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On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition

William Zinsser

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On Writing Well

30th Anniversary Edition

THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO WRITING NONFICTION

William Zinsser

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INTRODUCTION

One of the pictures hanging in my office in mid-Manhattan is a photograph of the writer E. B. White. It was taken by Jill Krementz when White was 77 years old, at his home in North Brooklin, Maine. A white-haired man is sitting on a plain wooden bench at a plain wooden table—three boards nailed to four legs—in a small boathouse. The window is open to a view across the water. White is typing on a manual typewriter, and the only other objects are an ashtray and a nail keg. The keg, I don't have to be told, is his wastebasket.

Many people from many corners of my life—writers and aspiring writers,

students and former students—have seen that picture. They come to talk through a writing problem or to catch me up on their lives. But usually it doesn't take more than a few minutes for their eye to be drawn to the old man sitting at the typewriter. What gets their attention is the simplicity of the process. White has everything he needs: a writing implement, a piece of paper, and a receptacle for all the sentences that didn't come out the way he wanted them to.

Since then writing has gone electronic. Computers have replaced the typewriter, the delete key has replaced the wastebasket, and various other keys insert, move and rearrange whole chunks of text. But nothing has replaced the writer. He or she is still stuck with the same old job of saying something that other people will want to read. That's the point of the photograph, and it's still the point—30 years later—of this book.

I first wrote *On Writing Well* in an outbuilding in Connecticut that was as small and as crude as White's boathouse. My tools were a dangling lightbulb, an Underwood standard typewriter, a ream of yellow copy paper and a wire wastebasket. I had then been teaching my nonfiction writing course at Yale for five years, and I wanted to use the summer of 1975 to try to put the course into a book.

E. B. White, as it happened, was very much on my mind. I had long

considered him my model as a writer. His was the seemingly effortless style—achieved, I knew, with great effort—that I wanted to emulate, and whenever I began a new project I would first read some White to get his cadences into my ear. But now I also had a pedagogical interest: White was the reigning champ of the arena I was trying to enter. *The Elements of Style*, his updating of the book that had most influenced *him*, written in 1919 by his English professor at Cornell, William Strunk Jr., was the dominant how-to manual for writers. Tough competition.

Instead of competing with the Strunk & White book I decided to complement it. *The Elements of Style* was a book of pointers and admonitions: do this, don't do that. What it *didn't* address was how to apply those principles to the various forms that nonfiction writing and journalism can take. That's what I taught in my course, and it's what I would teach in my book: how to write about people and places, science and technology, history and medicine, business and education, sports and the arts and everything else under the sun that's waiting to be written about.

So *On Writing Well* was born, in 1976, and it's now in its third generation of readers, its sales well over a million. Today I often meet young newspaper reporters who were given the book by the editor who hired them, just as those editors were first given the book by the editor who hired *them*.

I also often meet gray-haired matrons who remember being assigned the book in college and not finding it the horrible medicine they expected. Sometimes they bring that early edition for me to sign, its sentences highlighted in yellow. They apologize for the mess. I love the mess.

As America has steadily changed in 30 years, so has the book. I've revised it six times to keep pace with new social trends (more interest in memoir, business, science and sports), new literary trends (more women writing nonfiction), new demographic patterns (more writers from other cultural traditions), new technologies (the computer) and new words and usages. I've also incorporated lessons I learned by continuing to wrestle with the craft myself, writing books on subjects I hadn't tried before: baseball and music and American history. My purpose is to make myself and my experience available. If readers connect with my book it's because they don't think they're hearing from an English professor. They're hearing from a working writer.

My concerns as a teacher have also shifted. I'm more interested in the intangibles that produce good writing—confidence, enjoyment, intention, integrity—and I've written new chapters on those values. Since the 1990s I've also taught an adult course on memoir and family history at the New School. My students are men and women who want to use writing to try to

understand who they are and what heritage they were born into. Year after year their stories take me deeply into their lives and into their yearning to leave a record of what they have done and thought and felt. Half the people in America, it seems, are writing a memoir.

The bad news is that most of them are paralyzed by the size of the task. How can they even begin to impose a coherent shape on the past—that vast sprawl of half-remembered people and events and emotions? Many are near despair. To offer some help and comfort I wrote a book in 2004 called *Writing About Your Life*. It's a memoir of various events in my own life, but it's also a teaching book: along the way I explain the writing decisions I made. They are the same decisions that confront every writer going in search of his or her past: matters of selection, reduction, organization and tone. Now, for this seventh edition, I've put the lessons I learned into a new chapter called "Writing Family History and Memoir."

When I first wrote *On Writing Well*, the readers I had in mind were a small segment of the population: students, writers, editors, teachers and people who wanted to learn how to write. I had no inkling of the electronic marvels that would soon revolutionize the act of writing. First came the word processor, in the 1980s, which made the computer an everyday tool for people who had never thought of themselves as writers. Then came the

Internet and e-mail, in the 1990s, which continued the revolution. Today everybody in the world is writing to everybody else, making instant contact across every border and across every time zone. Bloggers are saturating the globe.

On one level the new torrent is good news. Any invention that reduces the fear of writing is up there with air-conditioning and the lightbulb. But, as always, there's a catch. Nobody told all the new computer writers that the essence of writing is rewriting. Just because they're writing fluently doesn't mean they're writing well.

That condition was first revealed with the arrival of the word processor. Two opposite things happened: good writers got better and bad writers got worse. Good writers welcomed the gift of being able to fuss endlessly with their sentences—pruning and revising and reshaping—without the drudgery of retyping. Bad writers became even more verbose because writing was suddenly so easy and their sentences looked so pretty on the screen. How could such beautiful sentences not be perfect?

E-mail is an impromptu medium, not conducive to slowing down or looking back. It's ideal for the never-ending upkeep of daily life. If the writing is disorderly, no real harm is done. But e-mail is also where much of the world's business is now conducted. Millions of e-mail messages every

day give people the information they need to do their job, and a badly written message can do a lot of damage. So can a badly written Web site. The new age, for all its electronic wizardry, is still writing-based.

On Writing Well is a craft book, and its principles haven't changed since it was written 30 years ago. I don't know what still newer marvels will make writing twice as easy in the next 30 years. But I do know they won't make writing twice as good. That will still require plain old hard thinking—what E. B. White was doing in his boathouse—and the plain old tools of the English language.

William Zinsser

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PART I

Principles

1

The Transaction

A school in Connecticut once held "a day devoted to the arts," and I was asked if I would come and talk about writing as a vocation. When I arrived I found that a second speaker had been invited—Dr. Brock (as I'll call him),

a surgeon who had recently begun to write and had sold some stories to magazines. He was going to talk about writing as an avocation. That made us a panel, and we sat down to face a crowd of students and teachers and parents, all eager to learn the secrets of our glamorous work.

Dr. Brock was dressed in a bright red jacket, looking vaguely bohemian, as authors are supposed to look, and the first question went to him. What was it like to be a writer?

He said it was tremendous fun. Coming home from an arduous day at the hospital, he would go straight to his yellow pad and write his tensions away. The words just flowed. It was easy. I then said that writing wasn't easy and wasn't fun. It was hard and lonely, and the words seldom just flowed.

Next Dr. Brock was asked if it was important to rewrite. Absolutely not, he said. "Let it all hang out," he told us, and whatever form the sentences take will reflect the writer at his most natural. I then said that rewriting is the essence of writing. I pointed out that professional writers rewrite their sentences over and over and then rewrite what they have rewritten.

"What do you do on days when it isn't going well?" Dr. Brock was asked. He said he just stopped writing and put the work aside for a day when it would go better. I then said that the professional writer must establish a daily schedule and stick to it. I said that writing is a craft, not an

art, and that the man who runs away from his craft because he lacks inspiration is fooling himself. He is also going broke.

"What if you're feeling depressed or unhappy?" a student asked. "Won't that affect your writing?"

Probably it will, Dr. Brock replied. Go fishing. Take a walk. Probably it won't, I said. If your job is to write every day, you learn to do it like any other job.

A student asked if we found it useful to circulate in the literary world. Dr. Brock said he was greatly enjoying his new life as a man of letters, and he told several stories of being taken to lunch by his publisher and his agent at Manhattan restaurants where writers and editors gather. I said that professional writers are solitary drudges who seldom see other writers.

"Do you put symbolism in your writing?" a student asked me.

"Not if I can help it," I replied. I have an unbroken record of missing the deeper meaning in any story, play or movie, and as for dance and mime, I have never had any idea of what is being conveyed.

"I *love* symbols!" Dr. Brock exclaimed, and he described with gusto the joys of weaving them through his work.

So the morning went, and it was a revelation to all of us. At the end Dr. Brock told me he was enormously interested in my answers—it had never

occurred to him that writing could be hard. I told him I was just as interested in *his* answers—it had never occurred to me that writing could be easy. Maybe I should take up surgery on the side.

As for the students, anyone might think we left them bewildered. But in fact we gave them a broader glimpse of the writing process than if only one of us had talked. For there isn't any "right" way to do such personal work. There are all kinds of writers and all kinds of methods, and any method that helps you to say what you want to say is the right method for you. Some people write by day, others by night. Some people need silence, others turn on the radio. Some write by hand, some by computer, some by talking into a tape recorder. Some people write their first draft in one long burst and then revise; others can't write the second paragraph until they have fiddled endlessly with the first.

But all of them are vulnerable and all of them are tense. They are driven by a compulsion to put some part of themselves on paper, and yet they don't just write what comes naturally. They sit down to commit an act of literature, and the self who emerges on paper is far stiffer than the person who sat down to write. The problem is to find the real man or woman behind the tension.

Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not the subject being

written about, but who he or she is. I often find myself reading with interest about a topic I never thought would interest me—some scientific quest, perhaps. What holds me is the enthusiasm of the writer for his field. How was he drawn into it? What emotional baggage did he bring along? How did it change his life? It's not necessary to want to spend a year alone at Walden Pond to become involved with a writer who did.

This is the personal transaction that's at the heart of good nonfiction writing. Out of it come two of the most important qualities that this book will go in search of: humanity and warmth. Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to "personalize" the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength.

Can such principles be taught? Maybe not. But most of them can be learned.

2

Simplicity

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless

jargon.

Who can understand the clotted language of everyday American commerce: the memo, the corporation report, the business letter, the notice from the bank explaining its latest “simplified” statement? What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure explaining his costs and benefits? What father or mother can put together a child’s toy from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn’t think of saying it may rain. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that’s already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank.

During the 1960s the president of my university wrote a letter to mollify the alumni after a spell of campus unrest. “You are probably aware,” he

began, “that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related.” He meant that the students had been hassling them about different things. I was far more upset by the president’s English than by the students’ potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction. I would have preferred the presidential approach taken by Franklin D. Roosevelt when he tried to convert into English his own government’s memos, such as this blackout order of 1942:

Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination.

“Tell them,” Roosevelt said, “that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows.”

Simplify, simplify. Thoreau said it, as we are so often reminded, and no American writer more consistently practiced what he preached. Open *Walden* to any page and you will find a man saying in a plain and orderly way what is on his mind:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,

and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

How can the rest of us achieve such enviable freedom from clutter? The answer is to clear our heads of clutter. Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other. It's impossible for a muddy thinker to write good English. He may get away with it for a paragraph or two, but soon the reader will be lost, and there's no sin so grave, for the reader will not easily be lured back.

Who is this elusive creature, the reader? The reader is someone with an attention span of about 30 seconds—a person assailed by many forces competing for attention. At one time those forces were relatively few: newspapers, magazines, radio, spouse, children, pets. Today they also include a galaxy of electronic devices for receiving entertainment and information—television, VCRs, DVDs, CDs, video games, the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, BlackBerries, iPods—as well as a fitness program, a pool, a lawn and that most potent of competitors, sleep. The man or woman snoozing in a chair with a magazine or a book is a person who was being given too much unnecessary trouble by the writer.

It won't do to say that the reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. If the reader is lost, it's usually because the writer hasn't been careful enough. That carelessness can take any number of

forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively cluttered that the reader, hacking through the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in several ways. Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in midsentence, or has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking or when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A; the writer, in whose head the connection is clear, hasn't bothered to provide the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used a word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up.

Faced with such obstacles, readers are at first tenacious. They blame themselves—they obviously missed something, and they go back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph, piecing it out like an ancient rune, making guesses and moving on. But they won't do that for long. The writer is making them work too hard, and they will look for one who is better at the craft.

Writers must therefore constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time? If it's not, some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is someone clearheaded enough to see this stuff

for what it is: fuzz.

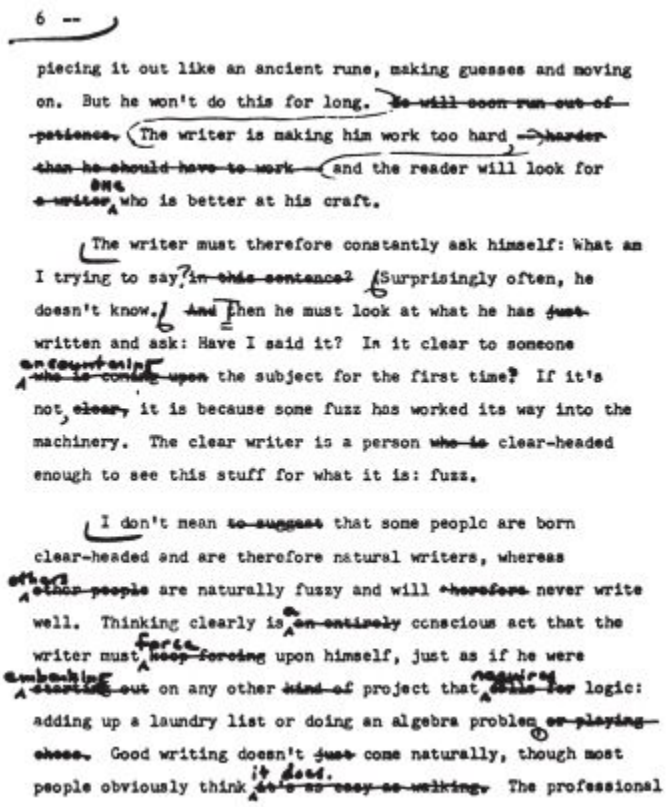
I don't mean that some people are born clearheaded and are therefore natural writers, whereas others are naturally fuzzy and will never write well. Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force on themselves, as if they were working on any other project that requires logic: making a shopping list or doing an algebra problem. Good writing doesn't come naturally, though most people seem to think it does. Professional writers are constantly bearded by people who say they'd like to "try a little writing sometime"—meaning when they retire from their real profession, like insurance or real estate, which is hard. Or they say, "I could write a book about that." I doubt it.

Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard.

is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the ~~writer's~~ train of thought. My sympathies are ~~entirely~~ with him. ~~He's not so dumb.~~ If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer ~~of the article~~ has not been careful enough to keep him on the ~~proper~~ path.

This carelessness can take any number of ~~different~~ forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively ~~long and~~ cluttered that the reader, hacking his way through ~~all~~ the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it ~~the writer~~ means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in any of several ~~two or three different~~ ways. ~~He thinks he knows what the writer is trying to say, but he's not sure.~~ Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in mid-sentence, or ~~perhaps he~~ has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking ~~to whom~~, or ~~exactly~~ when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A -- the writer, in whose head the connection is ~~perfectly~~ clear, has not bothered to provide ~~given enough thought to providing~~ the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used an important word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up ~~and make sure.~~ He may think that "sanguine" and "sanguinary" mean the same thing, but ~~I can assure you that~~ the difference is a bloody big one ~~to the reader.~~ The reader ~~He~~ can only ~~try to~~ infer ~~what~~ (speaking of big differences) what the writer is trying to imply.

Faced with these ~~such a variety of~~ obstacles, the reader is at first a remarkably tenacious bird. He ~~tends to~~ blames himself. He obviously missed something, ~~he thinks,~~ and he goes back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph,



6 --

piecing it out like an ancient rune, making guesses and moving on. But he won't do this for long. ~~He will soon run out of patience.~~ The writer is making him work too hard ~~harder than he should have to work~~ and the reader will look for ~~a writer~~ one who is better at his craft.

The writer must therefore constantly ask himself: What am I trying to say? ~~in this sentence?~~ Surprisingly often, he doesn't know. ~~And~~ Then he must look at what he has ~~just~~ written and ask: Have I said it? Is it clear to someone ~~who is coming upon~~ encountering the subject for the first time? If it's not, ~~clear,~~ it is because some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is a person ~~who is~~ clear-headed enough to see this stuff for what it is: fuzz.

I don't mean ~~to suggest~~ that some people are born clear-headed and are therefore natural writers, whereas ~~other people~~ others are naturally fuzzy and will ~~therefore~~ never write well. Thinking clearly is a ~~an entirely~~ conscious act that the writer must force ~~keep forcing~~ upon himself, just as if he were embarking ~~starting out~~ on any other ~~kind of~~ project that required ~~drills for~~ logic: adding up a laundry list or doing an algebra problem ~~or playing chess.~~ Good writing doesn't ~~just~~ come naturally, though most people obviously think it does. ~~it's as easy as walking.~~ The professional

Two pages of the final manuscript of this chapter from the First Edition of *On Writing Well*.

Although they look like a first draft, they had already been rewritten and retyped—like almost

every other page—four or five times. With each rewrite I try to make what I have written

tighter, stronger and more precise, eliminating every element that's not doing useful work.

Then I go over it once more, reading it aloud, and am always amazed at how much clutter can

still be cut. (In later editions I eliminated the sexist pronoun "he" denoting "the writer" and

"the reader.")

3

Clutter

Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds—the writer is always slightly behind. New varieties sprout overnight, and by noon they are part of American speech. Consider what President Nixon's aide John Dean accomplished in just one day of testimony on television during the Watergate hearings. The next day everyone in America was saying "at this point in time" instead of "now."

Consider all the prepositions that are draped onto verbs that don't need any help. We no longer head committees. We head them up. We don't face problems anymore. We face up to them when we can free up a few minutes. A small detail, you may say—not worth bothering about. It *is* worth bothering about. Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there. "Up" in "free up" shouldn't be there. Examine every word you put on paper. You'll find a surprising number that don't serve any purpose.

Take the adjective "personal," as in "a personal friend of mine," "his personal feeling" or "her personal physician." It's typical of hundreds of words that can be eliminated. The personal friend has come into the

language to distinguish him or her from the business friend, thereby debasing both language and friendship. Someone's feeling *is* that person's personal feeling—that's what "his" means. As for the personal physician, that's the man or woman summoned to the dressing room of a stricken actress so she won't have to be treated by the impersonal physician assigned to the theater. Someday I'd like to see that person identified as "her doctor." Physicians are physicians, friends are friends. The rest is clutter.

Clutter is the laborious phrase that has pushed out the short word that means the same thing. Even before John Dean, people and businesses had stopped saying "now." They were saying "currently" ("all our operators are currently assisting other customers"), or "at the present time," or "presently" (which means "soon"). Yet the idea can always be expressed by "now" to mean the immediate moment ("Now I can see him"), or by "today" to mean the historical present ("Today prices are high"), or simply by the verb "to be" ("It is raining"). There's no need to say, "At the present time we are experiencing precipitation."

"Experiencing" is one of the worst clutterers. Even your dentist will ask if you are experiencing any pain. If he had his own kid in the chair he would say, "Does it hurt?" He would, in short, be himself. By using a more pompous phrase in his professional role he not only sounds more important;

he blunts the painful edge of truth. It's the language of the flight attendant demonstrating the oxygen mask that will drop down if the plane should run out of air. "In the unlikely possibility that the aircraft should experience such an eventuality," she begins—a phrase so oxygen-depriving in itself that we are prepared for any disaster.

Clutter is the ponderous euphemism that turns a slum into a depressed socioeconomic area, garbage collectors into waste-disposal personnel and the town dump into the volume reduction unit. I think of Bill Mauldin's cartoon of two hoboes riding a freight car. One of them says, "I started as a simple bum, but now I'm hard-core unemployed." Clutter is political correctness gone amok. I saw an ad for a boys' camp designed to provide "individual attention for the minimally exceptional."

Clutter is the official language used by corporations to hide their mistakes. When the Digital Equipment Corporation eliminated 3,000 jobs its statement didn't mention layoffs; those were "involuntary methodologies." When an Air Force missile crashed, it "impacted with the ground prematurely." When General Motors had a plant shutdown, that was a "volume-related production-schedule adjustment." Companies that go belly-up have "a negative cash-flow position."

Clutter is the language of the Pentagon calling an invasion a "reinforced

protective reaction strike" and justifying its vast budgets on the need for "counterforce deterrence." As George Orwell pointed out in "Politics and the English Language," an essay written in 1946 but often cited during the wars in Cambodia, Vietnam and Iraq, "political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness." Orwell's warning that clutter is not just a nuisance but a deadly tool has come true in the recent decades of American military adventurism. It was during George W. Bush's presidency that "civilian casualties" in Iraq became "collateral damage."

Verbal camouflage reached new heights during General Alexander Haig's tenure as President Reagan's secretary of state. Before Haig nobody had thought of saying "at this juncture of maturization" to mean "now." He told the American people that terrorism could be fought with "meaningful sanctionary teeth" and that intermediate nuclear missiles were "at the vortex of cruciality." As for any worries that the public might harbor, his message was "leave it to Al," though what he actually said was: "We must push this to a lower decibel of public fixation. I don't think there's much of a learning curve to be achieved in this area of content."

I could go on quoting examples from various fields—every profession

has its growing arsenal of jargon to throw dust in the eyes of the populace. But the list would be tedious. The point of raising it now is to serve notice that clutter is the enemy. Beware, then, of the long word that's no better than the short word: "assistance" (help), "numerous" (many), "facilitate" (ease), "individual" (man or woman), "remainder" (rest), "initial" (first), "implement" (do), "sufficient" (enough), "attempt" (try), "referred to as" (called) and hundreds more. Beware of all the slippery new fad words: paradigm and parameter, prioritize and potentialize. They are all weeds that will smother what you write. Don't dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don't interface with anybody.

Just as insidious are all the word clusters with which we explain how we propose to go about our explaining: "I might add," "It should be pointed out," "It is interesting to note." If you might add, add it. If it should be pointed out, point it out. If it is interesting to note, *make* it interesting; are we not all stupefied by what follows when someone says, "This will interest you"? Don't inflate what needs no inflating: "with the possible exception of" (except), "due to the fact that" (because), "he totally lacked the ability to" (he couldn't), "until such time as" (until), "for the purpose of" (for).

Is there any way to recognize clutter at a glance? Here's a device my students at Yale found helpful. I would put brackets around every

component in a piece of writing that wasn't doing useful work. Often just one word got bracketed: the unnecessary preposition appended to a verb ("order up"), or the adverb that carries the same meaning as the verb ("smile happily"), or the adjective that states a known fact ("tall skyscraper"). Often my brackets surrounded the little qualifiers that weaken any sentence they inhabit ("a bit," "sort of"), or phrases like "in a sense," which don't mean anything. Sometimes my brackets surrounded an entire sentence—the one that essentially repeats what the previous sentence said, or that says something readers don't need to know or can figure out for themselves. Most first drafts can be cut by 50 percent without losing any information or losing the author's voice.

My reason for bracketing the students' superfluous words, instead of crossing them out, was to avoid violating their sacred prose. I wanted to leave the sentence intact for them to analyze. I was saying, "I may be wrong, but I think this can be deleted and the meaning won't be affected. But *you* decide. Read the sentence without the bracketed material and see if it works." In the early weeks of the term I handed back papers that were festooned with brackets. Entire paragraphs were bracketed. But soon the students learned to put mental brackets around their own clutter, and by the end of the term their papers were almost clean. Today many of those

students are professional writers, and they tell me, “I still see your brackets—they’re following me through life.”

You can develop the same eye. Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away.

Reexamine each sentence you put on paper. Is every word doing new work? Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous or pretentious or faddish? Are you hanging on to something useless just because you think it’s beautiful?

Simplify, simplify.

4

Style

So much for early warnings about the bloated monsters that lie in ambush for the writer trying to put together a clean English sentence.

“But,” you may say, “if I eliminate everything you think is clutter and if I strip every sentence to its barest bones, will there be anything left of me?”

The question is a fair one; simplicity carried to an extreme might seem to point to a style little more sophisticated than “Dick likes Jane” and “See Spot run.”

I’ll answer the question first on the level of carpentry. Then I’ll get to the

larger issue of who the writer is and how to preserve his or her identity. Few people realize how badly they write. Nobody has shown them how much excess or murkiness has crept into their style and how it obstructs what they are trying to say. If you give me an eight-page article and I tell you to cut it to four pages, you'll howl and say it can't be done. Then you'll go home and do it, and it will be much better. After that comes the hard part: cutting it to three.

The point is that you have to strip your writing down before you can build it back up. You must know what the essential tools are and what job they were designed to do. Extending the metaphor of carpentry, it's first necessary to be able to saw wood neatly and to drive nails. Later you can bevel the edges or add elegant finials, if that's your taste. But you can never forget that you are practicing a craft that's based on certain principles. If the nails are weak, your house will collapse. If your verbs are weak and your syntax is rickety, your sentences will fall apart.

I'll admit that certain nonfiction writers, like Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer, have built some remarkable houses. But these are writers who spent years learning their craft, and when at last they raised their fanciful turrets and hanging gardens, to the surprise of all of us who never dreamed of such ornamentation, they knew what they were doing. Nobody becomes Tom

Wolfe overnight, not even Tom Wolfe.

First, then, learn to hammer the nails, and if what you build is sturdy and serviceable, take satisfaction in its plain strength.

But you will be impatient to find a "style"—to embellish the plain words so that readers will recognize you as someone special. You will reach for gaudy similes and tinseled adjectives, as if "style" were something you could buy at the style store and drape onto your words in bright decorator colors. (Decorator colors are the colors that decorators come in.) There is no style store; style is organic to the person doing the writing, as much a part of him as his hair, or, if he is bald, his lack of it. Trying to add style is like adding a toupee. At first glance the formerly bald man looks young and even handsome. But at second glance—and with a toupee there's always a second glance—he doesn't look quite right. The problem is not that he doesn't look well groomed; he does, and we can only admire the wigmaker's skill. The point is that he doesn't look like himself.

This is the problem of writers who set out deliberately to garnish their prose. You lose whatever it is that makes you unique. The reader will notice if you are putting on airs. Readers want the person who is talking to them to sound genuine. Therefore a fundamental rule is: be yourself.

No rule, however, is harder to follow. It requires writers to do two things

that by their metabolism are impossible. They must relax, and they must have confidence.

Telling a writer to relax is like telling a man to relax while being examined for a hernia, and as for confidence, see how stiffly he sits, glaring at the screen that awaits his words. See how often he gets up to look for something to eat or drink. A writer will do anything to avoid the act of writing. I can testify from my newspaper days that the number of trips to the water cooler per reporter-hour far exceeds the body's need for fluids.

What can be done to put the writer out of these miseries? Unfortunately, no cure has been found. I can only offer the consoling thought that you are not alone. Some days will go better than others. Some will go so badly that you'll despair of ever writing again. We have all had many of those days and will have many more.

Still, it would be nice to keep the bad days to a minimum, which brings me back to the problem of trying to relax.

Assume that you are the writer sitting down to write. You think your article must be of a certain length or it won't seem important. You think how august it will look in print. You think of all the people who will read it. You think that it must have the solid weight of authority. You think that its style must dazzle. No wonder you tighten; you are so busy thinking of your

awesome responsibility to the finished article that you can't even start. Yet you vow to be worthy of the task, and, casting about for grand phrases that wouldn't occur to you if you weren't trying so hard to make an impression, you plunge in.

Paragraph 1 is a disaster—a tissue of generalities that seem to have come out of a machine. No *person* could have written them. Paragraph 2 isn't much better. But Paragraph 3 begins to have a somewhat human quality, and by Paragraph 4 you begin to sound like yourself. You've started to relax. It's amazing how often an editor can throw away the first three or four paragraphs of an article, or even the first few pages, and start with the paragraph where the writer begins to sound like himself or herself. Not only are those first paragraphs impersonal and ornate; they don't say anything—they are a self-conscious attempt at a fancy prologue. What I'm always looking for as an editor is a sentence that says something like "I'll never forget the day when I …" I think, "Aha! A person!"

Writers are obviously at their most natural when they write in the first person. Writing is an intimate transaction between two people, conducted on paper, and it will go well to the extent that it retains its humanity. Therefore I urge people to write in the first person: to use "I" and "me" and "we" and "us." They put up a fight.

“Who am I to say what *I* think?” they ask. “Or what *I* feel?”

“Who are you *not* to say what you think?” I tell them. “There’s only one you. Nobody else thinks or feels in exactly the same way.”

“But nobody cares about my opinions,” they say. “It would make me feel conspicuous.”

“They’ll care if you tell them something interesting,” I say, “and tell them in words that come naturally.”

Nevertheless, getting writers to use “I” is seldom easy. They think they must earn the right to reveal their emotions or their thoughts. Or that it’s egotistical. Or that it’s undignified—a fear that afflicts the academic world. Hence the professorial use of “one” (“One finds oneself not wholly in accord with Dr. Maltby’s view of the human condition”), or of the impersonal “it is” (“It is to be hoped that Professor Felt’s monograph will find the wider audience it most assuredly deserves”). I don’t want to meet “one”—he’s a boring guy. I want a professor with a passion for his subject to tell me why it fascinates *him*.

I realize that there are vast regions of writing where “I” isn’t allowed. Newspapers don’t want “I” in their news stories; many magazines don’t want it in their articles; businesses and institutions don’t want it in the reports they send so profusely into the American home; colleges don’t want

“I” in their term papers or dissertations, and English teachers discourage any first-person pronoun except the literary “we” (“We see in Melville’s symbolic use of the white whale …”). Many of those prohibitions are valid; newspaper articles should consist of news, reported objectively. I also sympathize with teachers who don’t want to give students an easy escape into opinion—“I think Hamlet was stupid”—before they have grappled with the discipline of assessing a work on its merits and on external sources. “I” can be a self-indulgence and a cop-out.

Still, we have become a society fearful of revealing who we are. The institutions that seek our support by sending us their brochures sound remarkably alike, though surely all of them—hospitals, schools, libraries, museums, zoos—were founded and are still sustained by men and women with different dreams and visions. Where are these people? It’s hard to glimpse them among all the impersonal passive sentences that say “initiatives were undertaken” and “priorities have been identified.”

Even when “I” isn’t permitted, it’s still possible to convey a sense of I-ness. The political columnist James Reston didn’t use “I” in his columns; yet I had a good idea of what kind of person he was, and I could say the same of many other essayists and reporters. Good writers are visible just behind their words. If you aren’t allowed to use “I,” at least think “I” while

you write, or write the first draft in the first person and then take the “I”s out. It will warm up your impersonal style.

Style is tied to the psyche, and writing has deep psychological roots. The reasons why we express ourselves as we do, or fail to express ourselves because of “writer’s block,” are partly buried in the subconscious mind. There are as many kinds of writer’s block as there are kinds of writers, and I have no intention of trying to untangle them. This is a short book, and my name isn’t Sigmund Freud.

But I’ve also noticed a new reason for avoiding “I”: Americans are unwilling to go out on a limb. A generation ago our leaders told us where they stood and what they believed. Today they perform strenuous verbal feats to escape that fate. Watch them wriggle through TV interviews without committing themselves. I remember President Ford assuring a group of visiting businessmen that his fiscal policies would work. He said: “We see nothing but increasingly brighter clouds every month.” I took this to mean that the clouds were still fairly dark. Ford’s sentence was just vague enough to say nothing and still sedate his constituents.

Later administrations brought no relief. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, assessing a Polish crisis in 1984, said: “There’s continuing ground for serious concern and the situation remains serious. The longer it

remains serious, the more ground there is for serious concern." The first President Bush, questioned about his stand on assault rifles, said: "There are various groups that think you can ban certain kinds of guns. I am not in that mode. I am in the mode of being deeply concerned."

But my all-time champ is Elliot Richardson, who held four major cabinet positions in the 1970s. It's hard to know where to begin picking from his trove of equivocal statements, but consider this one: "And yet, on balance, affirmative action has, I think, been a qualified success." A 13-word sentence with five hedging words. I give it first prize as the most wishy-washy sentence in modern public discourse, though a rival would be his analysis of how to ease boredom among assembly-line workers: "And so, at last, I come to the one firm conviction that I mentioned at the beginning: it is that the subject is too new for final judgments."

That's a firm conviction? Leaders who bob and weave like aging boxers don't inspire confidence—or deserve it. The same thing is true of writers. Sell yourself, and your subject will exert its own appeal. Believe in your own identity and your own opinions. Writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going.

5

The Audience

Soon after you confront the matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: “Who am I writing for?”

It’s a fundamental question, and it has a fundamental answer: You are writing for yourself. Don’t try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person. Don’t try to guess what sort of thing editors want to publish or what you think the country is in a mood to read. Editors and readers don’t know what they want to read until they read it. Besides, they’re always looking for something new.

Don’t worry about whether the reader will “get it” if you indulge a sudden impulse for humor. If it amuses you in the act of writing, put it in. (It can always be taken out, but only you can put it in.) You are writing primarily to please yourself, and if you go about it with enjoyment you will also entertain the readers who are worth writing for. If you lose the dullards back in the dust, you don’t want them anyway.

This may seem to be a paradox. Earlier I warned that the reader is an impatient bird, perched on the thin edge of distraction or sleep. Now I’m saying you must write for yourself and not be gnawed by worry over whether the reader is tagging along.

I’m talking about two different issues. One is craft, the other is attitude.

The first is a question of mastering a precise skill. The second is a question of how you use that skill to express your personality.

In terms of craft, there's no excuse for losing readers through sloppy workmanship. If they doze off in the middle of your article because you have been careless about a technical detail, the fault is yours. But on the larger issue of whether the reader likes you, or likes what you are saying or how you are saying it, or agrees with it, or feels an affinity for your sense of humor or your vision of life, don't give him a moment's worry. You are who you are, he is who he is, and either you'll get along or you won't.

Perhaps this still seems like a paradox. How can you think carefully about not losing the reader and still be carefree about his opinion? I assure you that they are separate processes.

First, work hard to master the tools. Simplify, prune and strive for order. Think of this as a mechanical act, and soon your sentences will become cleaner. The act will never become as mechanical as, say, shaving or shampooing; you will always have to think about the various ways in which the tools can be used. But at least your sentences will be grounded in solid principles, and your chances of losing the reader will be smaller.

Think of the other as a creative act: the expressing of who you are. Relax and say what you want to say. And since style is who you are, you only

need to be true to yourself to find it gradually emerging from under the accumulated clutter and debris, growing more distinctive every day.

Perhaps the style won't solidify for years as *your* style, *your* voice. Just as it takes time to find yourself as a person, it takes time to find yourself as a stylist, and even then your style will change as you grow older.

But whatever your age, be yourself when you write. Many old men still write with the zest they had in their twenties or thirties; obviously their ideas are still young. Other old writers ramble and repeat themselves; their style is the tip-off that they have turned into garrulous bores. Many college students write as if they were desiccated alumni 30 years out. Never say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation. If you're not a person who says "indeed" or "moreover," or who calls someone an individual ("he's a fine individual"), *please* don't write it.

Let's look at a few writers to see the pleasure with which they put on paper their passions and their crotchets, not caring whether the reader shares them or not. The first excerpt is from "The Hen (An Appreciation)," written by E. B. White in 1944, at the height of World War II:

Chickens do not always enjoy an honorable position among city-bred people, although the egg, I notice, goes on and on. Right now the hen is in favor. The war has deified her and she is the darling of the home front, feted

at conference tables, praised in every smoking car, her girlish ways and curious habits the topic of many an excited husbandryman to whom yesterday she was a stranger without honor or allure.

My own attachment to the hen dates from 1907, and I have been faithful to her in good times and bad. Ours has not always been an easy relationship to maintain. At first, as a boy in a carefully zoned suburb, I had neighbors and police to reckon with; my chickens had to be as closely guarded as an underground newspaper. Later, as a man in the country, I had my old friends in town to reckon with, most of whom regarded the hen as a comic prop straight out of vaudeville.... Their scorn only increased my devotion to the hen. I remained loyal, as a man would to a bride whom his family received with open ridicule. Now it is my turn to wear the smile, as I listen to the enthusiastic cackling of urbanites, who have suddenly taken up the hen socially and who fill the air with their newfound ecstasy and knowledge and the relative charms of the New Hampshire Red and the Laced Wyandotte. You would think, from their nervous cries of wonder and praise, that the hen was hatched yesterday in the suburbs of New York, instead of in the remote past in the jungles of India.

To a man who keeps hens, all poultry lore is exciting and endlessly fascinating. Every spring I settle down with my farm journal and read, with