

# 1. There is no recipe and what it is

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thanks. I am not the less grateful for that, and not the less eager to acknowledge that without their help this essay would have been worse.

“Hier stehe ich; ich kann nicht anders.”

## 1. THERE IS NO RECIPE AND WHAT IT IS

I think I can tell someone how to write, but I can't think who would want to listen. The ability to communicate effectively, the power to be intelligible, is congenital, I believe, or, in any event, it is so early acquired that by the time someone reads my wisdom on the subject he is likely to be invariant under it. To understand a syllogism is not something you can learn; you are either born with the ability or you are not. In the same way, effective exposition is not a teachable art; some can do it and some cannot. There is no usable recipe for good writing.

Then why go on? A small reason is the hope that what I said isn't quite right; and, anyway, I'd like a chance to try to do what perhaps cannot be done. A more practical reason is that in the other arts that require innate talent, even the gifted ones who are born with it are not usually born with full knowledge of all the tricks of the trade. A few essays such as this may serve to “remind” (in the sense of Plato) the ones who want to be and are destined to be the expositors of the future of the techniques found useful by the expositors of the past.

The basic problem in writing mathematics is the same as in writing biology, writing a novel, or writing directions for assembling a harpsichord: the problem is to communicate an idea. To do so, and to do it clearly, you must have something to say, and you must have someone to say it to, you must organize what you want to say, and you must arrange it in the order you want it said in, you must write it, rewrite it, and re-rewrite it several times, and you must be willing to think hard about and work hard on mechanical details such as diction, notation, and punctuation. That's all there is to it.

## · 2. SAY SOMETHING

It might seem unnecessary to insist that in order to say something well you must have something to say, but it's no joke. Much bad writing, mathematical and otherwise, is caused by a violation of that first principle.