

# Debugging Your Prose

Readers of this journal may be better at debugging *Mathematica* programs than they are at debugging the texts they write. Here is a book that can change this balance. It teaches the principles of good writing in a competent and highly entertaining way.

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*BUGS in Writing: A Guide to Debugging Your Prose*, by Lyn Dupré. Addison-Wesley, 1995. 650 pages, paperback. \$19.95. ISBN 0-201-60019-6.

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PUZZLED BY COPY EDITORS' MARKS IN MY manuscripts. Some of the corrections made a lot of sense, others I had to accept because they pertained to the house style of the various publishers, others I reluctantly took as the word of the expert. I really wanted to learn from the edits and improve my English to do better in the next manuscript. But, alas, I was seldom able to distill any principles from them, principles that would have allowed me to recognize my own errors before sending a manuscript to the publisher. I am sure that many native English speakers feel the same way, albeit to a lesser extent.

The situation improved dramatically when one of my edited manuscripts was accompanied by a 76 page photocopied document, entitled "Style SomeX<sup>1</sup>." The first part of this remarkable document was a discussion of principles of good writing and of common errors. The second part was a style sheet: an alphabetical list of words. The principles in the first part were accompanied by well-chosen examples and explained so clearly that I learned a lot about concise technical English. It was almost like going back to school, but this time it was actually fun!

A few years later I saw in an Addison-Wesley advertisement a book entitled *BUGS in Writing*, written by the same Lyn Dupré whose *Style SomeX* I had found so useful. Again, the title requires some explanation: the acronym BUGS stands for *Bad, Ugly, Good, Splendid*, the author's classification scheme for the examples in the book.

The book's main contents are 150 principles for lucid writing, arranged in no particular order. Lyn Dupré recommends that you browse the book at random, rather than read it meticulously in the order of the pages. As a computer scientist, I have a natural aversion to an unspecified order of things (such as the order of evaluation of the arguments of a

function in the language C), so I set out to read it sequentially anyway. Because it is not so easy to find a particular topic of interest, I recommend you do the same. The reason for not organizing the segments logically is a good one and it is explained in the preface:

I have written the book in this way, refusing steadfastly to organize it in the traditional manner, because I believe strongly that attempts to impose organization on the principles lead you to the analytic system of style manuals, rather than to the development of ear. ... I have, instead, purposely introduced chaos so that I can actively discourage you from trying to read this book linearly, memorizing the principles as you go. ...

Eventually, you will absorb a new model of language; you will start to understand a way of looking at language that lets you tell instantly whether the wording of a sentence sits well with you. You will develop ear, and that is my intention.

Each segment is a sequence of explanatory text mixed with many examples contrasting bad and good usage. Most (all?) of the examples are of the author's invention; their topics are either chosen from the technical disciplines (mostly computer science) toward which the book is directed, or they deal with Lyn Dupré's domestic life, which is centered around her two cats and her husband. The examples are fun to read, with an occasional gem that will make you laugh out loud. Contrasting bad-good examples are not variations of the same text, but have different subject matters. This device is successful in keeping you alert to both structure and content.

Each segment ends with a masterfully composed, self-referential formulation of the principle discussed. Here is an example (Segment 28):

THE PRINCIPLE FOR LUCID WRITING HERE is that a word placed before *either* or *both* applies to both alternatives, whereas a word placed after *either* or *both* applies to only (but not to either) one. You can either remember this principle or mark the page, but both

<sup>1</sup> The document's title was indeed followed by a footnote that tried to explain what it meant. This explanation was, fortunately, the only obscure part of the document.

remembering and marking would be redundant.

The best, most interesting, and most useful segments are those that deal with style issues (terms often confused, terms often misused, terms to avoid, terms tricky to handle), and those that explain how to use the various marks of punctuation (comma, semicolon, hyphens versus en-dashes, and so on). You will be tuned to the difference *between* two choices and the difference *among* three choices, to illustrate just one of the more subtle principles, and whether only you make one particular mistake or whether you make only one particular mistake.

The author's main achievement is the development of the reader's ear. *Ear* is used as a technical term, explained in the preface; it means the ability to recognize badly written phrases, perhaps even without knowing exactly what is wrong, and often without being able to explain clearly what is wrong to someone else, such as the author of the bad phrase asking for an explanation. Often, all you can say is that it feels wrong. Because I am often faced with this dilemma when I point out bad English in my students' writings, I decided to give each of my graduate students a copy of this book. *BUGS in Writing* will not cause unemployment among copy editors, but it will certainly make their task less frustrating than it must be.

Somewhat less useful are those segments that present information on standards and typesetting (formats for numbers, dates, and time; bibliographic references; figure and table captions and callouts; and so on). Such information is more easily looked up in a traditional manual of style, such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago Press). These standards are a matter of convention, rather than taste; you should simply look them up when you need them.

A few items in the book do not live up to its high standards. Interestingly, most of the problems are caused by the author's deliberate decision to ignore some of her own principles<sup>2</sup>.

The book does not use cross references and there is no alphabetical index. If you want to know what the author has to say about the use of the word "since," for example, you need to determine first whether it is a *term often misused*, or a *term often confused*, because<sup>3</sup> the index is arranged by categories. I would love to have this book available in machine-readable form, with full text search and indexing!

The author's use of feminist language is an annoying source of distraction. Lyn Dupré says (rightly) that it is no longer acceptable to write a book in which the reader is always referred to as *he*, but then goes ahead and does the reverse, using the feminine pronoun exclusively. The effect is a distraction from the proper topics of the book, something that authors should avoid (as a principle of lucid writing). Her suggestion to call a *motherboard* a *parentboard* is one of the few examples in the book that are unintentionally funny.

<sup>2</sup>Another problem is the abundance of footnotes (there are 377 of them). Publishers detest footnotes.

<sup>3</sup>Do not use *since* instead of *because*. See Segment 102.

The book is set in awkwardly large type (about 16 point); therefore, it is not as voluminous as the page count suggests. Because the book is most useful close at hand when writing, its size and weight are drawbacks. The author's intent was to design a friendly, inviting book to browse. The many visual elements (mostly cats) add to this impression. However, the benefits do not outweigh the practical disadvantages of this decision. Furthermore, the use of old-style numerals (0 1 2 3 4...) is not well suited for technical writing; the segments on standards and typesetting suffer from this choice. The numeral 1 and the small capital letter l are almost indistinguishable, for example.

A higher-than-average number of mistakes (who was the copy editor for *this* book?) and apparent problems with the typesetting of footnotes<sup>4</sup> obscure the meaning of some of the examples.

The quality of scientific and technical writing would increase considerably if this book were required reading for all authors. There is one danger, though: you will lose your innocence and may never again be able to read anything with-

<sup>4</sup>For example, all superscripts are set incorrectly: 10<sup>4</sup> appears as 104.

out being distracted by the large number of errors and bad style it may contain. (You will also spend much more time polishing your texts, especially reviews such as this one.) ☹