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**THE WRITE STUFF: WRITING AS A
PERFORMING AND POLITICAL ART***

"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can."

MATTHEW ARNOLD

*"The art of writing has for backbone some fierce
attachment to an idea."*

VIRGINIA WOOLF

*"Writing and rewriting are a constant search for
what it is one is saying."*

JOHN UPDIKE

"The great enemy of clear writing is insincerity."

GEORGE ORWELL

*"I have always felt that the first duty of a writer
was to ascend—to make flights, carrying others along
if he could manage it. To do this takes courage,
even a certain conceit."*

E. B. WHITE

*"There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at the
typewriter, open a vein, and bleed."*

LEGENDARY SPORTS WRITER RED SMITH

INTRODUCTION

Writing well is a form of leadership. Good writing helps us think clearly, express ideas, heighten consciousness, promote community, inspire, or even outrage us. Writing can be an effective means of communicating, persuading, and changing how people think, dream, and behave. Plato, Machiavelli, Jefferson, Madison, Marx, Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Orwell, Rachel Carson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Alexander Solzhenitsyn provide examples of this power.

Writers always have advice for aspiring writers: Read good writers and good writing. Use as many words as you must and as few as you can. Skip long words where short ones will do. Make every word count. Use the language of everyday life, yet don't substitute common words for distinctive words just to keep your writing simple. Say what you mean and sound like yourself. Strive for cadence, smoothness, and freshness. Clarity of writing flows from clarity of thought.

Direct your writing to a single reader, or at least to a distinct audience. Signal your voice, tone, and theme in your first two paragraphs. Write to inform, arouse, persuade. "Readers ... have a tough job to do," notes novelist Kurt Vonnegut, "and they need all the help they can get from writers." After all, readers have to decipher thousands of little notations and make sense of them. Unlike symphony musicians, they have no conductor to lead them through a work. Few phrases signal how fast or slow, or loud or soft a text is to be read. Punctuation can help. "Punctuation marks," writes Pico Iyer, "are the road signs placed along the highways of our communication—to control speeds, provide directions and prevent head-on collisions."²

The difference between poor writing and good writing lies in *careful revising*. Edit, recast, and tighten your material. Have the guts to cut. Spare the reader windy generalizations, clichés, uncritical thought. Writers have to custom design their own rules and be prepared, more than occasionally, to break them rather than write barbarous prose.

Research, writing, rewriting, and editing are hard work. And the more you care about your writing, the harder it gets. Professional writers seldom boast about the easiness of their craft. To write well requires

time, hard work, and intellectual self-discipline, the kind that seldom comes naturally. No matter how much they love it, and they usually love it more than anything else, it's lonely, demanding, and often painful.

Ernest Hemingway said writing, at its best, is exacting and often frustrating, in part because it is something you can never do as well as it can be done. Hemingway rewrote his ending of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times before he was satisfied. "There's no rule on how it is to write. Sometimes it comes easily and perfectly. Sometimes it is like drilling rock and then blasting it out with charges," Hemingway remarked. "I love to write," he added, "but it has never gotten any easier to do and you can't expect it to if you keep trying for something better than you can do."

Hemingway believed each writing project should be a new beginning—a time to try again for something never done before or for something others have tried to do and failed. One cannot, he said, be satisfied to write in another way what already has been well written. No, it is precisely because we have known such fine writers in the past that we who write are driven well beyond where we are comfortable, to where no one can help us.

The joy of research and writing comes from the challenge of being out there on your own, rethinking the explored realm of life and the human condition, and examining the unexplored. It is scary to be out there alone, yet, writing itself is one of the grand, free, human activities. Working back and forth between experiences and ideas, evidence and imagination, data and theory, a writer has more than space and time can offer. A writer with a sense of justice can remind us of what we ought to be, what might be, where we have failed. Writers can also help vanquish lies. Alexander Solzhenitsyn elaborates:

What is the place and role of the writer? . . . A writer is no sideline judge of his fellow countrymen and contemporaries; he is equally guilty of all the evil done in his country or by his people. If his country's tanks spill blood on the streets of some alien capital, the brown stains are splashed forever on the writer's face. If, some fatal night, his trusting friend is choked to death while sleeping, the bruises from the rope are on the

writer's hands. If his young fellow citizens in their easy going way declare the superiority of debauchery over frugal labor, abandon themselves to drugs or seize hostages, the stink of it mixes with the writer's breathing.⁴

As in the mastery of any skill, writing requires discipline. If you already know how to use time effectively, writing papers becomes easier, and even enjoyable. Most of us, however, are accomplished procrastinators. A research assignment can overwhelm you if you let it. Yet, if planned carefully, it can strengthen self-discipline and sharpen your ability to manage time. Effective time management is one of the most important gifts you can give yourself.

Be prepared to retreat to a quiet place and devote several hours a day for two or three weeks to uninterrupted, focused concentration. For extroverts, such a schedule is like being sentenced to solitary confinement. If you are going to take pride in your writing, however, you must resign yourself to devoting time to extensive reading and research, rigorous analysis, and intense thought, not to mention the hours of writing, rewriting, revising, and editing a first-rate research project requires.

SELECTING A TOPIC

Search for a worthy topic. Then state it simply in a sentence or two. Your paper must have a focus, a point of view, an answerable question or a fresh way of considering a compelling problem. Have a purpose: to inform, persuade, clarify, instruct, entertain.

Avoid the perfectionist inclination to tackle only those questions that are tidy or readily answered. Attacking a trivial problem is a waste of time. Any writing project, whether a senior thesis, an opinion essay, testimony before a legislature, or a treatise on a social or economic issue, is an opportunity to match your talents against a perplexing problem.

"Broadly speaking, academic writing is argumentative writing," write Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. "You need to enter a conversation, using what others say...as a launching pad or sounding board for your own ideas."⁵

They are right. Most writers write in response to other writers or points of view. Sometimes this involves agreeing with earlier writers or speakers. Yet it can also involve contending that previous thinking is wrong and needs reexamination. Thus writing often has much in common with debating. You might concede certain points, yet you try to shed new light—based on your research and analysis—that permits a fresh way of understanding a concept, a theory, or an explanatory model.

Hence, in selecting a topic you may start out seeking to confirm or disprove a particular point of view. This requires you to understand that point of view, engage it, summarize it, and present your findings in the context of what others have said about it.

Make sure your topic interests you enough that you will devote the time needed for research and writing. Although few purely original ideas exist, make sure your topic is researchable and that it has not already been so researched that little new territory remains. Take care not only that you don't bite off more than you can chew, but that you don't chew more than is worth chewing.

Simple curiosity spawns many writing projects: the urge to understand something better, to resolve or at least to grasp a paradox, dilemma, or set of previously unsolved, unanswered questions. To discover the way people live. My own research often springs from questions students or others ask me and from question-and-answer sessions on the lecture circuit. When I give an answer I am not wholly satisfied with, I say to myself, "That's a fine question, and it deserves a better answer."

Always have a pen and paper handy. Often inspiration hits when you are not directly searching for it. Any type of discussion, no matter how off topic of the paper, can inspire an idea not yet considered.

Perhaps something has been puzzling you, or a topic has been covered inadequately in an earlier course or in a speech you've recently heard or a book you've just read. Topics arise from discussions with friends, teachers, colleagues, or parents or from your own observations in a job, internship, or campaign experience. You may also be motivated by the search for truth or by an outrage at hypocrisy, lies, and injustice. Good writing is often telling the truth about things.

Refining and Researching Your Topic

As you decide on a research topic, ask yourself some questions about it. What do I want to say? What's the big idea? Or puzzle? Or confusion? What is it I want to discover, solve, learn more about? Why does X institution, or process, or leadership theory work in its own peculiar way? Could or should it be otherwise?

How, for example, is powerful leadership held accountable? Do we need politics and politicians? When are we well served by political leaders? How can we reconcile democracy and leadership? Are changes needed in our political system? Is one party better able to solve our problems than the other? Are our economic inequalities or our inability to prevent civil and inter-nation wars the fault of governmental structures, inadequate leadership, or deficiencies in vision?

You will obviously have to narrow your topic to accord with your time and talent. Then ask, What is the central question? Define it. Explore its origins and development. Explain its consequences. If it is a policy, process, or constitutional interpretation, you may want to analyze its effect on current and future political leaders. Try to discern the underlying assumptions, agendas, and incentives of groups advocating change or the status quo. In what ways do different schools of thought define the problem differently, and why?

You will want to clarify your topic by assimilating as much material, qualitative and quantitative, as possible. Search the library literature, the Internet, periodicals, and available documents. You will sometimes discover works that already have answered, or at least addressed, parts of your topic. Explore the availability of polling or survey data that may shed light on the problem. You may find, too, that interviewing knowledgeable leaders or experts, and current and former public officials, will be productive. Never underestimate the talent of local librarians, especially those who are specialists with reference works, computer search technologies, and government documents. They can be splendid allies.

Equally important is knowing when to stop researching and start writing. Saying you need more time for research often masks

procrastination. "The temptation to read one more book or search another library shelf was always great," remarked a recent Ph.D. dissertation writer. "Investigation leads one to ask questions which demand answers. Those answers in turn breed new questions and so on until the process gets out of hand. I found it necessary to place strict time limits on my work. Sometimes this meant altering objectives to comply with a timetable. This was not to short change myself, but rather to avoid becoming paralyzed by perpetual analysis."⁶ For many people, talking about their research and writing serves as a substitute for working on their project. Knowing when you have enough material to substantiate your claims, enlighten your reader, and put the problem in context is a skill writers need to develop. Remember the aphorism "Strive for excellence but not for perfection." Someone once said, too, "Don't get it right—just get it written," wise advice for many of us when we get bogged down.

Developing and Testing Hypotheses

Good writers don't just describe a problem and raise possible solutions offhand. Prepare a list of likely solutions or likely answers to your research question. Anticipate objections and contrary arguments. Experiment with competing or even opposing theoretical hypotheses. How does your hypothesis stand up to critical review? Ask yourself, What if...? Be clear about cause-and-effect relationships. Clarify your dependent and independent variables. For example, were the leaders shaped by their group or situation, or were they the primary shapers of events?

Anticipate the arguments of those who might disagree with your analysis; then make their argument even more powerfully than they do. Then tear it apart.

Don't be constrained by the conventional wisdom of the day. Inventions, scientific breakthroughs, and better answers often come only when you step outside existing ways of thinking. Disregard prevailing wisdom, ask bold questions, pose fresh possibilities. Be imaginative.

Of course, this strategy for enumerating hypotheses is easier to suggest than to do. Write down everything relevant that comes to mind, or even sounds plausible. The trick is finding those bold questions and reframing them in a compelling way. Ask a lot of questions, and a few

are likely to be bold. Still, we are, more than we appreciate, creatures of habit and cultural conditioning. Try to discern the mind-set shifts that are taking place or perhaps need to take place.⁷

Logical reasoning is important at this point. You will want to test, systematically, the plausible explanations you have posed. With a bit of ingenuity you can test solutions to difficult problems without making each particular test a two- or three-year enterprise. Appreciate, however, that empirical testing and the most rigorous forms of critical reasoning are indispensable to building the body of reliable knowledge needed to arrive at your conclusions.

Amassed information is not knowledge, merely a distant cousin. Information and findings are important only as intermediate phases of your research. You must make sense of what you have gathered. This step involves analysis. Writing a paper is ultimately an interpretive process. The skilled writer makes sense of the stories, aspirations, myths, and the symbolic as well as practical ideas that shape behavior.

Students of politics and leadership formulate theories about the “why” and the “so what” of political life and governance. Aristotle called the study of leadership and governance the “queen of sciences” and classified city-states according to their political structures, making predictions about how different structures would lead to different outcomes. Plato examined the need for enlightened leaders and the responsibilities of wise, informed leaders. Machiavelli, the famed author of *The Prince*, prescribed how rulers should best govern to maximize their own interests and how citizens should respond to different styles of leadership. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were all political theorists interested in formulating governance arrangements that would balance liberty and order, responsibility and leadership. Those who drafted the Constitution in the summer of 1787 in Philadelphia acted as both political philosophers and political architects as they merged experience and theory in the formation of practical political institutions.

Social scientists study patterns of politics, patterns of leadership, and the exercise of power and authority, just as physical scientists study atoms,

genes, rocks, and stars. They describe things as a means of understanding. Understanding often leads to explanations; explanations can lead to predictive models; and predictions can generate sound theory.

We search for the predictable to discover, to describe, and, if possible, to verify the basic laws of politics, leadership, and governance. Although Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* showed the way, rigorous efforts to learn enough to predict have been essentially a modern-day development.

Just as money is viewed as the mother's milk of politics and campaigns, *evidence* is the well-spring of convincing writing. Evidence means furnishing proof, witness, manifest data. Readers will justifiably ask, Did the writer back up the thesis? Is there compelling evidence? Is the evidence clearly backed by logic, examples, data, or related supporting material? Evidence, evidence, evidence—this is what will ultimately convince your readers that you have made a strong case. Providing evidence is absolutely your responsibility when you are asking readers to think anew about an old problem.

Back to your challenge. Although most topics you will tackle already have been written about by one or more scholars, don't be put off by this fact. Your challenge is to examine the problem with a fresh eye. Approach it differently. Place it in a fresh context. Recombine, rethink, recontextualize. Try to find new linkages, put forth audacious new and relevant explanations. The challenge of research and writing is to raise new questions, to supply fresh data, evidence, or findings that point in promising new directions.

BEGINNING TO WRITE

Here are a number of concerns you should keep in mind as you research, outline, write, and edit an essay. My advice is subjective. Different styles and approaches work for different people. Novelist Somerset Maugham once joked that "there are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."⁸ What works for me may merely inhibit you. And what one professor likes another may not.

Retain what's useful, disregard the rest. Most of it is common sense. Much of it comes from standard writing and style books, from friends

who teach composition and from editors who have criticized, corrected, and generally improved my writing over the years. My emphasis on certain uses and abuses also arises out of years of writing, and reading student papers.

The most important suggestions are:

- Prepare a paragraph or two to focus your objectives.
- Make an outline.
- Prepare a catchy and strong thesis.
- Write honestly.
- Write to convince.
- Adopt a working title.
- Revise, revise, revise.

Focus and Outline

It helps to have a map of where you're going. If you don't know where you're going, says an old aphorism, you just may end up there. The moral is important. In the past you may have sat down at your computer and produced a first draft you thought was a final product. Your essay may have been put together by cutting and pasting odd descriptions and definitions and tagging on a rough conclusion. This is unacceptable.

Write an outline to organize your argument in logical order. Prepare a simple one-page statement of purpose to clarify your objectives. What do you intend to do? Why are you writing on this topic? What's the problem? What is your main theme? Write in sentence form each major point needed to support your thesis. Jot down, under each sentence, the evidence you will use to support your central points. It's often best to do this before you turn on your computer.

You will want to ask yourself more questions as you review and revise your outline. What are my major points or most telling evidence? What are the weak points to my argument? Why do I really care about this topic? Will the conclusion flow smoothly from the body of the essay? Have I jumped to conclusions? In short, will my terms and concepts be clear, and will the essay persuade readers or offer a fresh way of seeing something?

An outline is merely a guide, a way of dividing a subject into its major points and subpoints. Your initial outline will change as you do more research and get into your writing. The best outlines grow and become more focused as the writer makes progress. Never let your outline limit or control you; alter it to serve your goals. Still, “to get anywhere, one first has to start. And a good way to start the outline is to jot down quickly . . . the ideas you have about your topic, asking what there is of interest that you want to pass along to the reader.”⁹ Your outline is in part a plan, in part a taking stock of information you have gathered, and a way of arranging your material and interpretive analysis in a logical order. Outlines are essential; they help avoid writer’s block, affirm you have something to say, allow you to see how one idea logically leads to another, and organize your schedule.

Watch out for overwriting. Students nowadays are conditioned to writing in chatty, unstructured email style. Word processors encourage most people to write longer, but not necessarily better.

One reporter found “students submit essays that are longer but not better written than those in years past. Worse, many students do not revise or even proofread their work, relying instead on software to check spelling and grammar.”¹⁰

But spell checkers are no substitute for careful proofreading. They don’t catch certain errors. For example, they don’t catch punctuation mistakes or differences between such words as “principle” and “principal” or “capitol” and “capital.” No word processor can make bad writing good.

If word processors help you overcome writer’s block by making it easy to pour out ideas, remember editing then becomes all the more important.

Write Honestly, with Voice and Power

Once you have sketched an outline, sit down and start writing, or turn on your computer. Put your ideas into words, composing freely. Try “shotgun” writing (free-style brainstorming), thinking in terms of blocks or chunks of ideas. Your first inclination with words is usually what you really mean. Don’t expect to get the vocabulary or flow exactly right on the first try. Concentrate on getting your ideas down in any way you

can. Writing technically correct prose about irrelevant ideas is a waste of talent, time, and energy. Keep yourself focused on key concepts.

At this stage, it's okay to be sloppy. Make a mess. Who cares? Allow your ideas to begin to take shape. Serious thinking is far more important at this stage than error-free writing. Later you can get them in more concise and elegant form. "If you are like most people, you can't do much precise thinking until you have committed to paper at least a rough sketch of your initial ideas," writes Sylvan Barnet of Tufts University. "Later you can push and polish your ideas into shape, perhaps even deleting all of them and starting over, but it's a lot easier to improve your ideas once you see them in front of you, than it is to do the job in your head. On paper one word leads to another; in your head one word often blocks another."¹¹

Each of us writes with a distinctive flavor and voice. Be yourself. Write from the heart. Good writing is about telling the truth as you understand it. Some stylists advise writers to place themselves in the background. They contend, with some justification, that writing and talking are separate modes of communication. A speaker, for example, has a rapport with listeners and takes into account what they already know. Formal writing and putting yourself in the background will work for many of you. It is absolutely required if you are writing for the *Yale Law Review* or the *New England Journal of Medicine*. But those who make political writing an art will write in their own voice with a compelling political purpose in mind; they draw attention to facts and argue for their views. Voice reveals a writer's character and passion.

When we were little, says Peter Elbow, we had no difficulty sounding the way we felt. Most children speak and write with real voice. But adults often have to work hard to achieve the same simple, direct honesty. Writing with no voice is lifeless, faceless, and wooden because it lacks sound, rhythm, and individuality. Elbow explains that

Most people's writing lacks voice because they stop so often in mid-sentence and ponder, worry, or change their minds about which word to use or which direction to go in

Writing *with voice* is writing into which someone has breathed. It has that fluency, rhythm, and liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people when they are enjoying a conversation

Writing with *real voice* has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep.¹²

THEN REVISE, REVISE, REVISE

Starting to write is the most difficult part of writing for some people. For others, like me, rewriting, revising, and editing are more exacting. Rewriting is the essence of writing. If you are not already ruthless about editing, erasing, and discarding unnecessary words, get that way. Ask, Can I write it more concisely? If it is possible to cut a word, cut it.

The late James Michener wrote scores of best sellers about places such as Hawaii and the Chesapeake Bay yet described himself as less a gifted writer than a talented rewriter.

One technique for learning to revise and edit your work is to “use the knife” on other people’s writings. It’s easier to find the flaws and what doesn’t work in a classmate’s drafts. So exchange papers. Read a classmate’s paper and ask them to proof and critique your work. You see more clearly what doesn’t make sense or doesn’t flow, and it is relatively painless to discard vigorously and mark up “their” prose. “Once you get comfortable wielding the knife and seeing blood on the floor, it turns out to be easier to wield it on yourself.”¹³

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Stanley Kunitz was asked if he had ever written a poem he thought perfect. He said he had deceived himself on occasion in thinking so. “But I no more expect a poem to be perfect than I expect a life to be perfect,” he added. “The two are interwoven and inseparable. And if it’s humans, the likeliness of perfection is so remote we might as well forget about it. One does the best one can and then one revises it. Then you revise it again. And then you publish it. And you see new flaws and then you try again. That’s the life in art.”¹⁴ Kunitz also wonderfully observed, “Art is that chalice into which we pour the wine of transcendence.”¹⁵

Begin the process of revising by reading your early efforts aloud to

yourself, your friends, or anyone you can get to listen. When you read aloud, you invariably hear and see things you may be unable to discern in any other way. The ear catches errors of substance and style the eye often misses. Reading aloud also stresses what is important. An effective sentence is partly a matter of cadence and rhythm. Abraham Lincoln succeeded with precision and elegance but also with his uncommon vernacular ease and his rhythmical virtuosity.¹⁶ Journalist James J. Kilpatrick urges us to “sound out” our sentences and suggests that if a sentence lacks cadence, it collapses like an overcooked soufflé. Essential to good writing is a good ear. Listen to your prose. Cultivate the inner ear. “The writer who learns the knack of balance or of deliberate imbalance; the writer who understands how to quicken his tempo with short words, quick darting words that smack and jab; the writer who learns to slow his composition with soft and languorous convolutions; the writer who practices the trick of sentence endings, striving deliberately for syllables that are accented in a particular way, for the long vowel sound or the short—such a writer is on his way toward mastery of a marvelous tool.”¹⁷

Editing means figuring out what you want to say and saying it. Just as effective leaders avoid wasting people’s time, effective writers avoid wordiness. After a draft or two or three, you’ll want to get it clear in your head and then rewrite it in the most accurate way.

Here are additional editing suggestions.

Select Words Carefully

The most common writing deficiency is an overly casual approach to the use of words. “Use the right word,” Mark Twain said, “not its distant cousin.” Ask yourself, What is it I’m trying to say? Why am I using this word? Does it look right? Does it sound right? Is there a better, fresher way to say it? Is it clear, direct, brief, and bold? Can one word suffice for two or three now used?

“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts,” advise William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. “This

requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”¹⁸ In addition to using accurate words you will usually want to use familiar, simple, unadorned words. Simplicity increases readability. Complexity, unorthodox usages, needless adjectives, transitional adverbs, and abstract nouns diminish readability.

Strive for lean writing. Avoid jargon, pedantry, and “out-of-town” or foreign phrases designed to show off erudition. Arrogance pervades the work of certain scholars and professors. The greatest discovery in history is useless if no one understands what it means. One of my students summed up obfuscation perfectly: “It is a cardinal sin of so-called ‘teachers’ to write and talk so their students cannot understand them—I hate that.” There is nothing wrong with using exotic or ten dollar words now and then if they are the best ones to describe what you’re talking about; yet if your work is aimed at a lay audience, use words ordinary readers will understand.

Language, however, is a subjective matter. Substituting too many short, conventional words for unusual ones can devitalize your writing. A trade-off exists: simplicity on the one hand, the use of unusual words on the other. Excessive editing can make language drab, commonplace, and lifeless. Long paragraphs can work for gifted writers like William Faulkner, and long and unfamiliar words sometimes though rarely work as well. Occasionally they fit the meaning best or serve the rhythm of a sentence. In any case, editing should turn bland, imprecise writing into good writing.

An Associated Press handbook for writers states, “It’s hard to see any advantage to long words such as these in the left-hand column,” when the ones on the right can do the job:¹⁹

accommodations	rooms
ameliorate	improve
approximately	about
commence	begin
deactivate	close, shut off
endeavor	try

implement	carry out
in consequence of	because
initiate	begin
methodology	method
objective;	aim, goal
proliferation	spread
purchase	buy
remuneration	pay
replicate	repeat
socialize	mingle, meet
underprivileged	poor
utilize	use

Prize-winning economist John Kenneth Galbraith, author of several best-sellers, said clear writing, something his profession is not especially known for, comes from a commitment to revision. His simple formula: at least six drafts.

To write accurately one must know, above all, how bad are one's first drafts. They are bad because the need to combine composition with thought, both in their own way taxing, leads initially to a questionable, even execrable result. With each revision the task eases, the product improves. Eventually there can be clarity and perhaps even grace My commitment is to not fewer than five revisions

I have also been much helped in writing on economics by the conviction that there is no idea associated with the subject that cannot, with sufficient effort, be stated in clear English. The obscurity that characterizes professional economic prose does not derive from the difficulty of the subject. It is the result of incomplete thought; or it reflects a priestly desire to differentiate one's self from the plain world of the layman; or it stems from a fear of having one's inadequacies found out. Nothing so protects error as an absence of readers or understanding.²⁰

Let Verbs and Nouns Do the Work

Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs; less is more. Carefully selected verbs and nouns seldom need a string of adjectives and adverbs to amplify their meaning.

Strong verbs (verbs that show action) infuse sentences with life-giving nectar. You can accomplish more with one carefully chosen, vivid verb than with a truckload of adjectives. A common verb offense is using the lame verb forms *there is*, *there are*, *it is*, and *it seems* where *it* is impersonal and has no referent. Good writers avoid the “to be” verbs when possible. People fall into the habit of using these out of pure laziness. They weaken most sentences and can almost always be replaced by more telling verbs. Further, using strong verbs rather than these flaccid forms contributes to word economy. Take the following simple yet universally applicable example: “There is one legislator who writes most of the committee’s bills and reports.” Remove three bland words: *there*, *is* and *who*. Now your sentence reads: “One legislator writes most of the committee’s bills and reports.” The new sentence is three words shorter and has a strong verb as its engine.

Active verbs make for vital sentences. An active verb has the person performing the action as its subject, as in “I am voting,” or “She leads her team.” A passive verb is a form of the “to be” family plus the past participle, as in “The group is being led by Heather,” or “The election results have been counted.” Try: “Heather leads her team,” and “They tallied the votes.”

The active voice verb provides pace and movement. It stresses the one doing something. It uses verbs to push, strike, carry, and persuade. “Joe led the discussion” is strong. “The discussion was led by Joe” is limp. The passive voice shifts the focus onto what’s being done and makes for sluggish reading. It slows the pace and usually requires more words. “The active voice strikes like a boxer moving forward in attack,” writes Theodore M. Bernstein. “The passive voice parries while backpedaling.”²¹ Remember Thoreau’s famous advice: simplify, simplify, simplify.

Clear, lean thinking is usually the key to clear, lean writing. Keep complicated constructions to a minimum. The “secret of good writing

is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components," writes William Zinsser. "Every word that serves no function, every word that could be a short word, every adverb which carries the same meaning that is 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."²²

Use Qualifiers and Modifiers Sparingly

Be bold. Be definite. Say it in positive form. Take a stand. Be careful about using qualifiers: *it seems, it appears, very, quite, pretty, rather, usually, mostly, generally, a lot, all right, some, often, sort of, various, frequently, really, probably, basically, and essentially*. Banish: *somewhat unique, very unique, or almost unique*. Unique is an absolute adjective; *unique* is unique.

Avoid using *pretty, really, sort of* and similar words as qualifiers of intensity in formal writing. Be careful not to confuse qualifiers of size (huge, tremendous) with qualifiers of intensity (significant, important).

Also restrain the temptation to hedge with *possibly, if only, moreover, furthermore, the fact that, it is my understanding, it is believed that, it is sometimes said that, due to, on one hand, however, that which, notwithstanding, and to the contrary notwithstanding*. A qualifier is necessary, of course, if a statement or partial evidence is open to doubt; hence an occasional *perhaps* or *reportedly* or *on the whole* has to be used.

Good writers accentuate the positive and downplay the negative. Thus "Write in the affirmative" does the job for "Don't write in the negative." And while we can't convert every negative into an affirmative, consider these helpful translations:

not many	few
not the same	different
does not have	lacks
did not stay	left
did not consider	ignored
did not accept	rejected
not possible	impossible
not able	unable
not certain	uncertain ²³

Beware of Unnecessary Words and “Doubleheaders”

Edit out the clutter. Strike of *all* in *First of all*. Replace *end result* with *result*, *serious crisis* with *crisis*, *true facts* with *facts*, *personal beliefs* with *beliefs*, *free gift* with *gift*, *single-most* with *single*, and *new record* with *record*. Delete *together* in “The team gathered together.” Delete the *very* in “Susan is a very strong leader.” The word *very* weakens the word *strong*, just as the word *pretty* weakens the word *red* in “The brick building is pretty red.” “He would claim that running is easier than swimming” is better written, “He claims running is easier than swimming.” “My visit to China will always be remembered by me” is improved by, “I will always remember my visit to China.” Use *thus* instead of *thusly*, *now* instead of *currently* or *presently*, *met* instead of *held a meeting*, *agreed* instead of *reached an agreement*, *because* instead of *due to the fact that*, *public works* instead of *infrastructure*.

Avoid overused words. Instead of saying a point is *important*, *exciting*, or *obvious*, just make it so. And if you are clear, you seldom have to use *clearly*, *plainly*, *doubtless*, or *most assuredly*. Colorless words make even the freshest ideas and prose seem stale. The joy of writing is getting it right in as lively a way as possible.

Beware of clichés. They can't be completely avoided but they usually sound lame. Examples: *few and far between*, *busy as a bee*, *water under the bridge*. Use them sparingly, if you have to, with discrimination and shun them when they substitute for precise thinking.²⁴

Also, avoid telling us what you are about to tell us. Just say it. Impeach wordy introductions such as *it is interesting to note that*, *also important is the fact that*, *therefore it seems that*, *I would at this juncture in my paper ...*, *it is now time for this writer to admit her own ...*, *the thesis here is that ...*, *and the point I want to make here is that we ...*, *be that as it may ...*, *and in conclusion*. Eliminate *history tells us* and *at this point in time*. Junk the phrase *further research is needed*. It always is.

Curb phrasing that makes repetition necessary to keep the sentence on track; strings of nouns depending on one another; prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbial expressions made up of two or more words: *with reference to*, *in conjunction with*, *in terms of*, *in the event that*, *in the*

to spell a word three different ways. Still, when in doubt, I look it up. Bad spelling and grammar imply a lazy writer who is indifferent to the reader. Worse, by calling attention to themselves, bad spelling and grammar interrupt the flow of ideas. Readers won't stick with a careless writer.

Be careful not to use *feel* when you mean *believe, consider, think*.

The word *but* is commonly misused when *yet* is appropriate. *But* cancels what you have just said. *Yet* is used when you are merely adding to what you have said or want a softer reversal than *but*. *Yet* can mean *nevertheless*, too. "The candidate said he was going to win, *but* the campaign is now over and he came in second." Fine. "The candidate is not sure she can use Jack Jones as a pollster for this campaign, *yet* she believes Jones is a gifted opinion analyst." Fine.

The thoughtful writer is aware of the distinction between *that* and *which* and uses these pronouns with precision. *That* defines, *which* informs. *Which* adds further information about the noun. For example, "The party, *which* was defeated, pulled itself together and prepared to wait until next time." Here the *which* explains something about the party and helps readers understand the context of why the party needed to pull itself together.

That restricts the meaning of the noun and makes it more specific. "The party that was defeated pulled itself together and prepared to win next time." In this sentence, a *that* clause defines the particular party the writer is talking about; it was the defeated party, not the victorious party, that pulled itself together. It is not just any party, but a specific party.

A good rule is this: if commas can be inserted around the clause, the correct word to use is *which*. Which is a bit more formal than *that*, and most writers prefer *thats* to *whiches* for readability and flow. We use *that* far more than *which* when we are talking. Good writers, however, try to avoid both words. Thus, it is better to revise the sentence above to read: "The defeated party pulled itself together and prepared to win next time." *That* can be deleted in about one-third of its appearances. "He said that it was expensive" is crisper when written, "He said it's expensive." If you have a sentence with these pronouns, challenge yourself to rewrite and eliminate them. Hooray "Whichless" and "thatless" sentences. They're shorter and more readable.

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nature of, as to whether, in lieu of, in relation to. Often a single, one-syllable word will do: *in, with, for.*

Avoid “doubleheaders”: *beck and call, bound and determined, safe and sound, clear and simple, nuts and bolts, full and complete, first and foremost, hope and trust, each and every, fair and just.* See if one word will say it all. “Lawyers love paired words with related meanings, like null and void, part and parcel, aid and abet, sum and substance, irrelevant and immaterial,” laments Rene Cappon. But these doubleheaders are “kissing cousins of redundancies.”²⁵ Legal writing rarely wins prizes for readability.

Avoid “Twinkie” Words and Phrases

A “twinkie” word takes its meaning from junk food, which has little or no nutrition. My nominations for twinkie awards are *needless to say, to say the least, interesting, nice, meaningful, exciting, hopefully, key, insightful, great, there are, there is, there were, and so forth, and the like, and so on, crucial, drastic, stimulating, sensitive, and parameter.* Omit *with reference to, in the nature of, the fact that.* These have been spoiled by excessive and careless use until they have become hollow.

Avoid jargon. Adding *-wise* and *-ize* to the end of words may be fashionable, but it undermines clarity. The suffix *-wise* has a place in established forms like *clockwise, otherwise, and likewise,* but adding it to nouns to indicate *in relation to* is sloppy writing. Made-up words like *politicswise, P.R.-wise, leadershipwise, policywise, datawise, and mediawise* are unpleasant to both eye and ear.

Although *finalize, prioritize, divisionalize, definitize, analogize, and bureaucratize* are formed by the same process that created the acceptable *popularize, concertize, and modernize,* skip them. Better words can be employed. For *finalize,* try *complete, conclude, or end.* Also avoid trendy words like *scenario, input, interface, impact, effectuate, bottom line, cool, chill, and awesome.*

Be Correct

For most of us, English is the primary language we’ll use when writing. Learn its rules of grammar and syntax. Master them. Learn to spell. I’m mildly dyslexic, and I prize the saying that only creative people know how

Take special care when using *this*. Pronouns refer to previous nouns. Some students use *this* to refer to everything they just said, as in “This explains why John Kerry lost the election.” Such usage confuses rather than clarifies. The careful writer avoids sentences beginning with *this*.

Criteria and *data* are the plurals of *criterion* and *datum* and require plural verbs. *Media* is plural.

Use gender-inclusive language. All executives aren’t men, nor are all of those who fish or put out fires. Instead of *fireman*, try *firefighter*. Instead of *congressman*, try *representative*. Use plural forms to avoid sexist language. Instead of “A president will use his veto power,” try “Presidents use their veto power.” *Human being*, *humankind*, *person*, and *chair* are all proper substitutes for *man*, *mankind*, and *chairman*.²⁶

Additional Style Suggestions

I like reading forcefully argued papers, yet I dislike overstatement. Effective writers learn the right balance.

Use contractions (e.g., *can’t* for *cannot*) when writing conversational prose. People use them when they speak, so they make for natural, readable writing. Write as you speak—unless of course you mumble or your everyday talk is incomprehensible. Contractions, however, are often unacceptable in formal writing. A careful writer knows how to get the right voice and when contractions are appropriate.

Use the exclamation point sparingly; once a paper is enough! Overuse robs it of its force. Avoid underlining, italicizing, and boldfacing for the same reason. A well-constructed sentence creates its own natural emphasis.

Phrases or words in parentheses disrupt the flow, as do dashes and hyphenated words. One critic assails the overuse of hyphens as “hyphenitis.” A hyphen, however, can avoid ambiguity and make life easier for your readers. Sometimes hyphens are essential to understanding. Do you mean an *old film buff* or an *old-film buff*? In general avoid hyphens. When in doubt, consult the dictionary or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. (Note: Social scientists, among others, rely on the *Chicago Manual of Style*, yet English professors and many people in the humanities disciplines rely on the Modern Language Association’s *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.)

Novelists occasionally use dashes to simulate speaking or dialogue. But writing is different from speaking. A dash can help provide a dramatic shift in tone or amplify a point. Yet nonfiction writers limit their use of dashes to avoid choppiness. Language maven William Safire cleverly satirizes the dramatic writer's penchant for the dash and similar punctuation novelties: "Writers of drama must write speech, not writing, because real people do not speak writing. Hence we have pauses, delays—you get my drift?—half-stops, restarts, stammering, and exclamatory grunts (ugh!) and drifting off into pre-dot-com ellipses To put this speech in written form—that is, to transcribe it—we have seen the powerful punch—pow! right in the kisser—of illustrative punctuation."²⁷

Vary the length of sentences and paragraphs, and vary how you begin sentences. If all your sentences have ten words and all your paragraphs ten sentences, you'll bore your reader. Try an occasional one- or two-sentence paragraph. Variety, counterpoint, and change grab the reader's attention. Write directly to your reader. Keep your audience in mind, and awake. Nothing bores a reader more than a string of paragraphs beginning "Harry Truman said . . .," "Harry Truman declared . . .," "Harry Truman noted . . .," "President Truman pointed out . . .," "As Truman wrote . . .," or "There was . . .," "There are . . ." "There is . . .," "There were . . ."

Colons (:) are a punctuation mark used chiefly to call attention to a list, explanation, or quotation. Thus, "The legislator brought home the bacon: a bridge, a new post office, and an expansion to the veteran's hospital." Semicolons (;) are used to indicate a pause longer than a comma yet shorter than a complete stop. They should normally be used only between two independent clauses (groups of words that could stand alone as sentences) and never to separate a dependent and an independent clause (as in "Although the candidate had innovative ideas; she had little speaking ability").

Commas help break up a sentence. Yet too many can be confusing. The best way to learn about the proper use of commas is to pay attention to their use by excellent writers. "Reverse engineer" their sentences.

The comma helps a reader understand that one clause or phrase has ended and another begun. "The comma was invented to help readers. Without it, sentence parts can collide with one another unexpectedly,

causing misreadings.”²⁸ Avoid using a comma, however, to take the place of a period between sentences.

Tables and Numbers

Use tables only when necessary. Sometimes they are. I like tables and visual displays of data. Yet readers have a tendency to skip past them, viewing them as intrusions or merely as evidence for a point the author makes in the prose. Try summarizing the contents of a table in prose and showing it in an eye-catching visual (as in *USA Today* or CNBC) so it can be grasped at a glance.

As a rule, tables or figures should stand on their own. They should be understandable to the reader who has not yet read the narrative. The meaning of numbers should be clear. Yet tables and graphs shouldn't be relied on to make a point not already made in the text; they should only amplify a point.

A table can help summarize data or highlight particular things to clarify research findings for the reader. “Including a table in a paper does not,” however, “relieve you of the obligation to describe specifically what is in that table,” writes political scientist Raymond Wolfinger. “You should not solve the problem of data description by instructing readers to look at Table 2 if they want to know what you found.”²⁹

Write out numbers from one to nine, except when using percentages. Thus it is 44 percent, eight vetoes, 62 legislative measures, 10 court rulings, and 3,000 words. Spell out a number when it begins a sentence. Spell out *percent* except in tables, when the % symbol is proper. Ordinal numbers are spelled out, as in the twenty-first century, the top one-tenth of the population. Legislative sessions and dates use numbers: 110th Congress and January 20, 2007.

Make sure your numbers add up correctly in all tables and charts. Writers often have a difficult time with numbers; errors, especially in percentages, easily creep into books and reports.

Quotations and Citations

Use quotations selectively. Few observations are truly original. The use of too many quotations conceals from the reader what you know

and what you think. Quotations interrupt the flow just as readily as too many tables, parentheses, or foreign phrases. Include long quotations only when the exact wording is crucial to your argument.

After you have read widely on a topic, you develop a sense of what is common knowledge. Dictionary definitions, the date of Picasso's death, or Ronald Reagan's career in Hollywood do not need to be cited or quoted from other sources. Paraphrase agreed-on definitions and common knowledge. If you know something, you can say it just as well as someone else did, and adopt the explanation to suit your purposes. You should shorten it as well. You can still give proper credit to the author who inspired your thoughts. Reserve quotations for material that is colorful, opinionated, or distinctive. Also quotations should merely support your argument rather than make the point for you.

If you use a quotation that runs more than seven lines in your typescript, set it off as a block quotation. Indent it several spaces from the left margin of the text, and double-space it. (I prefer the old way of single-spacing quotations but new writing handbooks now mandate double-spacing.) Block quotations don't need quotation marks. Keep in mind, however, that most of us let our eyes dance past block quotations. Shortening them so that they're integrated into the text increases reader attention.

Another device to keep your reader with you is to identify the author in the middle of a quotation rather than in the more traditional beginning or ending tag. Instead of "As E. B. White aptly puts it . . .," try "I suppose I have written *the fact that* a thousand times in the heat of composition, revised it out maybe five hundred times in the cool aftermath," writes E. B. White. "To be batting only .500 this late in the season, to fail half the time to connect with this fat pitch, saddens me, for it seems a betrayal of [my mentor] who showed me how to swing at it and made the swinging seem worth while."³⁰

Keep note cards or a journal of quotations you might later decide to use in your writing. Take down the author's words accurately, and record the source in full. Countless errors occur in quotations and citations, and retracing your steps to correct them is both time consuming and frustrating at later stages in your work.

To shorten a quotation a writer can use the ellipsis notation (. . .). *Ellipsis*, a Greek word, is defined as leaving out. Thus you can leave out an unneeded phrase in a sentence, as in "The President . . . reiterated his support for the constitutional amendment," so long as what remains is grammatical. When omitting a full sentence, use four rather than three spaced periods, as in (. . .).

Give credit to the appropriate sources for direct quotations and the distinctive ideas you paraphrase from others. The more you write, however, the more you will want to skip the verbose quotes you may have cited when you were less well read. Learn to be selective: "The art of handling quotes comes down to knowing when to quote, when to paraphrase, when to forget the whole thing."³¹

Footnotes are required tools. Footnote information you have learned from a book, article, newspaper, or interview if it is something others would not know without access to that source. Also occasionally footnote passages to encourage your readers to explore ideas or related topics in greater detail elsewhere.

Plagiarism is copying part or all of another's work without citing the source. It also refers to using someone's phrasing and ideas without proper citation or credit. Plagiarism is cheating. "Your research paper is a collaboration between you and your sources," writes Diana Hacker. "To be fair and ethical, you must acknowledge your debt to the writers of those sources."³²

Plagiarism, both accidental and intended, occurs all too frequently, both in college and in professional life. Whenever you use another writer's exact words, you must enclose the words or sentences in quotation marks. Changing one or two words doesn't make it your sentence.

Leads and Conclusions

Be creative about choosing an apt, and if possible, intriguing title. An effective title telegraphs your theme and arouses interest.

Your essay's first few sentences are especially important. An effective lead signals your thesis and hooks readers with calculated teasers. As they look at your title and leading sentences, readers are asking, What's the big idea? Where is this writer going? What's in this for me?

Reporters devote considerable energy to making what they call “the top of the story” accurate and arresting. Why? Most readers never get beyond the first two paragraphs of most stories in newspapers and magazines. If journalists grab your attention up front, they at least have a chance to hold your interest for the duration.

The lead must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with freshness or novelty or paradox, or with humor, or with surprise, or with an unusual idea, or an interesting fact, or a question. Anything will do as long as it nudges his curiosity and tugs at his sleeve.

Next the lead must do some real work. It must provide a few hard details that tell the reader why the piece was written and why he ought to read it. But don't dwell on the reason. Coax the reader a little more; keep him inquisitive.³³

Although news writing is different from college essays, corporate reports, or public policy papers, introductions in every form of writing are important. Students have the good fortune—although they might quibble at this description—that professors are paid to read student papers from start to finish even if the leads aren't arresting. Yet duty doesn't guarantee interest. Students must make a case for the significance of their essays at the outset.

Often good leads can't be written until the essay is finished. Try writing several leads after you've finished your first draft. Don't be too quick to settle on the first. Let the lead emerge from your work.

For long papers—over 20 pages—subtitles are helpful in indicating transitions to new material or new sections. Subheads can add to a paper's readability and, cleverly used, can save words. Yet, as most college writing assignments are five to 15 pages and focus on a few major points, subheadings and section breaks may be unnecessary. Beware, however, of using them as a crutch to avoid writing necessary, yet difficult, transitions.

Conclusions should flow from the rest of the paper. They don't need signals like *in conclusion* or *in summary*. They should tie ideas together,

not simply restate what already has been said. Nor should they introduce new topics or information. The best conclusions explore the significance of the ideas in the essay, sometimes by making recommendations.

ON FORMAT AND PRESENTATION

Take your reader into account. It pays to ask in advance if your intended reader, especially a professor or supervisor, has specific format rules.

Here is a set of suggestions I share with students. They are simple, commonsense guidelines. Most students already know them, yet what students know and what they do are not necessarily the same.

- Use good paper and make sure your machine produces dark enough copy for easy reading.
- Type double-spaced with margins of at least an inch on all sides—perhaps a bit more on the left. (Teachers and editors need space to make comments and corrections.)
- Number your pages, preferably at the top of each page after your first page.
- Staple the paper in the upper left-hand corner. Vertically or slanted is better than horizontal, for easier page turning.
- Skip the plastic wrappers or cellophane binders; they are a nuisance.
- Proofread your paper at least two or three times before submitting it. Even then, however, you'll spot an occasional typo or error. What to do? Minor errors may ordinarily be corrected by pen. Yet you'll find many professor and most professional or business supervisors will insist on error-free products.
- Retain a copy of what you write.
- Short essay papers usually don't need a separate title page. Save paper. Present your title at the start of your paper, leaving proper space before you begin your text. Put your name, date, and other necessary information in the upper right-hand corner of your first page. Here again, however, some instructors will ask that you put your name at the end of the paper, or even on the back of your last page, so they can read the paper without knowing who wrote it. Check on this.
- Strive for a consistent format on quotations, citations, punctuation, and indentation. When in doubt, check a reliable style handbook.

- On occasion you may want to append at the end of your essay a brief *Author's Note*. This is not a place for excuses or apologies, but rather a place to indicate your personal feelings about the topic or controversy, or how your views changed as you did the research and writing. It might be a place, too, to mention some unusual circumstance under which you wrote. Or perhaps you just want to note how joyous or exacting the assignment became. Once again, teachers and supervisors may object to this practice. You'll have to judge whether the context warrants an *Author's Note*.

Oh, and by the way, creative writers often ignore traditional rules and invent their own.

ON TRANSCENDING WRITER'S BLOCK

All writers, regardless of age, are daunted by writing assignments. Writers have to overcome fear and put anxiety on hold.

How does a writer overcome procrastination, get "in the zone," and encourage "flow"? "Like climbing a mountain, writing a book is exciting at the beginning, exhilarating at the end, but tedious, frustrating, and hair-raising in between," writes Ralph Keyes.³⁴

Keyes suggests "courage boosters" for writers; one or more of these may help you to transcend writer's block:

- read about successful writers, paying attention to their fears and how they dealt with them.
- take a writing course or two.
- attend an occasional writer's conference.
- join a serious writers' group.
- develop anxiety-easing rituals, no matter how eccentric.
- devise fear-taming work techniques no matter how gimmicky.
- write at times of day when you're most productive and least anxious.
- identify your censor-in-chief and mentally rehearse how to deal with that person.
- get to know yourself well enough not to be terrified by what escapes from within onto the page.
- convert fear into excitement.
- write.³⁵

Most "writing problems" are human problems. Courage and honesty are as important and perhaps more important than talent. Fearlessness and discipline are key. Yet nothing is as important, as noted earlier, as the urge to tell the truth, share stories, and say what we believe needs to be said.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Begin to write early enough so you have plenty of time to revise and proofread. If you can, put your edited draft aside, and reread it after it has receded a bit from memory. And, as noted, have a friend or roommate read your work. A later, detached reading will be as revealing as it is rewarding. Gaps between what you wrote and what you meant become apparent. Awkward transitions or unnecessary apologies jump out at you. Doubleheaders, redundancies, clichés, and "twinkies" pop up. Proofread your writing twice on your own. Remember the virtues of reading your work aloud. Ask a colleague, relative, or friend to read it too. We all learn from feedback, positive as well as critical.

Set high expectations for your research, yet not so high you paralyze your ability to get it done. Perfectionists seldom finish. Plus perfectionism undermines playfulness, creativity, and the liberating process of writing. Some people become so compulsive in the research stage that by the time they are ready to write, their data have become obsolete. "Analysis-paralysis" can undermine an otherwise healthy undertaking.

"Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life," writes Anne Lamott. "I think," she adds, "perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die." The truth is that messiness and improvisation are the writer's friend.³⁶ The main differences between effective writers and those who never get much written are discipline, focus, concentration, tenacity, and physical stamina.

Pace yourself. Too much time devoted to research often leaves too little for sophisticated writing. An executive friend of mine has a helpful 70 percent rule: Though having all the information would be perfect, having ~~90%~~ two-thirds of the available information usually ensures making the appropriate decision.

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Few scholars can obtain all the data, all the interviews, and all the evidence they'd like to have before making judgments. Executives or writers who wait for 100 percent assurances will probably still be waiting long after it has been worth the effort. Beware the "ready, aim-aim-aim" syndrome. Writers must be willing to make decisions, come to judgment, commit, and write. Set smart goals and realistic deadlines; schedule sensible cutoffs. Reward yourself on meeting these. Do your best, yet be prepared to move on to the next stage of your work.

Good writers invent their own rules and occasionally ignore traditional usage and style if these impede their writing. Mark Twain broke rules and told his stories with poetic and lyric descriptions, similes and colloquial turns of speech; Faulkner went on and on and on, and yet he succeeded because he made long sentences sing and paragraphs dance. Walt Whitman was a congenital rule-breaker. Hemingway redefined lean writing. James Joyce cherished breaking the mold.

Yet even the great ones acknowledge at least a few basic guidelines. To be good, you have to read and observe extensively. To write well you have to revise extensively. "I began to write seriously when I had taught myself the discipline necessary to achieve what I wanted," observes novelist Bernard Malamud. "When I reached that time, my words announced themselves to me." Revision, he notes, became not only essential but also one of the exquisite pleasures of writing. He would write everything three times: once to understand it, the second time to improve the prose, "and a third time to say what it still must say."³⁷

reached ?

Writing is a performing art. Yet unlike music, drama, or sports, no conductor, director or coach leads your reader through the performance. Word selection and punctuation are the only aids suggesting how fast or slow or loud the writing should be. Reading is a solitary, detached experience. Careless writing repels and confuses. Dull writing bores the reader. Active, clear writing, on the other hand, informs, persuades, entertains, empowers, liberates.³⁸

In the long run, learning to conduct research and to write well correlate highly with extensive reading of skillfully executed research projects and good writing. If you want to become an effective writer,

read classics, read great books, as many as possible, as soon as possible. Writers in the Western tradition invariably have read the major Greek classics, the Bible, and Shakespeare. Also read well-written, well-edited magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Keep a journal with your own comments on fine writing and what you like and dislike. Start a collection of words you might use. Heighten your awareness about the power of words.

Adopt gifted writers as your mentors. Read and reread your favorite writers, columnists, and social scientists. If you have no favorites, try Jefferson, Emerson, Lincoln, Twain, Churchill, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Russell Baker, Saul Bellow, Raymond Carver, Robertson Davies, Nadine Gordimer, Joe Klein, Anthony Lewis, William Manchester, David McCullough, John McPhee, Clinton Rossiter, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Lewis Thomas, Calvin Trillin, Barbara Tuchman, John Updike, Eudora Welty, Molly Ivins, Tim O'Brien, John Irving, George Will, and Garry Wills. Also read the Latin writers Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Manuel Puig. Read their earlier works. Discover why they are so good by trying a little of that "reverse engineering" mentioned earlier. Do they follow a clear, logical outline? How do they structure it? How do they capture your attention? How do they marshal evidence? What do they do to simplify, clarify, convince, and persuade?

Hemingway said the way a young writer learns the craft is just to go away and write. Yet Hemingway grew up on a steady diet of Mark Twain and other notable essayists. And after World War I, he went to Paris and enjoyed "tutorial sessions" with Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson. Young writers profit from sharing work with others and going over it, line by line.

Most important, the younger writer must find voice, purpose, and inner drive. "What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art," writes George Orwell. "Looking back," he adds, "I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally."³⁹ To write honestly, with power, voice and courage, you may

first have to make an appointment with yourself and come to terms with your personal values. You have to write from the “inside out” rather than the “outside in.”

Here are the questions readers will ask about your writing: Does it have focus, character, unity, and integrity? Does it have a clear beginning, a meaty middle, and a sound conclusion? Is it well researched and well written? Is your opening paragraph catchy enough to make us continue reading the paper? Is your evidence convincing? Does your paper have something new and fresh to say? Does it persuade? Did you learn and display this learning? Did we learn?

If you have important ideas to share, writing badly is better than not writing at all. Most of us are prisoners of compulsive teachers in our past who railed against sloppy sentences and couldn't have cared less about what we were trying to say.⁴⁰ This is the tyranny of form over substance. What we have to say is more important than the search for the perfect sentence. What's the use of elegant writing wholly allergic to substance? This problem reminds me of the person who could speak fluently in seven languages, yet had ~~nothing~~ of note to say in any of them.

little

Writing matters. But what matters even more is the power of ideas. Be brave. Writing is invariably an act of courage. Just as leaders define, defend, and promote important mutually shared values, so also writers help define and clarify critical choices. Writing is a grand opportunity to tell your story, to tell the truth, to advocate beliefs, and to share creative ideas. A writer writes to understand, teach, persuade, celebrate, criticize, caution, inspire, lead, entertain, and share stories.

Great writers help shape their times. Churchill's influence came from his ability to inspire by both spoken and written word. So also with Martin Luther King, Jr. His *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and his “I Have a Dream” speech galvanized the U.S. civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* helped launch impressive political movements. The writings of Karl Marx and Milton Friedman redefined economic debates in their day. Inspirational writers from Thomas Paine and Henry

Elie Wiesel

David Thoreau to ~~Dale Carnegie~~ and Richard Warren have transformed people's lives just as the writings of Peter Drucker recontextualized our understanding of modern management. The power of the pen (or word processor) may be different from the power of the sword yet should never be underestimated.

The first challenge of all writers is to write well; the second is to help us understand ourselves; the third is to take on cliches, myth, sentimentality, and hypocrisy. "One task of literature is to formulate questions and construct counter statements to the reigning pieties," wrote Susan Sontag. "And even when it is not oppositional, the arts gravitate toward contrariness."⁴¹

NOTES

- * Two earlier versions of this essay were published by Prentice Hall in 1990 and 1993. Several people have helped improve this work over the years, especially Carolyn Shultz, Margo Scribner, Serena Hoffman, David Lowland, Holly Carter, and Jon Goldstein.
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