

INTRODUCTION

This is the age of the Incredible Shrinking Message. Some of the most important verbal messages we encounter are also the shortest. Headlines, titles, brand names, domain names, sound bites, slogans, taglines, catchphrases, email subject lines, text messages, elevator pitches, bullet points, tweets, and Facebook status updates are a few examples. While there are plenty of style guides to consult for writing advice, from old fogies like Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* to young hipsters like Constance Hale's *Sin & Syntax*, they don't help much with little messages like these.

Messages of just a word, a phrase, or a short sentence or two—*micromessages*—lean heavily on every word and live or die by the tiniest stylistic choices. Micromessages depend not on the elements of style but on the *atoms* of style. They require *microstyle*.

Microstyle has been the secret knowledge of poets, copywriters, brand namers, political speechwriters, and other professional verbal miniaturists. Until now. You hold in your hands the first microstyle guide. Do you need to coin a new word? Come up with a short, available domain name? Capture the essence of your organization in three words? Then help is right here in these pages.

Microstyle is a guide to verbal strategies that make very short messages effective, interesting, and memorable.

But this isn't a typical style guide. Style guides as we know them are a product of a different time—a time when most people who wrote on a daily basis were professional writers or students. For the rest of us, writing was more of a special occasion. Style guides focus on things *not* to do. They urge us to avoid common mistakes of spelling and usage, jettison clichés and jargon, and break bad grammatical habits. Those books are useful, but they're essentially negative, because they play on our insecurities. Those books are part of a tradition that I call Big Style. But I'll get to that in a moment.

Like dictionaries, style guides will stick around. This book is something a little different. I like to think of it as a field guide. A style guide gives you rules to follow. A field guide is something you take out into the world with you. It can be practical—you might use it to decide which berries or mushrooms to eat—but it can also enhance your understanding and appreciation of what you see around you. So think of this as a field guide to everyday verbal ingenuity. It can help you survive in the verbal wilderness, but it can also help you explore and enjoy. And just to stretch the analogy a little further, words and phrases bear some resemblance to plants and animals. They're adapted to their natural environments, they're strange and beautiful, and they're sometimes dangerous.

Microstyle is really about language at play—even when it's used at work. You use it when you come up with a business name—or a baby name—that “has a nice ring to it.” You use it when you try to make a headline or title or sign “catchy.” You even use it when you think of something clever and funny to say at a party. And of course, you use it on Twitter, if you're a part of that world. Microstyle is the natural expression of verbal art and verbal playfulness. It's what makes every one of us a poet.

Is microstyle just regular old style applied to short messages? No, not really. Think about it this way: if extended prose writing is like painting or illustration, microstyle is like graphic design. It employs a subset of the techniques used in the more detailed arts, and because it serves different ends, it involves techniques and conventions of its own.

Let's flesh out that analogy a little. First, only certain aspects of style can be realized in very short messages. Paragraph structure, for example, doesn't come into play. Second, and more important, very short messages tend to serve different purposes and therefore involve different challenges. Some aspects of style in longer writing are intended to maintain cohesiveness and hold a reader's sustained attention. Microstyle is about grabbing that attention for a moment and communicating something quickly. Economy of expression is all-important. Many micromessages, such as brand names and sound bites, are also designed to be remembered and repeated verbatim.

Microstyle isn't new. Science fiction author William Gibson once observed that “the future is already here—it's just unevenly distributed.” Our future—the era of the micromessage—has been here for decades, concentrated in areas of life where verbal messages compete fiercely for attention. Some quintessentially American popular art forms, such as the pop song lyric and the one-liner, are expert expressions of microstyle. There's one place where microstyle has really been honed, and the analogy to graphic design should give you a hint: advertising. Graphic design and copywriting, which is perhaps the most highly advanced form of microstyle, grew up together in the print ad, as developed by the creative team—an artist and a wordsmith working together to come up with a creative ad concept.

So there's really nothing new about microstyle. We've all been spectators of the sport for a long time. What's new is that everyone's getting into the game. The need and ability to capture

instant attention are rapidly spreading to new people and new contexts and becoming the norm for daily discourse. It's no longer just specialists who need to master the art of the miniature message. It's anyone who names a website, thinks of a title for a blog post, makes a comment in an online forum, updates Facebook status, or uses Twitter to publish miscellaneous thoughts—that is, just about everyone who actively participates in web culture. It's also anyone who puts together a PowerPoint presentation, writes a personal ad, or crafts an attention-getting résumé—that is, just about everyone else.

In this book I observe microstyle in the wild, drawing on my training in linguistics and my experience as a naming and verbal branding consultant, and reveal its secret life. In the chapters that follow I freely grab examples from here and there, disregarding message categories and chronology in the interest of stylistic commonality. The “rules” discussed in this book are not limited to any particular kind of message or context; they're linguistic techniques that can be used in all kinds of miniature messages. We'll see that effective messages rely on the same techniques again and again. Think of them as tools, not rules.

WHY SHORT MESSAGES?

Daily verbal life has come to be dominated by micromessages, not because, as some commentators suggest, we're suffering from a mass onset of attention deficit disorder. It's not a sign of cultural decline. It's simple economics. Well, not quite. It's metaphorical economics. It's the verbal attention economy.

In their book *The Attention Economy*, Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck argue that capital, labor, knowledge, computational resources, and most important, information are all plenti-

ful, and that human attention is now the scarce resource we all compete for. The attention economy affects verbal communication. When we consume verbal messages, we scan, skim, and screen, trying to reserve our precious attention for the ones that deserve it. When we produce verbal messages, we struggle to get them noticed. This dynamic between reader and writer favors a verbal style that's catchy and fragmented.

The attention economy is a result of the information revolution that the web and social media have made possible. Anyone with a web connection has access to an unimaginable sea of documents, databases, images, videos, and audio recordings—“information overload” already seems like a quaint way to describe this situation. Much has been said about the demands that all this information places on our beleaguered attention. Most of the talk has been about the experience of filtering and consuming information, regardless of medium. The poster child for this social problem is the pasty, harried yet lethargic web geek who watches YouTube clips, downloads MP3s, peruses blogs, and obsessively checks email while “working.”

This generic tale of information overload is old hat. But a more interesting story—about how the attention economy affects our verbal life—has yet to be told. Language plays a uniquely intimate role in our thoughts and our relationships. When our experience of language changes—and it *has* changed—we're affected deeply. Most significant, we're all producers as well as consumers of verbal culture. More than any other mode of communication, language makes us experience the attention economy as seekers of others' attention, not just guardians of our own.

When the verbal attention economy is discussed, it's often blamed for declining reading habits and the loss of literacy. Nicholas Carr, for example, argues in his book *The Shallows* that the web, with its built-in distractions, is eroding our ability to follow

extended arguments and narratives. Several other books focus on the dark side of the web revolution, including David Slayden and Rita Kirk Whillock's *Soundbite Culture: The Death of Discourse in a Wired World*; Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone under 30)*; and Maggie Jackson's *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*.

Death of discourse? Dumbest generation? Coming dark age? There's a gloomy little trio of sound bites for you. But wait, here come the cheerleaders for the future! They sing the virtues of digital technology in books like Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You* and Marc Prensky's *Don't Bother Me Mom—I'm Learning!* and articles like Larissa MacFarquhar's "Who Cares If Johnny Can't Read? The Value of Books Is Overstated." Things aren't just OK—they're better than ever!

People get worked up about the pros and cons of the digital age. Part of the apparent polarization, however, comes from the need to give books provocative titles that will capture readers' attention. Overstating claims to push people's buttons is a classic microstyle technique (see Chapter 4). If you use a hyperbolic yet jauntily alliterating phrase like *The Death of Discourse* in the subtitle of your book, you're participating in sound-bite culture, even if you criticize that culture inside the book.

When thinking about a change like the one our verbal culture is undergoing, it's tempting to pick a side, pro or con, and yell as loudly as you can. We can do better than that. First let's recognize that where verbal life is concerned, all the focus on technology per se is misplaced. The technology of social media simply enables a new dynamic of communication, and that's the true cause of our disorientation. The web removes economic, editorial, and temporal barriers to mass publication and distribution, creating a landscape of verbal messages that's competitive in the

extreme. It amplifies an unprecedented multitude of voices. As social media observer Clay Shirky argues in *Here Comes Everybody*, the distinction between broadcast communication and simple one-to-one communication is breaking down. But when everyone is talking, no one has much time to listen. When you do stop to listen, there are so many voices that it's hard to pick a single one.

That, in a nutshell, is the verbal attention economy. As Carr and others have observed, it changes our experience of reading. On the web we scan, skim, and click around trying to make sure we don't waste our attention on things that don't deserve it. This is the verbal side of the dilemma we now face as consumers of all kinds of information.

The focus on reading, however, threatens to eclipse what may be an even more important change: the seismic shift in the way we write. The experience of writing on the web—blog posts, comments in discussion forums, even email messages to busy colleagues and friends—often requires us to be brief and attention-getting so that we won't be lost in the noise. Whatever we conclude from the broader critique of web culture, these are real challenges that many of us now face every day. And for many of us, they're *new* challenges.

We all need to think pragmatically about communication, to understand what reaches us and how we can reach others. That's not just practical; it's also a way to be culturally engaged, to notice and appreciate the verbal ingenuity that's all around us. In medieval universities, the ancient art of rhetoric—the study of effective communication—was one of the cornerstones of the original liberal arts education. We need to bring back rhetoric. Well, almost. Ancient rhetoric was based on a kind of public oratory that few of us engage in anymore. We need a rhetoric for the web age—a rhetoric of the micromessage.

Still
paraphrasing
in micro
style

A MICROHISTORY OF MICROSTYLE

Microstyle has its roots in simple conversation. A micromessage, which takes at most a few seconds to hear or read, is about the length of an average conversational turn, and when people talk face-to-face, they often strive to grab attention or be clever. Memorable bits of conversation enter our oral tradition as proverbs, aphorisms, and idioms.

The story of microstyle really got started, however, with the development of mass media in the nineteenth century. Mass media created all the conditions that shape microstyle today—most notably, the mass dissemination of words and competition for readers or listeners. The function of microstyle is to get messages noticed, remembered, and passed along. Brevity is just a minimal requirement. Prominent figures in the history of microstyle include people like Oscar Wilde, a modern-style media hound who was known as much for his witty epigrams as for his more standard literary output. One of his best-known quotes is “The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about.” He also wrote, “If you wish for reputation and fame in the world, take every opportunity of advertising yourself.”

Zippering across the Atlantic and into the twentieth century, we come to the Algonquin Round Table, a regular meeting of writers and other media types where witticisms were tested and often published the next day in participants’ newspaper columns—especially Franklin Pierce Adams’s “The Conning Tower,” which ran in the *New York Tribune* and other New York papers from 1913 to 1941. Dorothy Parker, another literary figure known for her succinct wit, built her reputation largely by lunching at the Algonquin and making wisecracks. One of her better-known quips answered someone’s challenge to use the word *horticulture* in a sentence: “You can lead a whore to culture, but you can’t

make her think.” Offensive, perhaps; contrived, no doubt; but brilliant all the same.

Today’s social media enable anyone to be Dorothy Parker. You don’t have to live in New York and lunch every day with important people from the publishing world. Tim O’Reilly, the founder and CEO of O’Reilly Media, made the following observation in his blog: “Twitter, with its 140 character limit . . . is a breeding ground for the rebirth of repartee and of the aphorism and epigram.” And let’s not forget Facebook, LinkedIn, and other services that enable short updates.

The popularization of microstyle is part of a larger cultural phenomenon. We have a collective obsession with brevity in all media. In March 2007, *Wired* magazine called it “snack culture.” Some theater festivals feature plays only a few minutes long. Short YouTube video clips have become a popular form of entertainment. A number of short speaking formats have become popular. The software developer Jason Dominus created the five-minute “lightning talk” format to get his colleagues to be more succinct. Architects Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham created the Pecha Kucha presentation format for designers, allowing twenty slides that advance automatically every twenty seconds. Brady Forrest and Bre Pettis of O’Reilly Media brought this format to the broader world with their Ignite talks, which started in Seattle and have spread worldwide. The Ignite format allows speakers five minutes each to teach the audience something. The pitch-perfect slogan for Ignite is ENLIGHTEN US, BUT MAKE IT QUICK.

On the web, people have taken a special interest in short literary forms. *Smith Magazine* has popularized the six-word story in recent years by soliciting and publishing “six-word memoirs.” The inspiration for the six-word form comes from the following story, which is commonly attributed to Ernest Hemingway, though no one seems to know whether he really wrote it:

For sale: baby shoes, never used.

Snopes.com, a website that documents and investigates rumors and urban legends, suggests that the story was first made public in *Papa*, a play about Hemingway written by John de Groot, that debuted in 1996.

All ~~these forms are about expressive economy, a basic design principle that's not limited to verbal messages.~~ Maximizing the communicative power of few and simple elements was an important aim of modernism in all the arts. Cubist painters created landscapes and portraits from geometric shapes. Picasso's drawings tried to capture the human figure with a few simple lines. William Carlos Williams wrote poems, such as "The Red Wheelbarrow," using few and simple words and spare images.

CUTE CURMUDGEONS

This book is meant to bridge a gap between the way we use language and the way we talk about it. Since 2007 I've written a blog called The Name Inspector, about names, naming, and language, and I've run my own naming and verbal branding consultancy. My contacts with readers and clients have taught me that there's not only a practical need for help with naming and other verbal branding issues, but also a hunger for a different kind of popular discourse about language. Writing about language tends to fall into one of two categories: either it focuses on the arcane, exploring the quirky corners of our vocabulary and the obscure etymological origins of words, or it's overtly prescriptive, telling us about the right and wrong of grammar and usage. Prescriptive writing about language is what the market demands, because many people think about language only when they're worried about getting it wrong.

They view language as a source of potential embarrassment rather than pleasure.

Many people who enjoy language feel seduced by pop prescriptivists to identify with a persona that I'll call the Cute Curmudgeon. The Cute Curmudgeon half-jokingly expresses great consternation toward the world for not properly understanding and appreciating grammar and usage. A favorite trope is to identify a common mistake, such as confusing the contraction *it's* and the possessive form *its*, and make a humorously extreme statement about the personal offense it causes.

If there's one person who has really corralled the cult of the Cute Curmudgeon, it's Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. Through the sheer charm of her prose, she managed to turn a book subtitled *The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation—punctuation, for god's sake!*—into an international best seller. Some editions contain stickers that readers can use to add missing commas and apostrophes to signs.

Mignon Fogarty, a.k.a. Grammar Girl, might be the cutest curmudgeon of all. Her first name even means 'cute' in French! But she seems to have become popular by *not* acting like a curmudgeon. She's a prescriptivist who never sounds like she's judging people. Rather, she sounds like she's helping people avoid embarrassment. She's a kind, smart friend who gives grammar advice cheerfully and discreetly. Nevertheless, it seems to be fear of embarrassment, and not linguistic curiosity, that leads people to her podcasts and books.

I'm not completely against cute curmudgeonry. It's fine as long as it contributes to our understanding of language. For example, prescriptivists tend to favor enforcing distinctions in usage, such as the one between *less* and *fewer*. A long-standing argument holds that *less* should be reserved for measurable substances (whether tangible or abstract) and only *fewer* should be used with countable

objects. Fine by me! I like nuances of meaning and usage. Learning this rule helps people notice the interesting and important distinction between mass nouns and count nouns.

Unfortunately, many prescriptive rules are ridiculous—for example, the ones prohibiting “split infinitives” and sentence-final prepositions—and prescriptivism has enjoyed an undue influence on our verbal culture. If you meet someone who claims to “love grammar,” chances are they mean they love “correct” grammar and enjoy pointing out other people’s mistakes. That’s the sorry state of linguistic discourse in the United States, and it breaks linguists’ hearts. If you tell someone you’re a linguist, the most likely response—after “How many languages do you speak?”—is “I guess I’d better watch my grammar then.” These answers reveal both a lack of understanding of linguistic issues and a deep insecurity about language. Linguists are, quite simply, specialists who take a scientific interest in language. They want to know how language works, and they’re not interested in judging you.

Prescriptive rules are among the least interesting things about language. They remind me of a scene from the Disney/Pixar animated film *Ratatouille*, about Remy, a gifted rat who longs to be a gourmet chef. His father, who neither understands nor appreciates his aspirations, puts him to work as the rat colony’s official poison sniffer. Though Remy has an uncanny ability to identify subtle ingredients in complex dishes, his job is to detect the mere presence or absence of poison in scraps of scavenged food. His work helps the rat colony but provides none of the joy he gets from cooking.

Prescriptivists are linguistic poison sniffers. They pay little attention to what makes language delicious. I want to remedy that. I believe that people could genuinely love language more if they shifted their focus from judgment and insecurity to curiosity and appreciation. We do interesting things when we use language, whether or not we’re being “correct,” and we should all be able to relish and discuss those things without fear of embarrassment.

BIG STYLE

*There is no apostrophe in “Diners Club” but who cares?
What is this, 1953?*

—@FAKEAPSTYLEBOOK, Twitter, April 2, 2010

Our culture conflates grammar and style with correctness because, until recently, most people wrote only when they were being formally evaluated: in school, in cover letters for job applications, and perhaps at work. Imagine (or remember!) a time before Twitter, before Facebook, before blogs, before online chat, before email. Unless you were a published author, an avid diarist, or an unusually prolific letter writer, you probably didn’t write much outside those formal contexts.

It’s not hard to see how Big Style got a grip on the public imagination. We like to believe that we live in a meritocracy, and that professional opportunity is based on ability. Our educational system increasingly focuses on sorting students according to their success at performing academic tasks. Standardized testing abounds, and the written essay has become a showcase for intellectual abilities that aren’t revealed by multiple-choice exams. Prescriptive rules of grammar and usage provide a fairly objective way for teachers to evaluate student writing, and give comfort to students who want to understand how to perform the writing task correctly.

For journalists, technical writers, and other writing professionals whose aims aren’t primarily artistic, standardization performs the same function that it does for restaurant chains: it eliminates unpleasant surprises that can be caused by strong flavors. Language is a domain in which preferences and social prejudices are strongly felt, and the use of an unexpectedly casual register or a regionally specific or “substandard” usage can often seem pun-

gent. Journalists learn to write in a style that's palatable to everyone (just as newscasters learn to neutralize their regionally specific accents). For amateur writers, standardization and style guides offer relief from anxiety by telling us how the experts do it.

Things are different now. We all have the means, motive, and opportunity to create media content. The means, of course, is the web—and more specifically, social media tools and platforms such as blogs, wikis, forums, YouTube, Flickr, and Twitter. The opportunity is the computer on your lap or the phone in your pocket. And the motive? There are many—curiosity, self-expression, the desire to be part of a community. But there's an especially important one fostered by social changes accompanying the growth of the web and social media. Those changes are affecting the relation between people and work.

We're a "Free Agent Nation," an idea that Daniel H. Pink wrote about for *Fast Company* magazine in 1997. Changes in employment practices have eliminated the kind of job security that people experienced in the middle of the twentieth century, especially in large corporations. Attitudes toward employment have changed as well, as people seek to work for companies that share their values. People change jobs, and even careers, far more often than they used to. This mobility makes networking essential. It encourages people to cultivate résumés instead of climbing corporate ladders, and it creates a constant need for them to sell themselves, to engage in what's sometimes called "personal branding."

WE'RE ALL MAD MEN NOW

The television drama *Mad Men*, which depicts a fictional Madison Avenue ad agency of the 1960s called Sterling Cooper, clearly struck a chord with the web-savvy set at the start of the twenty-first century. In 2008, during the show's second season, it became a fad

among users of Twitter to replace their avatars—the little pictures that appear next to the messages they publish on the service—with cartoon *Mad Men*-era versions of themselves. That same year, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story titled "Mad Men Has Its Moment." Certainly there were many reasons to like the show, including the meticulous period dress and the near-ethnographic depiction of outdated attitudes about sex, gender roles, race, ethnicity, the workplace, child rearing, and the environment. People liked to watch *Mad Men* and think, "Look how much we've changed!"

I believe a big part of the show's appeal also lies in the advertising industry itself, and more specifically, in the protagonist Don Draper, the creative director at Sterling Cooper. Despite being very much of his time and place, Draper is in some ways the show's most contemporary character. Part of the reason is his work. He's an idea guy and a word guy of a very particular type. He runs creative meetings and often ends them by coming up with the perfect phrase for an ad campaign (or recognizing when a colleague has come up with the perfect phrase). Sometimes he's shown lying in bed jotting phrases down on a matchbook, a napkin, a newspaper.

While many aspects of life in the agency—the rigid gender roles, three-martini lunches, and debauched boys' nights out with prospective clients—seem to be from a time long ago, Don Draper's work seems of the moment. We can all relate to his search for the perfect concept and the perfect phrase to express it. He's one of us. Or, we're one of him.

SEXY ICE CUBES

The classic critical look at the ad business from the *Mad Men* era was Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, published in 1957. Packard's book examined the motivational research used in adver-

tising and political campaigns of the 1950s and presented a suspicious view of advertising that resonated with the public. Packard warned about the “depth approach” to persuasion, the product of a collaboration between “motivational analysts” (psychologists and other social scientists who tried to understand people’s subconscious reasons for making purchasing decisions) and “symbol manipulators” (the copywriters, graphic designers, and others who applied that knowledge to create ads and other persuasive messages). Although Packard did not condemn the advertising industry as a whole, he expressed concern that the depth approach was an affront to human dignity and freedom, comparing it to George Orwell’s Big Brother.

This was the era of Big Style, and most people related to media content as consumer to product: experts produced media content, and everyone else ate it up. Not surprisingly, this “expert” culture gave media content a certain mystery that made it both glamorous and threatening. Advertising in particular, created by businesses with ulterior motives to influence our behavior, stirred anxiety and aroused suspicion. What were those wizards doing, pulling all those secret levers and pushing those buttons? There were the shady agents of persuasion doing their work behind closed doors, and then there were the innocent masses being manipulated and taken advantage of.

By 1980 *The Hidden Persuaders* had sold over a million and a half copies. It helped create a market for sensationalist books such as Wilson Bryan Key’s *Subliminal Seduction* (1974), which argued that advertisers were embedding sexual words and images in seemingly innocent photos and illustrations. The cover photo shows a glass full of ice cubes that supposedly contain such images. Inside the book there’s another photo of ice cubes, next to a bottle of Gilbey’s gin, in which the word *sex* is claimed to be subtly visible. (I see the *S* and the *E*, but the *X* is a stretch.) Key saw the word *sex* hidden everywhere; the phrase “hidden

SEXes” riddles his book. In one of his most outlandish “analyses,” Key claimed that a *Playboy* centerfold was surrounded by hidden SEXes. Apparently he thought that an image of a beautiful nude woman kneeling and bending over provocatively wasn’t truly titillating until it was tarted up by the awesome power of hidden words.

There’s no evidence that subliminal advertising was ever as prevalent as Key and others claimed, and subsequent research has suggested that it’s not especially effective anyway. In 1992 two psychologists from UC Santa Cruz, Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, argued in their book *Age of Propaganda* that their thorough survey of relevant research showed no significant effect of subliminal messages on behavior.

That’s not to say that advertisers and marketers don’t want to manipulate people. They do. And just as Packard argued, they hire psychologists and social scientists to help them invent new ways to do it. The power attributed to advertising, however, in Packard’s (and especially Key’s) critique is beginning to seem dated. Today the idea that someone might try to sell gin by half-hiding the word *sex* in some ice cubes seems quaint. The idea that the persuasive power of advertising was somehow hidden also seems dated. Usually it’s right there in your face. Advertisers use *sex* to sell? Duh. Advertisers appeal to our deepest desires and insecurities? Well, yeah. The hysteria about subliminal advertising seems to have come from a different time, a time when people believed that words and images, in the hands of the evil wizards of mind control, had awesome and mysterious powers.

Today social media are causing a fundamental shift in public attitudes toward persuasion. It’s a shift in perspective similar to the one that takes place when a worker becomes a manager, or a student becomes a teacher. Our suspicion of The Man, and in particular, The Mad Man, is based on a caricature. In the age of mass media, we were passive consumers of persuasive messages

and bound to be wary of the people and organizations that created them. But now the world is more entrepreneurial. We have the opportunity to talk back to companies and even to *be* companies. An individual blogger can start a mini media empire. An individual software developer can release applications directly to the public. Collectors and artisans have their own web stores on eBay and Etsy. Many people now have a personal stake in branding and advertising, and that familiarity demystifies and destigmatizes those pursuits. People who aren't directly involved in micro-entrepreneurial activities probably know others who are. Branding doesn't seem so bad when it's for your husband's startup or your girlfriend's band.

The line between persuader and persuaded is becoming less like the one between labor and management and more like the one between driver and pedestrian—one we might cross over frequently in a single day. More and more people are learning what it means to try to get their messages heard by a mass audience, and more and more media messages are taking on a marketing or promotional role.

HOW WE READ NOW

In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts released a study showing that Americans are reading less than they used to. This was a follow-up to a 2002 report that arrived at the same conclusion. One of the activities that replaces reading, according to the study, is “using the computer.” You might object that one of the main reasons we “use the computer” is to read. But that sort of reading doesn't count for the NEA. In its study, reading means reading books, and more specifically, literature: novels, plays, and poems.

Social media expert Stowe Boyd wrote in his blog,

I have found myself reading less in recent years: reading in the sense of hours immersed in a book, curled up on the couch. I am reading more today, in terms of text passing through my eyes, than ever before, however. It's just time spent in the browser.

Although there's some debate as to whether we're actually reading less, no one denies that we're reading differently. In his book *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr eloquently describes how his experience of reading has changed: “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.” Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen has carefully studied the way people read on the web. His conclusion is that we don't. What we do, he claims, is scan web pages and do “information foraging.” In an article titled “How Users Read on the Web” Nielsen wrote, “Instead of spending a lot of time on a single page, users move between many pages and try to pick the most tasty segments of each.”

Some argue that this new way of reading is bad for us. If it's the *only* kind of reading we do, it is, but there's an undeniable logic to it. On the web, your choice of reading material is unlimited, and quality control is often conspicuously absent. There's a 90 percent chance of drivel. If you read serendipitously—one of the great pleasures of the web—the best you can do to avoid the drivel is to scan headlines, screen as well as you can, skim articles until you're convinced you're reading something worthwhile, and click away when you realize you're not. It would be foolish not to embrace this strategy.

Consider the conditions that allow you to curl up with a book and confidently devote your full attention to it. Why are you reading this book? Chances are it was recommended to you by a trusted source: an educator, a critic, a friend. Maybe you read a review, or a bookstore displayed it prominently enough for you to

notice it. Maybe you read the nice comments on the back. Quality filters helped you make your decision.

There were other filters before that. I had to submit a proposal to publishers and go through a competitive process to secure a book deal. I had to work with an editor to ensure that my manuscript made sense to someone besides me. My completed manuscript had to pass muster. A lot of work went into making sure this book would deserve your attention. On the web, most of the burden of that work has been placed on the shoulders of readers. It's no wonder we read differently there.

The new way of reading isn't just lazy or unfocused; it's *guarded*. The verbal attention economy creates reading anxiety. The sad irony is that we often waste our time clicking around because we don't want to waste our attention. We don't always give it willingly, but it can be captured.

Words and phrases can do that. They have a way of grabbing us. Have you ever found yourself using a faddish expression, buzzword, or catchphrase despite yourself? Referring to the web as the "interwebs"? Calling your home your "crib" and your car your "ride"? If so, you might have felt possessed by something outside yourself. William S. Burroughs wrote that "language is a virus," capturing the feeling we sometimes have of being possessed by, rather than possessing, language. (Of course, Burroughs also said that language was "from outer space," but that part was just crazy talk.) Linguistic expressions seem to exist outside human minds, to take up residence in them, and to be transferred from one to another, much like viruses.

To use a somewhat trendier version of this metaphor, we might say that words and phrases are "memes." For a while *meme* was a fashionable buzzword. You might say there was a *meme* meme. People were always talking about this or that meme on the web. There was the blog-tagging meme, which had bloggers writing on certain topics or making lists ("8 things you don't know about

me") and then "tagging" other bloggers to do the same, chain letter style. Any popular thing on the web that people linked to a lot was a meme. As the word *meme* became more and more popular, it got harder to remember why we used it rather than other perfectly good words, like *fad* or *idea*.

If anything deserves to be called a meme, it's a micromessage. Let's return to the roots of the meme idea for a moment. In *The Selfish Gene*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins argued that the processes of variation, inheritance, and selection, which form the basis of Darwinian evolution, might help us understand the nebulous and ever-changing realm of cultural phenomena. He proposed the meme as the cultural equivalent of the gene. In biological evolution, genes carry information that determines inheritable traits. Mutations are changes to the information in genes that can cause changes in traits. When a mutation leads to a new trait that gives an organism some kind of reproductive advantage, the mutation spreads, because the organisms that have it tend to have lots of offspring that also carry it. Over time, the trait predominates in a population. That's how biological evolution works.

There are indeed interesting parallels between this process and the way certain cultural phenomena spread. Ideas, phrases, songs, fads, and other cultural practices undergo processes of mutation (people, intentionally or accidentally, modify them) and selection (people remember and repeat some and forget or ignore others). And while they're not exactly inherited, they are passed on. A biological theory of culture promises to tame the messy realm of human expression and enthusiasm with science, and that, no doubt, appeals to lots of people—especially the geeks who set the tone for web culture.

The biological analogy goes only so far, though. Some researchers, such as Scott Atran, director of research in anthropology at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, argue that culture is communication, and communication

doesn't work through exact replicas the way genetic reproduction does. Communication is based on calling to mind shared knowledge and inviting people to make inferences based on it.

But verbal fragments succeed as memes through repetition, and repetition need not depend on the precise communication of meaning. It's the form of a message that is repeated, and purely formal properties can make a message memorable. Micromessages often feature the formal traits of poetry: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, structural parallelism. These are properties of the sound and structure of language, which are much more regular and predictable than meaning, so they're more closely analogous to the kinds of information that can be encoded in genes.

That's not to say meaning isn't important in micromessages. Our responses to the meanings of words are immediate and automatic, which is one of the things that makes them so powerful.

Any well-rehearsed skill is almost like a new form of perception built upon our existing faculties. Consider driving. It involves the coordination of vision, awareness of the locations of all the controls (wheel, pedals, turn signals, rearview mirror, side mirrors, horn, defogger, etc.), tactile feedback from the wheel and the pedals, awareness of sounds from approaching vehicles, and so on. Despite its complexity, longtime drivers experience driving as a simple, natural phenomenon, and can easily do it while thinking about something else.

Language is the ultimate well-rehearsed skill. We start learning to distinguish linguistic sounds before we even leave the womb, and we start to practice making our own sounds shortly after we're born. Before long we can identify the meanings of simple words and phrases, and we usually start producing our own words around our first birthday. Our verbal practice starts early, occurs constantly after that, and never ends. We're always learning new words, new expressions, new nuances of meaning, and constantly reinforcing the ones we already know.

After all this practice, our responses to verbal stimuli are so automatic that they're almost impossible to ignore. In a famous experiment reported in 1935 by John Ridley Stroop in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, subjects see a series of color words printed in colored ink. The color of each word is different from the color named by that word; for example, the word *blue* might be printed in red ink. Subjects are asked to simply name the colors in which the words are printed. The task proves remarkably difficult. Most people can't ignore the verbal information they get from the printed words no matter how hard they try, and they start to read the words aloud rather than naming the colors in which they're printed. The presence of verbal information interferes with their ability to see and name the colors themselves—a phenomenon that's now known as the *Stroop effect*.

This effect shows that the detection of meaning in the face of a familiar linguistic symbol is automatic, like a perception. Words are little bundles of labeled meaning that we're all built to learn, remember, and share. They're there at the beginning of our lives, and they were there in the evolutionary environment of our ancestors. They're the original memes.

That makes the micromessage the ultimate tool for getting noticed on the cheap, so microstyle is on the front line of the battle for attention on the web. It costs next to nothing to create a verbal message, and once you do, you can distribute it just as cheaply. The computational resources needed to move short snippets of text around the web are trivial. And thanks to its role in our evolutionary history, language has another unique, and uniquely cheap, distribution channel: humans. Language doesn't require special equipment. People produce verbal culture all the time, just by having conversations. Verbal messages, as long as they're short enough, can be spread by people talking in the course of their daily lives—good old word of mouth.

HOW WE WRITE NOW

The ongoing changes in our reading habits are hugely important and interesting phenomena, but there may be an even bigger story: the way we write has changed just as much. In fact, writing has probably changed more, because it has gone from being a specialist's activity to being a normal daily activity for regular people.

Text-based communication tools, and the social media that make use of them, are driving this change. We have an unprecedented opportunity to incorporate writing into our daily lives using email, text messaging, online chat, blogs, online forums, Twitter, Facebook, and other tools and services. And they give us access to a mass audience. Or rather, they give us potential access. It's up to us to actually make people pay attention.

The cultural implications of these changes should not be underestimated. Many of us now have our fingers on keyboards all the time. That just wasn't true twenty-five years ago. Most of us write not to be evaluated, but to communicate, to entertain, to persuade, to get attention. Andrea Lunsford, a professor of English, writing, and rhetoric at Stanford University, calls this kind of writing "life writing." She thinks the online world, far from destroying literacy, is creating a renaissance of literacy driven by life writing. Clive Thompson, writing for *Wired* magazine, called it the "new literacy." Microstyle isn't "micro" just because it's about short messages. It's also about these smaller, more intimate writing contexts. When we write now, it's often to make small observations about daily life, not to develop extended arguments or narratives.

The new literacy has new rules. Or rather, it doesn't really have rules as we know them, because the rules we know are embedded in official contexts that are irrelevant to life writing. Our life writing is still evaluated, but collectively, and by peers

rather than authority figures. Whatever rules emerge from this kind of peer evaluation will be less arbitrary, more flexible, and less intimidating. Making mistakes in a Big Style context can mean not getting into the college of your choice or not landing a plum job. Making a mistake in a microstyle context just means having to issue a quick correction and maybe make a little self-deprecating joke.

So writing now is more interpersonal. Except when it's not. Any snippet of language published online serves two purposes: communicating something to people, and blazing a trail through the tangle of digital signals that is the web. Before people read anything on the Internet, machines read it first. This duality is built into the web's infrastructure. A domain name like amazon.com contains a brand name and a word of English that means something to people, but it also functions as a unique address that helps route signals between a website's server and a client's browser. Blog titles, post titles, and post content can all be "optimized" for search engines through the careful use of keywords.

In fact, the whole web is built out of text. The basic Internet protocols that make the web run, like TCP/IP, were created before we had graphical web browsers, and they were based on command-line interactions that people could control with simple typewriter-like Teletype interfaces. (My elementary school classmates and I had the dubious distinction of using a Teletype machine and an old-fashioned dial-up modem—the kind that you plug the phone handset directly into—to play what was certainly one of the earliest first-person shooter games. It was *The Oregon Trail*. To hunt for food, we had to type "BANG" as fast as we could.)

Text has acquired even more significance on the web as Google and similar search engines have become the preferred form of web navigation. Though there are technologies for searching images, text search is the most effective and widely used type of search.

Anyone who wants to be found on the web had better provide the text to make it happen.

This situation has led to a new generation of words coined specifically for the web. The best-known examples are Web 2.0 names with strange spellings, like *Flickr* and *digg*. Tweaked words like these draw on the meaning of existing words while making it possible to secure “.com” domain names. They also serve as unambiguous keywords for search engines. Some marketing experts, such as Seth Godin, maintain that a name for a new company should be a unique word or phrase that yields no results whatsoever in Google, so that when someone searches for the name, only relevant results will appear. Hence the name of his company: Squidoo.

Some people have even tried to introduce the neologism-as-unique-keyword into normal conversation on the web. Consider the word *hoosgot*, a respelling of the phrase “who’s got.” It was coined by Doc Searls (senior editor for *Linux Journal* and one of the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*) and David Sifry (founder of the blog directory and search engine Technorati). The Hoosgot website invites people to use the word *hoosgot* when they publish questions on their blogs or in their Twitter posts. For example, someone might write, “Hoosgot a good laptop bag for camping?” Then Hoosgot’s search technology will find the questions, publish them as blog posts on the website, and invite people to provide answers as comments on those posts. Users can receive the answers as RSS feeds.

So the word *hoosgot* is three things at once: a domain name, a unique keyword that can be picked up by search engines, and a phrase of English that’s used normally in sentences, though with an altered spelling. It’s a word designed both for humans and for the web, and it gives us a hint about the direction our vocabulary might take in the future.

HOW WE THINK ABOUT LANGUAGE

Big Style has had a strong influence on our verbal culture. Because people tend to reflect consciously on language only when they write, Big Style set the tone for the way we think about language. Grammar, which is really just the structure of language as we all speak it, became all about being correct, about getting it right.

Big Style hasn’t gone away. We still produce long, formal documents, and we still have good reasons to follow the rules when we do. And yet, Big Style seems less and less relevant to the kind of writing that most of us do every day. Our new mode of writing requires a new way of thinking about language and style. Instead of Big Style, we need microstyle—the style of short messages, removed from the context of long, formal documents and the institutions in which they’re evaluated. It’s “micro” both because it’s about more informal, interpersonal writing and because it’s about the shorter texts we create.

So, in addition to being a field guide, this book is a modest manifesto. A micromanifesto. We need to think differently about language, grammar, and style. There’s an odd mismatch in contemporary culture between the way we use language and the way we think and talk about it. Everyday language use embraces creativity, pragmatism, and pleasure. Commentary about language, on the other hand, leans heavily toward the pedantic and judgmental. That’s largely because it’s based on the idea of Big Style, associated with formal writing tasks. Microstyle, on the other hand, is all around us every day. It’s informal, adaptive, hardworking, and fun. Language belongs to all of us, and it’s something we all have the opportunity to enjoy, like the natural world. Let’s approach it with interest, not with anxiety. Here’s my manifesto:

Pay attention to the language around you in the spirit of appreciation and curiosity.

WHAT WILL THIS BOOK DO FOR YOU?

Microstyle is all about expressive economy in language: getting a lot of idea out of a little message. The tools that I discuss directly serve the purpose of expressive economy. Ambiguity gives us two meanings for the price of one. Metaphor creates complex ideas out of simpler ones. Metonymy evokes complex situations via simple details. Sound symbolism squeezes meaning out of non-meaningful aspects of sound. These are some of the topics we'll explore in the following chapters.

The book is divided into four sections: Meaning, Sound, Structure, and Social Context. These are four basic dimensions of verbal communication. Each chapter discusses one tool that helps miniature messages grab attention, communicate instantly, stick in the mind, and roll off the tongue. Each chapter is loaded with examples of a tool used well. You'll also find examples of messages that don't work, either because they fail to use a tool or because they use it badly. Some examples pop up more than once because they use more than one tool.

WHO WROTE THIS BOOK?

My story reflects what's been happening to our verbal culture. I started college at the University of Chicago thinking I was going to be an English major. I set the typical course for would-be writers: read lots of novels and learn about narrative structure and point of view and all those literary things.

I gradually learned that I was more interested in language

on a smaller scale. I got into poetry and poetic structure. Then I took a course in anthropological linguistics taught by Michael Silverstein, a charismatic professor who taught so vigorously that he sometimes got chalk on the end of his nose while outlining his lectures on the blackboard. Silverstein assigned readings that examined short, ordinary texts from a linguistic and semiotic perspective, and I was hooked.

One linguist we read was Roman Jakobson. He did a poetic analysis of Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous political slogan I LIKE IKE that has stuck with me throughout my adult life. Phonetically, the word *like* contains the word *Ike*, and the word *Ike* contains the word *I*. As Jakobson put it, this short phrase gives us an "image of a feeling which totally envelopes its object" and shows us "the loving subject enveloped by the beloved object."

That kind of attention to the microstructure of language really excited me. It also jibed with my interest in certain basic questions about language and meaning: How do words summon such complex ideas and feelings? Why do some phrases just sound right and stick in our minds? How can we be creative when we follow linguistic convention? How do our forms of speech relate to the way we live?

I moved away from literary studies and designed an interdisciplinary program in linguistics, philosophy, and psychology to study the way meaning works in language. After I graduated, I went to UC Berkeley to get a PhD in linguistics.

When I entered grad school, Berkeley was the world center of "cognitive linguistics," an approach to language that explores its connections to our other cognitive abilities and to culture. I studied word meanings, the way they relate to larger conceptual structures and metaphors, and the way they serve as a sort of interface between concepts and grammar. I studied the way grammar, far from being a set of abstract rules, is suffused with patterns that are specific and meaningful.

While enjoying this steady diet of linguistic esoterica, I was given a rare opportunity to apply it to real paying work: a job as a namer and name analyst at Lexicon Branding. So I shuttled between the scholarly Shangri-la of Berkeley and Lexicon's office in Sausalito, where I worked part-time during many semesters of grad school and full-time during the summers.

Lexicon is one of the top naming firms in the country and, with its proximity to Silicon Valley, has made technology names a specialty. Some of Lexicon's best-known names are Pentium, PowerBook, and BlackBerry. Other Lexicon names include Zima, Swiffer, Febreze, and Dasani. I worked as a namer on a number of those projects. I also developed techniques for evaluating names and wrote countless analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of names for clients, developing a perspective on words that informs what I do now—including writing this book.

Shifting gears between the academic and commercial worlds was sometimes disconcerting. The university was a factory for weighty dissertations, and Lexicon was a little workshop where people crafted names just a handful of letters long. In grad school I was trained to write scholarly papers that explored subtle arguments and acknowledged all existing literature on a topic. At Lexicon I had to get to the point. Clients didn't want to learn about language, they wanted to build brands and sell products. It became a fun challenge to find ways to make linguistics useful, and I learned to respect the craft of creating messages in the miniature.

After finishing grad school, I got involved in the first web technology boom, developing ways to model linguistic meaning for software applications. Then I taught linguistics in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. I've considered language in many contexts, including ones in which it's learned by children and modeled by computer software.

These experiences have given me a multifaceted view of language that I carry with me every day. I still write analyses of names—mostly company names—on my blog *The Name Inspector*. They're an excuse to write about linguistic issues for nonspecialists. I also work as a naming and verbal branding consultant, helping businesspeople use microstyle to draw attention to their companies and products and present them in the best possible light.

When I'm reading and writing, I'm hyperaware of the words and phrases I encounter and use—not in an “is it correct?” way, but in a “how does it work?” way. When I consider the fragments that make up normal verbal life, I see specimens of the diverse flora and fauna of our new verbal ecosystem. I wrote this book to share some of the things I see, to let you observe words in the wild through a linguist's eyes.