On Writing Well
Part 1: Principles
The Transaction

- Key Principle: To write well, one must have the right Mindset, Motivation, Practice, and Opportunity.
- Zinsser has a conversation with Dr. Brock about their views on writing.
  - While Brock believes a writer should be free and lenient, Zinsser believes a writer must set a schedule and stick to it.
- Zinsser believes one must have the right motivations by writing about things he/she are passionate about, write frequently to get good reps, and see others to learn from.
- “Find the best writers in the fields that interest you and read their work aloud”
Simplicity and Clutter

- Key Principle: Good writing is clear, simple, concise, and human.
- Zinsser believes writers sometime feel as though they must make everything complicated and verbose to demonstrate their ability.
- Zinsser argues that the writing should be structured, linear, and to the point to allow readers to find each point quick to understand.
- One should remove sentences that are just rephrases of other sentences, remove obvious points, technical jargon, and clichés
- One should replace euphemisms, deflate phrases, and remove qualifiers and redundant adjectives
  - Example: “It should be pointed out”
  - Example: “Due to the fact that” → “Because”
Style and Audience

- Key Principles: Style must be genuine, and write for yourself
- Zinsser argues one must make sure everything he/she is writing is authentic, not just so that the writing gets published.
- Good writers do not try to decorate their writing, but use words picked from the subconscious and brought to the writing consciousness.
- Aim for your own set standard to write, and do what you believe will make the writing better → do not have secondary motives
- “You are writing for yourself. Don’t try to visualize the great mass audience.”
Words and Usage

- Key Principles: Avoid cheap words and be conscious of your word choice, as the actual usage of your words express your ideas.
- Certain words make some readers think differently than others, so make sure your word choice reflects the message you want to convey.
- This is a soft skill and ever-changing because the English language contains evolving definitions and vernacular.
- To develop a better sense of sentence structure and word choice, one should study other texts.
- “Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft.”
Part 2: Methods
Unity

- **Fact: you get better at writing by writing even if you’re your writing is poor**
  - By writing everyday you improve even if you are not actively learning how to write more proficiently
  - You’ll learn on your own how to write by doing it over and over
- **Fact: writing is puzzle solving. Yay engineering!**
  - Maybe the puzzle is where to get your facts from
  - Maybe the puzzle is how to organize your facts
  - Regardless writing involves some problem solving which we should embrace
- **Fact: unity is the anchor of good writing**
  - Unities is staying consistent with choices in writing style
  - If your unities are out of wack your reader will be confused
Unity

- **Unity with respect to pronouns**
  - Are you going to write in the first-person? Third-person? Omniscient observer? If you’re brazy second-person?
  - Ask yourself “What pronoun and tense am I going to use?”

- **Unity of tense**
  - Present tense? Past tensed?
  - It’s ok to switch between them for a flashback or look ahead, but there needs to be a main tense for the piece

- **Unity of mood/voice**
  - Don’t switch between being formal and informal, stick with one and ride with it
  - Ask yourself “What style?” (Impersonal reportorial? Personal but formal? Personal and casual?)
    - “What attitude am I going to take toward the material?” (Involved? Detached? Judgmental? Ironic? Amused?)

- **Other good questions:** “How much do I want to cover?” “What one point do I want to make?”
The Lead and the Ending

- If your first sentence doesn’t hook the reader -> you fail
- If your second sentence doesn’t hook the reader -> you fail
- Repeat for as many sentences as is the “Lead”
- Length of the lead should be tuned based on your audience
  - But it’s safer to go shorter than longer
- There is no perfect lead
  - Maybe start with something funny or novel or paradoxical
  - Should do real work in why the piece was written and why it matters
- But the lead should always keep building and engage the reader to keep reading
  - Every paragraph should get more serious
  - The last sentence is crucial it encourages the reader to read the next paragraph
- To help read as much of you can of anything you can
The Lead and the Ending

- If you write an article that doesn’t stop -> you fail
- If you write a....Surprise! Surprise your readers but it should seem right
- “Like a good lead, it works”
- Don’t just summarize what you have already said, that irks your reader
- But do wrap things up and leave the reader with a fresh, exciting thought
- “But usually what works best is a quotation”
Bits & Pieces

- **Use active verbs** not passive ones
  - They push a sentence forward
  - They encourage visualization
  - Choose cool, precise verbs
- **Short words**
  - Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address- 701 words, 505 one syllable, 122 two syllable, 701-505-122 three+ syllable
- **Don’t use unnecessary adverbs**
- **Same thing with adjectives**, let the **nouns** do the work
- **Don’t use little qualifiers**
Bits & Pieces

- **Punctuation.!?„::”**
  - Why say many word when few do trick.
  - Don’t use it!
  - We live in the 21st century; a time when things move quickly.
  - Keep the sentence going - sprinkle in some detail too - and carry on
  - Important punctuation: the period, the dash, the colon.

- **Mood Changers**
  - However, nevertheless, thus, therefore, BUT

- **Contractions** - all good except “she’d, he’d, we’d”

- **That and Which** - If you need a comma use which, otherwise use that
Bits & Pieces

- Concept nouns & Creeping Nounism
  - get people doing things, don’t string nouns together
- Don’t overstate it ruins credibility
- The subconscious mind
  - you may think of what to write when you’re not thinking about it
- Quickest fix- just delete!
- Keep paragraphs short
- Sexism-
  - Don’t always turn he or she into they, use we or our, don’t assume gender based on position
- Rewrite rewrite rewrite
- Go with your interests
Part 3: Forms
Shift from Fiction to Nonfiction

● “Literature” follows the same definition as it did in the 19th century where it consists of novels, short stories, and poems
● Most of what writers produce today and what readers want to read is nonfiction
● This change occurred after WWII, when Americans’ eyes were opened overseas and the advent of the television gave people constant reality
  ○ They became fed up with the slow pace of the novelist
● Nonfiction is not just journalism by another name
  ○ Good writing is good writing, no matter the form it takes
Writing About People

- No writing is better than what someone is speaking verbatim, once the writer steps in, everyone else is experiencing the conversation secondhand

- **Step 1: Determine who to interview**
  - Don’t interview your college roommate. Go out into the real world and interview someone whose job is important, interesting, or unusual

- **Step 2: Make a list of likely questions and do your homework**
  - You will be resented if you ask for information you could have easily found out yourself
  - Do not use a tape recorder, instead take notes
    - You often don’t have one with you, they break, and it is best to write things down

- **Step 3: Get home and type up your notes so that you review and ingest the information**
  - It is the ethical duty to the person being interviewed to present their position correctly
Writing About Places

- It’s natural to describe places as though you were the first one to ever go there
  - A detailed description of your experience will entertain you, but not the reader
- Avoid trevelese: the tendency for places to be described with syrupy words and groaning platitudes
  - Wondrous, dappled, fabled, scudding, “quaint town nestled in the hills”
  - If a phrase comes too naturally to mind, avoid it
- Capture the idea of the place you are describing
  - Find distinctive traits and talk about those. Leave out the obvious descriptions everyone knows
- Human activity brings a place alive: people doing the things that give a locale its character
Writing About Yourself

- Of all the subjects to write about, the writer knows themselves the best. However, it is the subject that people try their hardest to avoid.
- People often go through life “having to write what the teacher wants”.
- Memoir is a great way to write about yourself
  - Rather than a rambling retelling of one’s life, memoirs assume the life and give a snapshot of time.
  - Include the smallest of details to help explain how each small detail shaped your memory of the event.
  - The people are what make the memoir. Summon back the men and women and children who notably crossed your life. The most important character should hopefully be the writer of the memoir.
Part 4: Attitudes
The Sound of Your Voice

- Don't alter your voice to fit your subject!
- Develop one voice that readers will recognize when they hear it on the page.
- Finding a voice your readers will enjoy is a matter of taste -- i.e., it is intangible, and hard to define.
  - But almost across the board, less is more--simple is better--and some ideas work across time and audiences.
- Freshness is crucial; avoid cliches!
  - Choose words that have surprise, strength, and precision
- Never hesitate to imitate another writer
  - Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning a new skill or craft
- Eloquence is as much about what is left unsaid
  - Great writing invites you to bring some part of yourself to the transaction
Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence

- A sense of enjoyment is a priceless attribute for a writer
  - “If something strikes me as funny in the act of writing, I throw it in just to amuse myself.”

- What does it take to be a comic writer?
  - “It takes audacity and exuberance and gaiety, and the most important one is audacity.”
  - “The reader has to feel that the writer is feeling good.”

- Writers have to jump-start themselves at the moment of performance

- Fear is a powerful negative motivator at work, particularly for non-fiction writers who have to deal with...
  - losing the reader
  - confusing the reader
  - boring the reader
  - not keeping the reader engaged from beginning to end
Pursuing things you care about is perhaps the most important thing.

“One of the reasons I admired Red Smith was that he wrote about sports for 55 years, with grace and humor, without succumbing to the pressure, which was the ruin of many sportswriters, that he ought to be writing about something “serious.” He found in sportswriting what he wanted to do and what he loved doing, and because it was right for him he said more important things about American values than many writers who wrote about serious subjects—so seriously that nobody could read them.”
Nonfiction topics are typically not as narrow as you think; you’ll have often have had an experience that helps you relate!

- “I happened to see a PBS television documentary called A Celebration of Birds, which summed up Roger Tory Peterson’s life and work. The film had so much beauty that I wanted to know more about him. What caught my attention was that Peterson was still going at full momentum at 84—painting four hours a day and photographing birds in habitats all over the world. That did interest me. Birds aren’t my subject, but survivors are: how old people keep going.”

- The moral for nonfiction writers is: think broadly about your assignment.
  - Don’t assume that an article for Audubon has to be strictly about nature, or an article for Car & Driver strictly about cars. Push the boundaries of your subject and see where it takes you. Bring some part of your own life to it; it’s not your version of the story until you write it.
The Tyranny of the Final Product

- An emphasis on final product can take away focus from the process, especially taking the time to organize your work.
- Authors are taught how to write great individual sentence--but writing something more extensive is much more of a challenge.
- The author taught a writing class in which no writing is required:
  - People had to come up with a topic they wanted to write about, why and how.
  - He asked members of the class to find deep, personal connections to the subject matter.
  - The class went on to learn and tell personal stories about their subject matter, and then worked on distilling this tangled mass of experiences into coherent narratives.
The Tyranny of the Final Product

- You can’t write a good story about the disappearance of small towns in Iowa; it would be all generalizations. You can write about one small town, however, and through that tell a larger narrative.
- The release from immediacy was what made all the difference; because they never had to write, they could time thinking critically about how they wanted to tell their story.
A Writer’s Decisions

- Every sentence should feel inevitable based on the prior sentences.
- The hardest decision is how to begin: want to grab the reader with a provocative idea and continue with each paragraph.
- Simple, declarative sentences are always better.
- Take the time to bring dull but necessary facts to life:
  - we were in our fifties and sixties -> “from late middle age to Medicare.”
- Touches of humor -- tiny jokes -- are nice ways to keep yourself and the reader engaged.
- At some point, changing the tone to straight narrative is ok--one declarative sentence after another.
- Knowing where to end a story is important, but it can be guided by your gut instinct; after what point does it not matter what subsequently happened?
Writing Family History and Memoir

- Writers are the custodians of memory
- Family histories don’t need to be published; writing can be a personal search mechanism by which we come to terms with our own life narratives
- Don’t try to be a writer. Focus on the transaction between you and your remembered experiences, not how they will be perceived.
- How should you organize a memoir? Make reducing decisions.
  - Focus on a branch or subset of the family
  - If it's your story, don’t worry about fitting others' experiences in unless they help better understand your own
- Think small; look for small self-contained incidents that are still vivid in memory instead of searching for everything that has happened to you
Write as Well as You Can

● Don’t just write as well as possible; write as entertainingly as possible!
● To write better than everybody else, you must be willing to put in the effort
  ○ Attention to detail
  ○ Defend what you’ve written
● Editors bring an objective eye that writers have long since lost
● Editors can also tinker too much, and miss the point of what the author is trying to do
● Ideally, should be a relationship of negotiation and trust