On Writing Well
By William Zinsser

Adele S. Li, Anelia Valtchanova, Bharath Jaladi, Sarah Herman, Suyog Bobhate
Part I: Principles
Chapter 1: The Transaction

- There isn’t a “right” way to do such personal work as writing:
  - Every writer has their own preferences for the writing process (whether to use symbolism, whether to rewrite and revise, whether to write in solitude, etc.)
- The “right” method for writing: the one that helps you to say what you want to say
- What holds the interest of the reader is the enthusiasm of the writer for their field
- Personal transaction: the heart of good nonfiction writing
  - Humanity and warmth in writing
  - Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next
- Good writing is a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength
Chapter 2: Simplicity

- **Clutter**: the disease of American writing
- People often think that if a sentence is too simple, there must be something wrong with it
- The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its **cleanest components** by removing:
  - 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
- Writers must constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time?

“We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.”
Roosevelt’s 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.”
Chapter 3: Clutter

- Avoid using prepositions that don’t add any meaning:
  - *Face* problems vs. *face up* to problems
  - *Free* a few minutes vs. *free up* a few minutes

- Clutter is the **laborious phrase** that has pushed out the short word that means the same thing:
  - “Now” vs. “currently” vs. “at the present time” vs. “presently”
    - “all our operators are currently assisting other customers”
    - “at the present time we are experiencing precipitation” = “it’s raining”

- “*Experiencing*” is one of the worst clutterers:
  - “Are you experiencing any pain?” vs. “Does it hurt?”

- Clutter is the official language used by corporations to hide their mistakes:
  - 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”
- “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)
- “assistance” (help)
- “numerous” (many)
- “facilitate” (ease)
- “individual” (man or woman)
- “remainder” (rest)
- “initial” (first)
- “implement” (do)
Chapter 4: Style

- 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.
- 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.”
- Style is tied to the psyche, and writing has deep psychological roots.
- Writers are at their most natural when they write in first person:
  - use “I” and “me” and “we” and “us”
- Most importantly, relax and believe in your own identity and your own opinions!
Chapter 5: The Audience

- **Who am I writing for?**
  - You are writing for yourself!
  - Don’t try to visualize the great mass audience
  - Every reader is a different person and don’t try to guess what sort of thing editors want to publish
  - Editors and readers don’t know what they want to read until they read it

- **If an impulse of humor amuses you, put it in!**

- **Two separate processes in writing:**
  - Mechanical act: *Simplify, prune and strive for order*
  - Creative act: *Express who you are, relax and say what you want to say*

- **Never say anything is writing that you wouldn’t comfortably say in conversation!**
Chapter 6: Words

- Journalese, a blend of cheap words, made-up words, and clichés, has become so commonplace that writers can hardly avoid adopting the style.
- In order to make your mark as a writer, you must develop a respect for words and a curiosity about their shades of meaning that is almost obsessive.
- Zinsser cites an article from “a famed newsmagazine” about the New York City police department to demonstrate the prevalence of journalese and its banality.
- We must: (1) care deeply about words, (2) be original not swift, (3) make a habit of reading the works of our predecessors and contemporaries, (4) use dictionaries, (5) make proper use of thesauruses, and (6) listen to the sound and rhythm of what we write.
Chapter 7: Usage

- Usage has no fixed boundaries and language is constantly changing. It is unclear who our tastemakers are. In the 1960s, *The American Heritage Dictionary*, assembled a “Usage Panel” to address this and provide a separate “Usage Note” in the dictionary.

- The panel, of which Zinsser was a member, strove to both keep the language from becoming sloppy and welcome new words that would help it grow. The panel’s rule of thumb came from Theodore M. Bernstein in *The Careful Writer*: “‘We should apply the test of convenience. Does the word fill a real need? If it does, let’s give it a franchise.’”

- The laws of usage are relative. Spoken language tends to be looser than written language. The panel was more conservative with grammar, and liberal with words and phrases.
Part II: Methods
“You learn to write by writing.” By repeatedly writing, you gain confidence and identify your most common mistakes.

The anchor of good writing is unity. “Unity not only keeps the reader from straggling off in all directions; it satisfies your readers’ subconscious need for order and reassures them that all is well at the helm.”

There is unity of pronoun, tense, and mood.

Fatal mixtures of tone are common amongst those writers who have not yet learned control.

Ask yourself questions before you start, especially: “How much do I want to cover?” and “What one point do I want to make?” Think small and know what one provocative thought you want to leave your reader with. Don’t be afraid to start over if your initial choices were incorrect.
“The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead.” Similarly, each sentence must induce the reader to continue. With such a progression of sentences, a writer constructs a “lead.”

The only valid test for a lead is: “does it work?” “Your lead may not be the best of all possible leads, but if it does the job it’s supposed to do, be thankful and proceed.” The length of a lead can vary.

The lead must first capture the reader and then provide hard details to tell the reader the origin of the piece and why they should read it.

“Knowing when to end an article is far more important than most writers realize.”

Regarding the ending: when you are ready to stop, stop. The ending should encapsulate the idea of the piece without being repetitive and should jolt the reader with its unexpectedness or fitness.
Chapter 10: Bits & Pieces

- Zinsser dictates that a writer should use active verbs whenever possible, unless there is no suitable way to avoid using a passive verb. “Verbs are the most important of all your tools.”

- Most adverbs and adjectives are unnecessary. Make them do the work that needs to be done.

- “Learn to alert the reader as soon as possible to any change in mood from the previous sentence.” This will make it infinitely easier for the reader to understand and process the text.

- Contractions can make your writing warmer and truer to your style when used comfortably.

- Nouns that express a concept are a hallmark of bad writing. It is preferred to use instead verbs that tell what somebody did. For example: “The common reaction is incredulous laughter.” vs. “Most people just laugh with disbelief.”
Part III: Forms
Chapter 11: Nonfiction as Literature

- Prior to World War II, literature mainly consisted of forms that were certified as literary: novels, poems and short stories
- The evolution of the Book-of-the-Month Club founded by Harry Scherman in 1926 shows the shift in demand of American readers.
  - “High tide of literature” - Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Virginia Woolf
  - Post-Pearl Harbor, people wanted to read about facts, issues and events
- The Saturday Evening Post changed their content from predominantly short stories to 90% non-fiction
- The popular writers in non-fiction all presented information with vigor, clarity and humanity
- Non-fiction enables you to write about what you know or can observe
Chapter 12: Writing About People - The Interview

- Learn to ask questions that will **elicit answers** about what is most interesting
- Non-fiction will come alive in **proportion to the number of “quotes”** you can weave into it
- Look for the **Human element**. Men and women who have a fierce attachment to the institution or topic at hand.
- Chat with your interviewee beforehand, if possible and **make sure they’re comfortable**
- Make a list of **likely questions** but be ready to veer off the plan in a new direction
- **Don’t be afraid to ask your interviewee to slow down** if they’re going to fast - nobody wants to be misquoted
- Your duty is to **correctly represent** the interviewee and **distill the information** for the reader
Chapter 13: Writing About Places - The Travel Article

- People and places are the pillars of nonfiction writing
- Descriptive detail is the main substance when writing about places
- Choose words with care: if a phrase comes to you easily, it may be one of the countless cliches that will come off as artificial or pompous
- Be intensely selective with substance:
  - eliminate known attributes - “the sea had waves”, “the shore was scattered with rocks”
  - Instead find interesting details that may be unusual, comic or entertaining
- Your main task is to find the central idea of the place
The problem with enthusiasm

- The traveler wants to talk “all” about his trip
- Readers aren’t interested in all the details - only the interesting stories

Bad:
- Describing every ride at Disneyland
- “The Grand Canyon is awesome”

Good:
- One of the rides at Disneyland got stuck
- Someone fell into the “awesome Grand Canyon”
Jonathan Raban on the Mississippi

“The great flat farms of Minnesota are laid out in a rules grid, as empty of surprises as a sheet of graph paper...The farms are square, the fields are square, the houses are square...”

Then the river enters the picture - a broad serpentine shadow that sprawls uncomfortably across the checkerboard. Deviously winding, riddled with black sloughs and green cigar shaped islands...”
Chapter 14: Writing about Yourself - The Memoir

- Write for yourself, not for an editor
- A memoir isn’t a summary of your life, it is a window into it
- Give half-remembered events a narrative shape
  - Add detail that played a shaping role such as a smell or song
- The crucial ingredient is writing about the people - what made them memorable?
- Don’t be afraid to be vulnerable; a memoir can be a great journey of self-exploration
Chapter 15: Science and Technology

- Scientific writing is all about putting the facts and deductions in a cohesive form.
- “It’s the principle of leading readers who know nothing, step by step, to a grasp of subjects they didn’t think they had an aptitude for...”
- **The pyramid analogy**: facts to significance and speculation.
- Help the reader identify with the scientific work:
  - use personal experience
  - Relate unfamiliar facts to familiar sights
  - Write like a person, not like a scientist
- Pause after each paragraph to think about questions the reader might have and proceed to answer them.
IEEE Spectrum: “How Iraq Reverse-Engineered the Bomb”

"...The chamber and its associated equipment are called a calutron. The heavier U-238 ions are deflected less than the U-235 ions, and this slight difference is used to separate out the fissile U-235...Invariably, some U-238 ions remain mixed with the U-235, and ion streams can be hard to control."

- Why are the ion streams hard to control?
“...Their accumulation in the two containers can be thrown off wildly by small variations in the power to, and temperature of, the electromagnets.”
Chapter 16: Business Writing

- You don’t have to write like an institution doesn’t mean you need to write like one
- Readers identify with people and humanity, not with abstractions and pompous concepts
- We tend to use this kind of language because we want to sound important, and are nervous that we won’t be taken as seriously if we write simply. However, this language will cause the reader to have to stop and translate every sentence, and to feel like they are reading the words of a robot.
- Workshop with educators in Greenwich:
  - Found that whenever the principals were writing to parents about a more “human” detail, they sounded much more human, and whenever they wrote about an educational decision, they slipped back into aloof language
Chapter 17: Sports Writing

- Sports lingo is often overused and thus sports articles can become very trite and boring.
- **Sports English and regular English are not two different languages.** We should use techniques that work well in regular English to make sports writing better.
- Sports writers like to use a lot of numbers in their works, but this can cause clutter and can lose the reader.
- When writing about sports, don’t just report what happened in a game or a season, but delve deeper into the people, places, time, and changes that have to do with the sport you are focused on.
  - Describes a famous sports writer who “came to know everyone connected with racing—owners, breeders, stewards, judges, timers, mutuel clerks, Pinkertons, trainers, cooks, grooms, handicappers, hot-walkers, starters, musicians, jockeys and their agents, touts, high-rolling gamblers and tinhorns.”
“Sport is now a major frontier of social change, and some of the nation’s most vexing issues—drug abuse and steroids, crowd violence, women’s rights, minorities in management, television contracts—are being played out in our stadiums, grandstands and locker rooms. If you want to write about America, this is one place to pitch your tent.”

“American sport has always been interwoven with social history, and the best writers are men and women who make the connection.”

Sports Writing Can Be So Much Deeper Than We Think
Chapter 18: Writing About the Arts

- There is a difference between being a critic and a reviewer
  - Reviewers: job is to report rather than to give a judgment on what they're writing about
  - Critics: try to evaluate serious works of art and to place them in the context of what has been done before in that medium or by that artist

- Tips for writing good reviews and criticism
  - You should love what you are writing about
  - Don't give away too much; write enough so that readers will know whether or not they will like it, but not too much so that they know what will happen
  - Use a lot of detail. Don't say “The play was fascinating,” — discuss why it was fascinating
  - Try to avoid common adjectives used to discuss different forms of art, such as “enthralling” and “luminous.”
  - Be informed about what you are writing about — read about the history of the field and the prior works of the artist, and incorporate your research into your piece.
Chapter 19: Humor

- We tend to think that humor and seriousness are opposite concepts, but the truth is that you need seriousness to write good humor, and that humor is a secret weapon for conveying serious ideas.

- You can use humor to point out the craziness and absurdity of certain situations
  - Parodized the conflict over the shape of the table at the Vietnam peace conference in the early 70s. Write about how he changed the shape of his dinner table to try to make peace in his house and how he made people’s chairs shorter as a sign of status.

- To write great humor, you must be very controlled
  - Don’t use crazy names
  - Don’t make the same jokes two or three times
  - Stay true to the form of what you are trying to parody

- Use humor to convey truths about life
Part IV: Attitudes
Chapter 20: The Sound of Your Voice

● Your biggest commodity as a writer is you. Don’t change your voice to fit your subject. Your writing should be recognizable from piece to piece.

● Inexperienced writers change their voice to try to appeal to the reader:
  ○ Use “breezy” language: they try to sound conversational and light, but end up writing very poor English
  ○ Use cliches: “the enemy of taste.” You should strive to have your work be fresh and to have it come from you. By using cliches you are recycling the word choices of other people

● Don’t be afraid to imitate other writers whose voices are compelling to you, and to even merge the styles of several writers to create your own. Imitation is part of the process of anyone who is trying to learn a craft.
Enjoyment, Fear, and Confidence (ch 21)

- Sense of enjoyment is a prerequisite attribute for a writer or for a publication
- Writing is lonely work; it takes audacity, exuberance, gaiety and most important audacity to write confidently

Advice For Successful Writing:

- Write about the subjects that interest you and are the things that you care about
- Authors must use writing to give yourself an interesting life and a continuing education
- Think broadly about your assignment- bring some part of your own life to the work
Big & Small Decisions in Writing (ch22 & 23)

Writing in the continual balance between quest and intention.

1. Quest - desire to find something deeper, a meaning, an idea, a sliver of the past
2. Intention - what we wish to accomplish with writing

Red Flags:

1. Fixation on a finished product causes writers a lot of trouble by distracting them from the earlier decisions that have to be made to determine its shape and voice and content
2. Writes who lack compassion find it hard to write: They must distill a coherent narrative from a huge and tangled mass of experiences
Writing Family History & Memoirs (ch 24)

- Writers are the custodians of memories; therefore it’s important to leave some kind of record in your life and family you were born into.
- Writing is a powerful search mechanisms, one of its satisfaction is to come to terms with your life narrative.

When Writing & Reflecting Upon Family:

- When you write your own family history, don’t worry about finding your voice and write in the way you talk.
- Think small. Don’t rummage around in your past to find episodes that you think are “important” enough to be worthy of including your memoir.
Editors bring to a good piece of writing an objective eye so that the writer has can go back to pruning, shaping, clarifying the piece.

Do Not's with Editors

- Work with a bad editor who has compulsion to tinker
- Allow your distinctiveness to be edited out-- if you do, you will lose your voice
- Don’t let editors use distance or disarray as excuse for altering work without consent
- Refuse to let your editor go beyond the changes of style and structure and enter the sacred realm of content
Write as Well as You Can! (ch25)

Biggest Takeaways and Advice for Writing Well:

- Decide what you want to do. Then decide to do it. Then do it.
- No writing decision is too small to be worth a large expenditure of time
- Writing is way to share stories, information, and your voice. Use it to your advantage.
- Go to your desk on Monday and write about some event that’s vivid in memory, and to do the same thing everyday for multiple months. Once you do it several times, over the course of a few months, you will start to see themes in the memoir