On Writing Well

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Chapters 1: The Transaction

- William Zinsser is chosen to speak on a panel with “Dr. Brock”
  - They answer student questions with polarized opinions about writing
  - Differed in opinion on use of craft, persevering through obstacles, use of symbolism
- Writing is hard work, and many struggle
- There is no “right” way
Chapter 2: Simplicity

- Clutter as the disease of American writing
  - Spread by companies and authority figures
  - Children are led to believe that trying to sound sophisticated is the correct way to write
- Functionless words as sentence adulterers
  - Also long words, adverbs that mean the same as the verb, passive constructions
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.

Faced with such a variety of obstacles, the reader is at first a remarkably tenacious bird. He tends to blame himself—He obviously missed something, he thinks, and he goes back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph,
Chapter 2: Simplicity
Chapter 5: The Audience

- Distracted, overstimulated, citizen of the modern world
- Not dumb, not lazy
  - If they get lost it is the fault of the writer
- Tenaciously try to figure out unclear wording
  - But do not have unlimited patience
- C5: There is no “mass audience”
  - The paradox of being carefree about reader opinions
- Never say anything in writing you wouldn’t say aloud
- Comparing and contrasting: E.B. White on hens, H.L. Mencken on the Scopes Trial and James Hendron being a junior high school teacher
  - All writing for themselves
“Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn’t be there”
Chapter 3: Clutter

- Cutting out small unnecessaries can make a big difference
  - “Free up,” “face up to,” “personal”
- Pompous language and jargon: championed by corporations, authority figures
  - “Are you experiencing any pain”
    - Professionalism to avoid the question “does it hurt”
  - “Negative cash flow”
    - Business jargon to mask an undesirable company position
  - “Reinforced protective reaction strike”
    - Military doublespeak (just as Orwell predicted)
- Clusters explaining what the writer is doing
  - “It should be pointed out” (point it out!)
Chapter 4: Style

- “You must strip your writing down before you can build it back up”
- Before you can add “fanciful turrets and hanging gardens,” you must build something “sturdy and serviceable”
- You will be impatient to find a style, and will try to compensate with fancy words
  - Style cannot be store-bought
  - Unoriginal style comes off like a bad toupee
- Instead, be yourself
  - Don’t well on imagined opinions of readers
  - Don’t think about being interesting, focus on being interested
    - “I-ness” without “I”
    - Firm conviction inspires confidence
Chapters 6-10: Words

- Getting people to continue reading:
  - Caring deeply for your choice of word usage
  - Avoiding cliches
  - Surprise the reader in the form of unusual words
  - Having a large dictionary by your side
    - Learn the etymology of words
    - Any other meanings or definitions of the words
Chapter 6-10: Words

- “The Thesaurus is to the writer as the rhyming dictionary is to the songwriter” (34)
  - Rhythm, alliterations are vital to every sentence
  - Odd-sounding words make the reader stop and think if they really understand what’s going on
- Try reversing the order of sentences, shortening sentences, substituting bland words for odd words without changing the meaning away

BUMFUZZLE
(adj.)
crossed, perplexed
Chapter 6-10: Word Usage

- “[Something] being rather unique is no more possible than being pregnant” (39)
  - Separate usage from jargon — the reader doesn’t need to know that someone is unique, but rather how they are unique
  - Express yourself simply and clearly, avoiding opaque comments. Don’t dress up words, it just confuses the reader
Chapter 6-10: Unity

- Learn by Doing:
  - Writing is essentially solving a problem (e.g. obtaining information, organizing facts)
  - One of the problems is keeping your reader unified
    - Writing in first person vs. second person vs. third person vs. participant
    - Having a consistent tone of mood or sense of formality
  - Consistent enthusiasm in writing! It's not a blueprint!
Chapter 6-10: The Lead and the End

- Readers want to know what’s in it for them
  - Capture them immediately through humor, surprises, questions, unusual ideas, paradoxes, etc.
  - Nudge at their curiosity
  - Getting the reader to smile guarantees they stay for one more paragraph
Chapter 6-10: The Lead and the End

Knowing how and when to stop:

- Don’t end with “in summary” or “in all”
  - These tell the reader to stop putting in the effort, as they have already read the information that you’re about to give to them again
  - Try to end by bringing the story full circle — strike a note that was sounded at the beginning of the piece
  - Surprise your reader and leave them startled, so that they continue thinking about your writing
Chapter 6-10: Bits & Pieces

- Active verbs: push the sentence forward for momentum
- Use fewer adverbs (e.g. “the radio blared loudly”)
- Limit adjectives (e.g. “frisky kitty”)
- Erase partial qualifiers (a bit, a little, etc.)
  - Be total, complete, and confident
- Learn to alert the reader of mood changes
  - Use “nevertheless,” “but,” “yet” at start of sentences and however in the middle
  - Don’t use these at the end as they’ve already lost their impact!
Chapter 6-10: Bits & Pieces

● Avoid overstating the facts and horrible humor!
  ○ “It seemed as if an atomic bomb went off in the room”
● Keep paragraphs short — they are more inviting to the reader
● Avoid male-dominated sentences (chairman vs. chairperson)
  ○ Avoid separating he vs. she, him vs. her and rather substitute with they/them/we/our
● Rewriting is key
  ○ Find failures to alert reader of mood or place changes
  ○ Clean up stylistic inconsistencies
● Write about your interests and trust your instincts!
Before WWII, literature typically referred to forms of writing such as novels, poems and short stories.
After Pearl Harbour, people who saw reality every evening were disillusioned from fiction books and wanted to read about facts, issues and events.
Good writing took a new standard of having vigor, clarity and based on humanity.
Nonfiction allows people to write about what you feel most comfortable about because you can write about observable facts.
In order to write good nonfiction, be passionate about what you write so you can stay motivated to keep writing about it.
Chapter 12: Writing About People - The Interview

- Learn to ask questions that will elicit a passionate response
- Pay attention to the inflection in their voice, sentence structure, dialect and enthusiasms
- Nonfiction writing will get better in “proportion to the number of quotes” you use
- Look for the person’s story
- Every person has something that they are passionate about that if you ask, they will be happy to talk about
Learning the Interview

1. Determine the person you want to interview, go outside the University
2. Choose a person that is important or unique enough to captivate readers when you write about them
3. Write it down, don’t leave the content of the interview to memory
4. Make sure the person is comfortable with you before taking out a notepad
5. Make a list of likely questions so that you do not run out of questions to ask
6. Persistence, sometime the interview won’t go well and you should try to interview them later
7. Consider using a voice recorder if you have a hard time understanding them
8. Don’t be afraid to ask the interviewee to slow down or wait for you to write down your thoughts before they continue
9. It is important to accurately represent the interviewee and the information provided for both your and their reputation
   a. Janet Malcolm: Found guilty of libel and defamation for fabricating quotes
   b. Joe McGinniss: said he wrote “certain scenes and described certain events from what I inferred to be his point of view” without interviewing the person he wrote about
Chapter 13: Writing About Places - The Travel Article

- The setting of nonfiction writing is integral to nonfiction writing
  - Most important aspects of writing about places is style and substance
    - Style: Don’t use superfluous language in your writing such as superfluous, wondrous, dappled, fabled and any or all cliche phrases
    - Substance: detailed descriptions of places
      - Don’t mention how it was hot when you went to the beach and there was a lot of sand
  - Discuss human activity that takes place in the environment
  - Do not try to convey emotional meaning for places that are sanctful to a group of people
    - Get a quote from a person that feels that emotion for that place
Chapter 14: Writing About Yourself - The Memoir

- The person that knows you the best, is you
- It is important to focus on individuality
  - Discuss what makes you interesting and unique
  - Don’t be egotistical in your writing
- Everything you write about yourself should be purposeful
  - Talk narrowly about specific events that occurred in your life rather than trying to give a summary of every event that happened in your life
- The most important aspect of writing about your experience is the people you interacted with and what made them memorable
- Memoir’s should be for yourself, allow yourself to be vulnerable and introspect deeply to get the best results
Chapter 15: Science and Technology

- Scientific writing focuses on explaining how things work and why they work the way they do
- Make the assumption that the reader knows nothing and elaborate on the topic in detail
  - Makes sure you know what you are talking about yourself
  - Guides the reader along the same line of reasoning you had to follow to make the same conclusions
- Pyramid Analogy
- Relate the content to the reader
  - Use your own personal experiences
  - Try to relate facts the reader knows to the information being presented
  - Write like a person, not a scientist
    - If you do use technical terminology then follow up with a paragraph that explains things the reader will have obvious questions about
Corporations aren’t people but people in corporations are people.

When you write on behalf of an institution, write as yourself
  ○ Humanize yourself to your audience
  ○ Avoid corporate jargon and make yourself more clear

Not this: “Announced concurrently with the above enhancements were changes to the System Support Program”
Chapter 17: Sports

- Sports? Sports.
- Avoid using cliches and statistics: “southpaw”, “4123 yards”
- Understand and convey the drama and intrigue that comes along with sports - these are great feats!
Chapter 18: Writing about the Arts

- Critics of the arts must love and be very knowledgeable about the subject matter they are communicating
  - Don’t just be a hateful critic to seem cool - it’s not
  - Criticism is a serious intellectual art
- Express your opinion firmly
  - Don’t be wishy-washy
Chapter 19: Humor

● Humor is the secret weapon of a nonfiction writer
  ○ Humor is a way to express ideas that are hard to express otherwise

● Control is key:
  ○ Be serious most of the time
  ○ Don’t reuse jokes
  ○ Jokes can be serious as well!

● Strive for truth and humor - they are intertwined!

Joke
Part 4: Attitudes
Chapter 20: The Sound of Your Voice

- Develop your own personal voice, and stick to it
- No definition of good taste, but do your best to develop:
  - Avoid cliches
  - Imitate other writers
  - Embrace your history and heritage, and it can lead you to your own style.
Chapter 21: Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence

- "The reader has to feel that the writer is feeling good. Even if he isn't"
- Fear of writing gets planted in most Americans at an early age, usually at school, and it never entirely goes away.
- Nonfiction writers are infinitely accountable
  - For both content and craft
- Generate confidence by writing about subjects that interest you and that you care about
  - If you write about subjects you think you would enjoy knowing about, your enjoyment will show in what you write
- Every reduction of the unfamiliar will reduce your fear
- The moral for nonfiction writers is: think broadly about your assignment
Chapter 22: The Tyranny of the Final Product

- Fixation on the finished product. This is a very American kind of trouble.
- “The writer, his eye on the finish line, never gave enough thought to how to run the race.”
- Less glamorous gains made along the way:
  - learning, wisdom, growth, confidence, dealing with failure—aren't given same respect because they can't be given a grade.
- Big challenges:
  - Compression
  - Focus
  - Voice and tense
- The right to fail is as liberating as the right to succeed.
Chapter 23: A Writer's Decisions

- Little decisions: the hundreds of choices that go into creating a long article.
- How to organize
  - Writing is linear and sequential
  - Narrative
- The hardest decision about any article is how to begin it.
- Every sentence requires thought
  - Readers can process only one idea at a time, and they do it in linear sequence
- What do your readers want to know next?
- “What is the piece really about?” (Not just "What is the piece about?")
- Know what to omit
- Divisions within articles help readers and writers
Chapter 24: Write as Well as You Can

- Write as well as you can by your own standards
  - "I've never changed my style to fit the size or the presumed education of the audience I was writing for."
- Writers are part entertainers
  - Humour, anecdote, paradox, an unexpected quotation, a powerful fact, an outlandish detail, a circuitous approach, an elegant arrangement of words.
  - Develop your "style."
- You have to want to write better than everybody else
- "I always thought that there was at least one person in the stands who had never seen me play, and I didn't want to let him down"
  - Joe DiMaggio
Chapter 24: Write as Well as You Can
The Role of an Editor

- “The relationship between a writer and an editor should be one of negotiation and trust.”
  - Will do what a writer allows them to
- Provide an objective eye that the writer has long since lost
- Pruning, shaping, clarifying, tidying
- An editor’s hand must also be invisible
- Potential harm:
  - Altering style
  - Altering content
- Clarity is what every editor owes the reader
  - Never publish something if you don’t understand