DESIDERIUS ERASMUS
A Short Rule for Copiousness

This short colloquy dates from about 1499, and Erasmus composed it as an exercise for his pupils to learn Latin. You may remember the technique of short dialogues which is common today for teaching languages. Erasmus' approach was so successful that he kept revisiting and expanding this dialogue until it became the huge textbook called De copia (1518, etc.). The basic principles of that important textbook can be seen in embryonic form in this colloquy between Augustine and Christiaan.

AUGUSTINE: I'm ready. In the first place, the subject itself must be expressed in pure, choice Latin words—in achievements of no little skill, since there are a good many persons who somehow or other aim at richness and variety of diction when they can't express the thing properly even once. As if having blundered once weren't enough, they make their blunderings still worse by variations, as though they had accepted a challenge to speak as barbarously as possible! And thus in their clumsy way they pile up synonyms so ill-assorted that the words themselves will wonder how they came together. What would be sillier than for a beggar, who hasn't a stick of clothing he can put on without shame, to change his rags at regular intervals nonetheless and show off his beggarliness for nothing? But these emphases for variations seem no less absurd. Though they've had a thing barbarously once, they repeat the same thing much more barbarously—over and over again and worse every time! This is copiousness in selections, not in diction.

First of all, then, as I said, the subject itself must be set forth in choice and appropriate words. Next, say it in different words, if any we find that convey the same meaning; there are plenty of these. Finally, when individual synonyms fail you must use metaphors, provided the metaphor is not an extravagant one. When you run out of these you'll have to shift to passives (if you've been speaking in the active voice). They afford fully as many expressions as the verses provided. After that you'll change the verbs, if you like, either into verbal nouns or participles. Last of all, when we've changed adverbs into nouns, then nouns into various parts of speech, we'll say it in an opposite way: either change affirmative speech into negative or the reverse, or put a positive statement into the form of question. Now, for the sake of example, let's take this sentence:

Your Letter Pleased me Very Much

Letter

Epistle, note, writing, sheets, letter.

Very Much

In marvelous fashion, wonderfully, extraordinarily, in a way to be worked at, exceedingly a great deal, not a little, extremely, most exceedingly,

My soul, my breast, my eyes, my heart, Christian.

Erasmus, Short Eras, page 1
Pleasant

Stirred with pleasure, refreshed, gladdened, was a pleasure, delighted, filled me with pleasure, was honey-sweet most pleasantable, etc.

You have the material; it will be yours to arrange. Let me, then. Less risk it.

CHRISTIAN. Your letter pleased me very much. Your epistle gladdened me wonderfully.

AUGUSTINE. Turn the active into passive; the form will change, as, "It is impossible to say how gladdened I was by your writing."

Forming the Same Likeness Through Other Verbs

I got incredible pleasure from your letter. I received a great deal of pleasure from Your Highness' letter. Your writing brought me no mean joy. Your writing filled me with joy, full as I was. (Here you couldn't change into passive except in that last part: was filled with joy," which is common usage. "Joy was taken by me;" joy was afforded, wouldn't be so idiomatic.)

Through the Verb "More"

Your letter moved me with singular pleasure.

Change into Passive

I was given incredible pleasure by your writing. Your note produced no little joy for us.

Through the Verb "to be" and Noun Adjectives

Your letter was in many ways most pleasing to me. Your letter was as pleasurable as could be.

Through Noun Substantives

Your letter was an unspeakable pleasure to us. Your letter was an incredible happiness.

Change into Negative

Your writing was no small joy. Nothing in my life more pleasing than your letter has fallen to me.

However, this method—which is not to be carelessly neglected—is one we've used many times already. Whenever we wish to signify "much," "very much," "singularly," we'll get the same thing by a negative, as in

Henry loves you violently. He loves you in no common fashion. Wine pleases me much. It pleases me but a little. He's a man of singular talent. He's a man of no common talent. He's a man to be admired for learning. He's a man of no contemptible learning. Thomas is born for the highest place among his associates. Born not for the lowest place. Augustine was most eloquent. He was not lacking in eloquence. Camerades was a noble orator—"not ignoble," "not obscure."

And others of this kind, which are in constant use. But to have called attention to a matter that is quite clear is enough. You shouldn't be left unformed that we use this sort of diction in two ways: for the sake of modesty, especially if we're talking of ourselves, and for the sake of amplifying. For we say correctly and gracefully, "not ungrateful" for "very grateful," "not uncommon," for "singularly."

Erasmus, Short Rufe, page 2
For the Sake of Modesty

My writing has won me some reputation for learning, I've always taken pains not to be lost in literary reputation.

The above are examples of amplification. Now to reverse:

Nothing more gratifying than your letter ever happened. Nothing ever was a greater pleasure than your letter. I never took so much pleasure in anything as in your very lovely letter. Each of the expressions above could have been varied by being put in the form of a question, in this fashion:

What in life could have been more pleasant than your letter?

Whatever happened to me that was sweeter than your epistle?

Whatever so delighted as did your latest letter?

In this manner you'll be able to vary almost every expression anew.

CHRISTIAN. What comes next?

AUGUSTINE. Now let's change the whole style a little more freely, in order to paraphrase one expression by many words.

CHRISTIAN. Give an example.

AUGUSTINE. By adding some words we'll change the simple phrase expressed once by the pronoun "incredible" and again by the adverb "incredibly".

I couldn't put into words how delighted I was by your letter.

It would be hard for me to write, and for you to believe, how great a pleasure your writing was to me.

I can't set forth plainly how overjoyed I was by your letter.

And so on, ad infinitum. And again, by another means. Thus far we've varied by negation, inversion, and by countless expressions. Now we'll vary through juxtaposition or in this way:

Let me die if there was ever anything more welcome or sweeter than your letter.

Let me perish if there was anything that gave me greater pleasure than your letter.

So help me God, nothing more agreeable than your letter has befell me in all my life.

And you'll be able to think up many others also in this way.

CHRISTIAN. What next?

AUGUSTINE. Now we should hurry on to metonyms, comparatives, and examples.

**Metaphor Is in These**

I received your letter, which was honeyed. Your writing seems to me sheer delight. Your letter is in my pleasure.

And many more of this sort. But we should be careful to avoid metaphors that are obsolete or too far-fetched, like this one: "love spin on the swart Alps". And this: "The banquets of your writing refreshed us with most delightful dishes."

**Comparison by Smile**

Your writing was more delicious than all ambrosia or nectar. Your letter was sweeter to me than any honey. Your kind epistle is surpassed all carobs and Attic honey and sugar, nectar, and ambrosia of the gods.

Whatever is enhanced by sweetness can be dragged in here.

**By Example**

Erasmus, *Short Rule*, page 3
I'll never be persuaded to believe Herod received her Leander's letter with greater pleasure
or more kisses than I received yours.
I'll scarcely believe Scipio had a more splendid triumph when Carthage was overthrown,
or Aemilius Paullus when Pompey was captured, than I had as soon as the carrier delivered your
sweetest writing to me.

From friars and chronicles of this kind, innumerable examples can be found. Comparisons of
things are taken from natural science; you must memorize the qualities of a great many of them.

Now, if you please, let us try it in another sentence.

I'll Never Forget You as Long as I Live

While I live, I'll always remember you. As long as I live, forgetfulness of you will never
ever overcome me. I shall cease to live before I forget you.

By Comparison

If the body can escape its shadow, this heart also will be able to forget you. Not even the
Lebesian stream will be able to wash away the memory of you.

In Addition: Through Impossibility, or,
in Poetic Fashions, Through Opposites

As long as the bear loves the mountains ridges, / As long as fish the streams.” “Sooner,
then, the fleet, etc.—which is not much trouble to think up. But to avoid seeming inmodest, let
be content with these for the present. At another time, if you wish, we’ll have a longer talk on this
subject.

CHRISTIAN. I kept thinking you had now spent all you had, Augustine, but contrary to
my expectation, you’ve revealed a new source of wealth. If you proceed to display it, might it be
upon us before you run out of words on this matter.

AUGUSTINE. If even I perform this with my modest learning and talent, how much do
you think Cicero himself could have accomplished, when he is said to have rivaled the actor
Roscius?—But the sun has left us; the air grows damp. Best to remain here, and take to
hunting and bed. Farewell, therefore, my dearest Christian, until tomorrow.

CHRISTIAN. Farewell to you likewise, Augustine, most learned of men.

Erasmus, Short Fable, page 4