Communications

Note on a Displaced Dogfish

Squalus acanthias is commonly referred to as being an inhabitant of the waters off the coast of New England and northern Europe. Nowhere can I find mention of its having any proclivity to inhabit fresh water. I would therefore like to report the following incident that occurred 30 August.

Morgan and Nick Garrett (ages 10 and 7, respectively) landed a 27-in. female *S. acanthias* while fishing from a bridge over the Appomattox River just north of Farmville, Virginia, in Prince Edward County. The shark appeared to be in excellent physical condition, making it necessary that the boys club it severely after having pulled it out of the water.

The Appomattox River is an uncommonly sluggish and muddy stream located in the James River drainage area. The point at which the fish was taken is 120 airline miles from the Atlantic Ocean.

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Word Saving, Good and Bad

Herman R. Struck [*Science* **119**, 522 (1954)] advocates methods for getting rid of word padding that are broadly similar to some that I have often used in quasi-editorial work. I think, however, that alternative methods of applying one or two of them are worth considering; that Struck is too hard on *there are*, and so forth, and on the use of passives; that words can be saved in ways that he has not mentioned; and that if word-saving is made an end in itself some other important objectives may be overlooked.

Most of the specific advice in Struck's paper may be summarized in these three precepts: (i) Use strong verbs whenever possible rather than weak verbs coupled with abstract nouns. (ii) Be wary of the inverted forms that begin with *it is, there are,* and so forth. (iii) Whenever possible, use the active, rather than the passive, voice.

Precept (i), as Struck develops it, makes *to be* and other weak verbs "chronic offenders." To me they seem inoffensive except when they get into the bad company of abstract nouns. The most effective way to carry out this precept, I believe, is to look for the abstract nouns —which are easier to find than the weak verbs—and get rid of most of them, chiefly by utilizing the strong verbs from which many of them are derived. "The rock shows much alteration" is a word longer and is weaker than "The rock is much altered." Since many needless abstract nouns end in *-tion,* much of the ground is covered by what used to be a pet slogan of mine: "Shun *-tion*!" Abstract nouns do not all end in *-tion,* however, and we have to use some of those that do end that way as well as many of those that do not. To get rid of needless nouns may sometimes take radical recasting, as in the following example, cited on page 524:

> . . . rats have an *ability* to make *selections* conducive to their *well-being.*
>
> . . . rats instinctively select the foods that are good for them.

Chains of prepositional phrases (p. 524) are likely to contain abstract nouns, and those that do can be broken up by cleaning out what the Fowlers call "noun rubbish" (*The King's English,* p. 15). That is what they did in radically recasting two examples on page 525.

The advice that I have summarized as precept (ii) appeared to me, at first reading, to mean that Struck would prefer that we never use the inverted constructions beginning with *it is, there are,* and so on (p. 523). He has been so kind as to point out, through the Editor, that he remarked a little further on that none of the constructions he "cudgels" must be condemned automatically, and that he used a *there are* on the same page. Many readers, however, might overlook that isolated *there are* and be less impressed by that generalized reservation than by the vigorous cudgeling of *there are,* and so forth.

There is good reason for the fact that these inversions, even though often used ineptly, are firmly imbedded in English idiom. They often make for effective placing of emphasis. In the second sentence back, for example, the uninverted form would be: "A good reason [16 words] is"—or "exists." That would throw a violent emphasis on *is* (or *exists*) and also is grotesquely unidiomatic. Of course Professor Struck knows all this, but it would have been helpful for him to say it explicitly.

In precept (iii), Struck is not so hard on the passive voice as he appeared to be on those inversions, but it would have been helpful to point out that the passive is sometimes better than the active, and to show why this is so. Often, of course, the passive does take a word or two more than the active, and when unskillfully used it is weak. But, like *there are,* and so forth, it sometimes makes for good placing of emphasis and good connection. In describing a stratigraphic sequence in ascending order, it is better to write "The Jefferson dolomite is overlain by the Madison limestone" than "The Madison limestone overlies the Jefferson dolomite."

The article fails to point out that words can be saved in ways that have nothing to do with verbs. In the longest example on page 524, many are wasted by elegant variation, which is carried over into Struck's rewrite. The reader's time is wasted, also, in figuring out that "rats," "animals," "rats," "animals," "rats," and "experimental animals," all mean "rats," and that there were seven of them. This secret is divulged in the first sentence of the following version, which con-