Joseph William’s
Style
Toward Clarity and Grace
Summarized by Emily Hill

1 Causes

Chapter 1 discusses why so many people fall into the bad-writing trap and why a series of rules (as presented by most other writing guides) isn’t enough to get people on the right track.

2 Clarity

Chapter 2 works on making individual sentences clear. 
To make prose clear, try to align subjects with characters and verbs with actions.

Top of p. 23 gives revising tips: identify the characters and actions in your sentences. Revise so the characters are the subjects and actions are the verbs.

Other helpful tips to clarify your writing:

- Avoid useless or abstract nominalizations.
  “The police conducted an investigation ...” → “The police investigated ...”

- Avoid unnecessary passive verbs when they hide the actors (characters) in a sentence.
  
  **Passive** “The agreement was broken by the partners.”  
  **Active** “The partners broke the agreement.”

  Sometimes passive is necessary to preserve the cohesion or flow of a paragraph, or to control the point of view of the reader.

- Avoid compound noun phrases if you don’t plan on using them again later to refer to complex ideas.
  “early childhood thought misdiagnosis” → “[doctors] misdiagnose disordered thought in early childhood”

Historically, the first person (I/we) was used in scientific writing—it is only over the past century or so that we have shifted away from it. The result is that sometimes the actors in a sentence are not the subject (if the actors are the authors), causing prose to become confused.

3 Cohesion

Chapter 3 focuses on fusing sentences cohesively into a discourse.

Put old/familiar information in the beginning of a sentence.
Put new/surprising/complex information at the end.

The topic of a sentence is its psychological subject:

- Try to align topics with grammatical subjects
- Among groups of related sentences, try to keep topics consistent. This may lead to passive sentences and the use of nominalizations—that’s ok.

Careful word selection can subtly assign different responsibility or point of view, even in agent-action styled sentences

Tom & I at fault:  “When Tom & I bumped, my glass dropped and the juice spilled.”

Just I am at fault:  “When I bumped Tom I dropped my glass and spilled my juice.”

Notice the first example is more abstract than the second.

4 Emphasis

Introduce unfamiliar terminology at the end of a sentence, never at the beginning.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, make sure new/more important information appears at the end of the sentence, with less important/old information in the beginning.