on Spencer’s very goal of “economy.” For example, one of Spencer’s modern biographers, James Kennedy, believed that Spencer failed to understand that for literary language, speed and ease of reading are not primary goals. Challenging the argument embodied in Spencer’s mind-machine metaphor, Kennedy wrote:

He was right to see the problem of literary expression as one of force, but wrong to suppose that its solution would be a reduction in heat loss. Inevitably, to do its work of getting acceptance—of lifting and sustaining interest—literary language must generate more significance than a reader can easily or ever realize. So there must be a heat loss, for the sentence must perform work on the reader at the same time that it gives him light. A literary sentence need not be an efficient conveyance, but it must provide a powerful impetus. It need not glide, but it should seek force from a weight of significance propelled by natural sentence stresses. Spencer, recommending a literary style that would send a reader flying toward sentence subjects, never allowed for the fact that the suggestivity of language was itself a thing of interest. Engineer and inventor, amateur of all science, always interested in physical things, Spencer never recognized that the variable meanings of writings were as worthy of sensuous and speculative apprehension as stars and rocks [46, p. 32].

Not an entirely fair criticism, in my view; it does not take into account the many qualifications Spencer added to his theory. And even though Kennedy’s assessment may carry some validity as criticism of a theory of literary style, it is perhaps less damaging when we consider the particular goals, or the different ranking of goals, for scientific and technical communication.
Initial reception of Spencer’s essay was kinder. In October of 1852, after Philosophy of Style came out in *Westminster Review*, Spencer wrote to his father that his article was “a good deal praised, both in the press and in private” [41, p. 66]. The accounts I’ve read support Spencer’s statement. Lewes, as I’ve pointed out, was still so impressed years later that he gave Spencer’s ideas a prominent place in his own treatment of style. Lewes’ five “laws of style,” which he explicates on a “psychological basis,” are the laws of economy, simplicity, sequence, climax, and variety—a close parallel of the topics in Spencer’s essay. Lewes acknowledges Spencer and, although describing economy as but one principle of excellent style, places it in first rank. He calls Spencer’s mind-as-machine metaphor “perfect” [38, p. 129]. In both mind and machine, writes Lewes in paraphrase of Spencer’s doctrine,

...the object is to secure the maximum of disposable force, by diminishing the amount absorbed in the working. Obviously, if a reader is engaged in extricating the meaning from a sentence which ought to have reflected its meaning as in a mirror, the mental energy thus employed is abstracted from the amount of force which he has to bestow on the subject; he has mentally to form anew the sentence which has been clumsily formed by the writer; he wastes, on interpretation of the symbols, force which might have been concentrated on meditation of the propositions [38, p. 129].

This waste is especially lamentable, Lewes goes on to say, in writing about inherently sophisticated subjects like science and philosophy. He would no doubt be comfortable were we to add “technology” as another example of an inherently sophisticated subject where waste of mental energy is especially lamentable.

Critical reception of Spencer’s essay became more mixed over the years as it was republished in various collections of his essays and in other formats.³¹ For example, Allyn & Bacon republished it in 1891, with introduction and notes by Fred Newton Scott, along with a critical essay by T. H. Wright. Wright takes issue with Spencer’s conclusion that the superior stylist will be so flexible as not to have a specific style, for in Wright’s view, it is a delightful fact that each man’s nature is different, and that his nature is revealed through his style. Wright sees the best writing as revealing a “multiplicity of individualities, each speaking its own language and telling its own tale” [42, p. 59]. Although he acknowledges the basic soundness of Spencer’s philosophy of stylistic economy, he dislikes Spencer’s vision of an “ideal being who is to be without personality” [42, p. 59].

In our century, Travis Merritt, commenting on the criticism of Wright and others in Wright’s vein, opined that Spencer “did not really deserve the attacks made against him on this score,” since “the remark that got him into trouble—‘to have a specific style is to be poor in speech’—is surely intended to advance the cause of thoroughgoing expressivism, not to deprecate it. What Spencer apparently means is that a narrowly ‘specific style’ violates that variety of means which enables a man to say anything and everything he has to say; he does not mean to recommend stylistic impersonality” [43, p. 18]. Donald C. Stewart, on the other hand, thought Spencer richly deserved the bad press for his apparent denigration of “authentic voice” (personal voice), and Stewart uses Wright’s criticism of Spencer in his (Stewart’s) well-known advocacy of the value of authentic voice in writing [44].

Scott, for his part, evidently agreed with Wright about the importance of expressing individual insight and personality through style; he makes this clear in his own treatise *The Principles of Style* (1890). Yet in terms of his reaction to Spencer’s essay, he seemed much less concerned with this point than with his impression that Spencer had missed the opportunity to give Philosophy of Style a more explicit ethical turn. He wished Spencer had begun, not ended, his essay with a discussion of the ideal writer and the evolutionary implications of stylistic development in humans, focusing on what Scott regarded as the “true conception of economy”: communication that best “maintains the integrity of the whole organism” (that is, society) and “furthers the intellectual life of the whole community.” This approach, wrote Scott, might have been developed into “an instrument of criticism and interpretation to literature of any time and any place” [42].

**CONCLUSION**

Whether Scott’s suggested improvement would have elevated Spencer’s essay to the status of such an instrument of criticism and interpretation, I can’t say—but even in the form Spencer gave it, it has had a seminal influence in the realm of psychological approaches to style, and I have found it particularly useful for giving students and professionals a vision of the nature and importance of stylistic efficiency—of conserving the reader’s mental energy—and for thinking about specific techniques for doing so.

Again, the goal is not merely to simplify ideas; the goal is to represent them as economically as possible—that is, to minimize the reader’s mental effort in apprehension of those ideas. While the related goal of economizing the reader’s sensibilities may not be as relevant in scientific and technical communication as in some other genres—journalism, political speechmaking, or fiction, for

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32 I cite these as distinct examples; readers may dispute the extent of difference.
example—the general application of the idea of conserving mental energy via good style has very apparent application. Consider its utility when, for example, discussing style with students or with efficiency-loving engineers, scientists, and managers. Spencer’s theory can help us “demonstrate” why noun stacking, jargon cramming, unrelieved abstraction, inattention to pattern, excessive detail—or any number of such common features of scientific and technical writing—is bad, energy-wasting style. At the same time, we can use it to explain why choosing and sequencing words in certain other ways33 can result in good, energy-saving style. One can even extend this principle beyond Spencer’s focus on textual style to discuss methods of conserving the reader/user’s mental energy via comprehensive document architecture and visual design (these topics, however, fall outside the scope of my article).

Despite the many criticisms of Spencer’s stylistic theory, his synthetic, compact, rhetorically astute essay retains much of its persuasive and pedagogical power. But should we, perhaps, draw back from using Philosophy of Style because Spencer conceived it in the framework of the outmoded, even (now) laughable context of phrenology? After all, Spencer himself came soon to reject all but the “adumbrations of truth” cast by phrenology [30, p. 228], as he makes clear in his autobiography and in Principles of Psychology. Historian of science Robert Young calls Philosophy of Style a “remarkable snapshot of a mind in transition” [45, p. 166] for this very reason.

Interestingly, even though Spencer evolved beyond his belief in most of the tenets of phrenology, developing an innovative scientific description of human psychology based on associationist psychology fused with his evolutionary theory, he never retracted the conclusions he’d reached in Philosophy of Style. On the contrary, when he was an old man—just a year before his death in 1903—he wrote a few more pages about style, regretting that he himself had never been able fully to conform his own writing style to his theory. The reason, he lamented, was that he hadn’t properly been taught the law of conservation of mental energy as a youth, when his own mental development was at the best stage to receive this education and habituation. It was also difficult for him, he pleaded, to achieve the level of stylistic excellence he wanted because his infirmities necessitated that he make so much use of dictation. Whatever his own degree of ability to adhere to the conclusions of Philosophy of Style, he wrote, they were “conclusions which I hold still, as strongly as when they were drawn” [30, p. 108].

Others have assessed Spencer’s own style variously. Grant Allen, for example, wrote of it:

33 For example, preferring active to passive voice, reducing nominalizations, using figures of speech effectively, cutting “sentence fat,” using jargon judiciously, crafting syntax for deliberate effects, and, for all but the strongest-minded, breaking up long noun strings.
Spencer’s style, both in speech and writing, was one of the most highly elaborated and perfectly adapted instruments ever invented by a human brain for a particular purpose. It did all that was wanted of it with admirable force, precision, and economy [47, p. 616].

Not all critics have been so glowing in their assessment, but most I’ve read seemed to think Spencer’s style was adequate to his purposes.

Although Spencer himself, a century ago, held fast to the conclusions he’d reached in Philosophy of Style, even while moving beyond his belief in phrenology, I certainly don’t argue that we should hold, uncritically, to all those conclusions. Still, there’s something valuable there, something worth holding on to. Certainly, there is value in understanding the historical trajectory and influence of Spencer’s treatise on style, especially because of the framework—or foil—it provided for so many subsequent studies of style. But I also think there is current value to be derived from using Spencer’s essay as a heuristic and teaching tool. Even if the essay contains mistakes, we can regard it much as Young, in his essay on Spencer, regards both phrenology and Lamarckianism34: “immensely fruitful errors in the history of science,” which for all their errors, “must be judged in the light of heuristic value” [45, p. 189]. This seems to me a valid way to regard Spencer’s Philosophy of Style, as well, both in terms of its historical impact and its current value. Whatever its defects, its virtues invite us to use it fruitfully in our teaching and thinking about style, especially for scientific and technical communication.

REFERENCES


34“Lamarckianism” refers to the evolutionary theory (or to some version of the evolutionary theory) of the brilliant scientist Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, the Chavalier de Lamarck (1744-1829)—most specifically to his theory that organisms adapt to their environment and then pass on those changes to their offspring.
42. F. Scott (ed.), The Philosophy of Style, Together With An Essay on Style by T. H. Wright, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1891.

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