On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction

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"Humor is the secret weapon of the nonfiction writer. It's secret because so few writers realize that humor is often their best tool – & sometimes their only tool – for making an important point.

If this strikes you as a paradox, you're not alone. Writers of humor live with the knowledge that many of their readers don't know what they are trying to do. I remember a reporter calling to ask how I happened to write a certain parody in *Life*. At the end he said, "Should I refer to you as a humorist? Or have you also written anything serious?"

The answers is that if you're trying to write humor, almost everything you do is serious. Few Americans understand this. We dismiss our humorists as triflers because they never settled down to "real" work. The Pulitzer Prizes go to authors like Ernest Hemingway & William Faulkner, who are (God knows) serious & therefore certified as men of literature. The prizes seldom go to people like George Ade, H. L. Mencken, Ring Lardner, S. J. Perelman, Art Buchwald, Jules Feiffer, Woody Allen & Garrison Keillor, who seem to be just fooling around.

They're just just fooling around. They are as serious in purpose as Hemingway or Faulkner – a national asset in forcing the country to see itself clearly. Humor, to them, is urgent work. It's an attempt to say important things in a special way that regular writers aren't getting said in a regular way – or if they are, it's so regular that nobody is reading it.

1 strong editorial cartoon is worth a hundred solemn editorials. 1 *Doonesbury* comic strip by Garry Trudeau is worth a thousand words of moralizing. 1 *Catch-22* or *Dr. Strangelove* is more powerful than all the books & movies that try to show war "as it is." Those 2 works of comic invention are still standard points of reference for anyone trying to warn us about the military mentality that could blow us all up tomorrow. Joseph Heller & Stanley Kubrick heightened the truth about war just enough to catch its lunacy, & we recognize it as lunacy. The joke is no joke.

This heightening of some crazy truth – to a level where it will be seen as crazy – is the essence of what serious humorists are trying to do. Here's 1 example of how they go about their mysterious work.

1 day in the 1960s I realized that half the girls & women in America were suddenly wearing hair curlers. It was a weird new blight, all the more puzzling because I couldn't understand when the women took the curlers out. There was no evidence that they ever did – they wore them to the supermarket & to church & on dates. So what was the wonderful event they were saving the wonderful hairdo for?

I tried for a year to think of a way to write about this phenomenon. I could have said "'It's an outrage" or "Have these women no pride?" But that would have been a sermon, & sermons are the death of humor. The writer must find some comic device – satire, parody, irony, lampoon, nonsense – that he can use to disguise his serious point. Very often he never finds it, & the point doesn't get made.

Luckily, my vigil was at last rewarded. I was browsing at a newsstand & saw 4 magazines side by side: *Hairdo, Celebrity Hairdo, Combout* & *Pouf*. I bought all 4 – to the alarm of the newsdealer – & found a whole world of journalism devoted solely to hair: life from the neck up, but not including the brain. The magazines had diagrams of elaborate roller positions & columns in which a girl could send her roller problem to the editors for their advice. That was what I needed. I invented a magazine called *Haircurl* & wrote a series of parody letters & replies. The piece ran in *Life* & it began like this:

" – Zinsser, 2016, pp. 195–

Part IV: Attitudes

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"I wrote 1 book about baseball & one about jazz. But it never occurred to me to write 1 of them in sports English & the other in jazz English. I tried to write them both in the best English I could, in my usual style. Though the books were widely different in subject, I wanted readers to know that they were hearing from the same person. It was *my* book about baseball & *my* book about jazz. Other writers would write *their* book. My commodity as a writer, whatever I'm writing about, is me. & your commodity is you. Don't alter your voice to fit your subject. Develop 1 voice that readers will recognize when they hear it on the page, a voice that's enjoyable not only in its musical line but in its avoidance of sounds that would cheapen its tone: breeziness & condescension & clichés.

Let's start with breeziness.

There is a kind of writing that sounds so relaxed that you think you hear the author talking to you. E. B. White was probably its best practitioner, though many other masters of the style – James Thurber, V. S. Pritchett, Lewis Thomas – come to mind. I'm partial to it because it's a style I've always tried to write. The common assumption is that the style is effortless. In fact the opposite is true: the effortless style is achieved by strenuous effort & constant refining. The nails of grammar & syntax are in place & the English is as good as the writer can make it.

Here's how a typical piece by E. B. White begins:

> I spent several days & night in mid-September with an ailing pig & I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, & I lived, & things might easily have gone the other way around & none left to do the accounting.

The sentence is so folksy that we imagine ourselves sitting on the porch of White's house in Maine. White is in a rocking chair, puffing on a pipe, & the words just tumble out in his storyteller's voice. But look at the sentence again. Nothing about it is accidental. It's a disciplined act of writing. The grammar is formal, the words are plain & precise, & the cadences are those of a poet. That's the effortless style at its best: a methodical act of composition that disarms us with its generated warmth. The writer sounds confident; he's not trying to ingratiate himself with the reader.

Inexperienced writers miss this point. They think that all they have to do to achieve a casual effect is to be "just folks" – good old Betty or Bob chatting over the back fence. They want to be a pal to the reader. They're so eager not to appear formal that they don't even try to write good English. What they write is the breezy style.

How would a breezy writer handle E. B. White's vigil with the pig? He might sound like this:

> Every stay up late babysitting for a sick porker? Believe you me, a guy can lose a heckuva lot of shut-eye. I did that gig for 3 nights back in September & my better half thought I'd lost my marbles. (Just kidding, Pam!) Frankly, the whole deal kind of bummed me out. Because, you see, the pig up & died on me. To tell you the truth, I wasn't feeling in the pink myself, so I suppose it could have been yours truly & not old Porky who kicked the bucket. & you can bet your bottom dollar Mr. Pig wasn't going to write a book about it!

There's no need to labor all the reasons why this stuff is so terrible. It's crude. It's corny. It's verbose. It's contemptuous of the English language. It's condescending. (I stop reading writers who say "You see.") But the most pathetic thing about the breezy style is that it's harder to read than good English. In the writer's attempt to ease the reader's journey he has littered the path with obstacles: cheap slang, shoddy sentences, windy philosophizing. E. B. White's style is much easier to read. He knows that the tools of grammar haven't survived for so many centuries by chance; they are props the reader needs & subconsciously wants. Nobody ever stopped reading E. B. White or V. S. Pritchett because the writing was too good. But readers will stop reading you if they think you are talking down to them. Nobody wants to be patronized.

Write with respect for the English language at its best – & for readers at their best. If you're smitten by the urge to try the breezy style, read what you've written aloud & see if you like the sound of your voice.

Finding a voice that your readers will enjoy is largely a matter of taste. Saying that isn't much help – taste is a quality so intangible that it can't even be defined. But we know it when we meet it. A woman with taste in clothes delights us with her ability to turn herself out in a combination that's not only stylish & surprising, but exactly right. She knows what works & what doesn't.

For writers & other creative artists, knowing what *not* to do is a major component of taste. 2 jazz pianists may be equally proficient. The one with taste will put every note to useful work in telling his or her story; the one without taste will drench us in ripples & other unnecessary ornaments. Painters with taste will trust their eye to tell them what needs to be on the canvas & what doesn't; a painter without taste will give us a landscape that's too pretty, or too cluttered, or too gaudy – anyway, too something. A graphic designer with taste knows that less is more: that design is the servant of the written word. A designer without taste will smother the writing in background tints & swirls & decorative frills.

I realize I'm trying to pin down a matter that's subjective; 1 person's beautiful object is somebody else's kitsch. Taste can also change from 1 decade to another – yesterday's charm is derided today as junk, but it will be back in vogue tomorrow, certified again as charming. *So why do I even raise the issue?* Just to remind you that it exists. Taste is an invisible current that runs through writing, & you should be aware of it.

Sometimes, in fact, it's visible. Every art form has a core of verities that survive the fickleness of time. There must be something innately pleasing in the proportions of the Parthenon; Western man continues to let the Greeks of 2000 years ago design his public buildings, as anyone walking around Washington, D.C., soon discovers. The fugues of Bach have a timeless elegance that's rooted in the timeless laws of mathematics.

Does writing have any such guideposts for us? Not many; writing is the expression of every person's individuality, & we know that we like when it comes along. Again, however, much can be gained by knowing what to omit. Clichés, for instance. If a writer lives in blissful ignorance that clichés are the kiss of death, if in the final analysis he leaves no stone unturned to use them, we can infer that he lacks an instinct for what gives language its freshness. Faced with a choice between the novel & the banal, he goes unerringly for the banal. His voice is the voice of a hack.

Not that clichés are easy to stamp out. They are everywhere in the air around us, familiar friends just waiting to be helpful, ready to express complex ideas for us in the shorthand form of metaphor. That's how they become clichés in the 1st place, & even careful writers use quite a few on their 1st draft. But after that we are given a chance to clean them out. Clichés are 1 of the things you should keep listening for when you rewrite & read your successive drafts aloud. Notice how incriminating they sound, convicting you of being satisfied to use the same old chestnuts instead of making an effort to replace them with fresh phrases of your own. Clichés are the enemy of taste.

Extend the point beyond individual clichés to your larger use of language. Again, freshness is crucial. Taste chooses words that have surprise, strength & precision. Non-taste slips into the breezy vernacular of the alumni magazine's class notes – a world where people in authority are the top brass or the powers that be. What exactly is wrong with "the top brass"? Nothing – & everything. Taste knows that it's better to call people in authority what they are: officials, executives, chairmen, presidents, directors, managers. Non-taste reaches for the corny synonym, which has the further disadvantage of being imprecise; exactly *which* company officers are the top brass? Non-taste uses "umpteenth." & "zillions." Non-taste uses "period": "She said she didn't want to hear any more about it. Period."

But finally taste is a mixture of qualities that are beyond analyzing: an ear that can hear the difference between a sentence that limps & a sentence that lilts, an intuition that knows when a casual or a vernacular phrase dropped into a formal sentence will not only sound right but will seem to be the inevitable choice. (E. B. White was a master of that balancing act.) Does this man that taste can be learned? Yes & no. Perfect taste, like perfect pitch, is a gift from God. But a certain amount can be acquired. The trick is to study writers who have it.

Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft. Bach & Picasso didn't spring full-blown as Bach & Picasso; they needed models. This is especially true of writing. Find the best writers in the fields that interest you & read their work aloud. Get their voice & their taste into your ear – their attitude toward language. Don't worry that by imitating them you'll lose your own voice & your own identity. Soon enough you will shed those skins & become who you are supposed to become.

By reading other writers you also plug yourself into a longer tradition that enriches you. Sometimes you will tap a vein of eloquence or racial memory that gives your writing a depth it could never attain on its own. Let me illustrate what I mean by a roundabout route.

Ordinarily I don't read the proclamations issued by state officials to designate important days of the year as important days of the year. But in 1976, when I was teaching at Yale, the governor of Connecticut, Ella Grasso, had the pleasant idea of reissuing the Thanksgiving Proclamation written 40 years earlier by Governor Wilbur Cross, which she called "a masterpiece of eloquence." I often wonder whether eloquence has vanished from American life, or whether we even still consider it a goal worth striving for. So I studied Governor Cross's words to see how they had weathered the passage of time, that cruel judge of the rhetoric of earlier generations. I was delighted to find that I agreed with Governor Grasso. It was a piece written by a master:

> Time out of mind at this turn of the seasons when the hardy oak leaves rustle in the wind & the frost gives a tang to the air & the dusk falls early & the friendly evenings lengthen under the heel or Orion, it has seemed good to our people to join together in praising the Creator & Preserver, who has brought us by a way that we did not know to the end of another year. In observance of this custom, I appoint Thursday, the 26th of November, as a day of Public Thanksgiving for the blessings that have been our common lot & have placed our beloved stat with the favored regions of earth – for all the creature comforts: the yield of the soil that has fed us & the richer yield from labor of every kind that has sustained our lives – & for all those things, as dear as breath to the body, that quicken man's faith in his manhood, that nourish & strengthen his word & act; for honor held above price; for steadfast courage & zeal in the long, long search after truth; for liberty & for justice freely granted by each to his fellow & so as freely enjoyed; & for the crowning glory & mercy of peace upon our land – that we may humbly take heart of these blessings as we gather once again with solemn & festive rites to keep our Harvest Home.

Governor Grasso added a postscript urging the citizens of Connecticut "to renew their dedication to the spirit of sacrifice & commitment which the Pilgrims invoked during their 1st harsh winter in the New World," & I made a mental note to look at Orion that night. I was glad to be reminded that I was living in 1 of the favored regions of earth. I was also glad to be reminded that peace is not the only crowning glory to be thankful for. So is the English language when it is gracefully used

for the public good. The cadences of Jefferson, Lincoln, Churchill, Roosevelt & Adlai Stevenson came rolling down to me. (The cadences of Eisenhower, Nixon & the 2 Bushes did not.)

I posted the Thanksgiving Proclamation on a bulletin board for my students to enjoy. From their comments I realized that several of them thought I was being facetious. Knowing my obsession with simplicity, they assumed that I regarded Governor Cross's message as florid excess.

The incident left me with several questions. Had I sprung Wilbur Cross's prose on a generation that had never been exposed to nobility of language as a means of addressing the populace? I couldn't recall a single attempt since John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech in 1961. (Mario Cuomo & Jesse Jackson would partly restore my faith.) This was a generation reared on television, where the picture is valued more than the word – where the word, in fact, is devalued, used as mere chatter & often misused & mispronounced. It was also a generation reared on music – songs & rhythms meant primarily to be heard & felt. With so much noise in the air, was any American child being trained to listen? Was anyone calling attention to the majesty of a well-constructed sentence?

My other question raised a more subtle mystery: what is th line that separates eloquence from bombast? Why are we exalted by the words of Wilbur Cross & anesthetized by the speeches of most politicians & public officials who ply us with oratorical ruffles & flourishes?

Part of the answer takes us back to taste. A writer with an ear for language will reach for fresh imagery & avoid phrases that are trite. The hack will reach for those very clichés, thinking he will enrich his thoughts with currency that is, as he would put it, tried & true. Another part of the answer lies in simplicity. Writing that will endure tends to consist of words that are short & strong; words that sedate are words of 3, 4 & 5 syllables, mostly of Latin origin, many of them ending in "ion" & embodying a vague concept. In Wilbur Cross's Thanksgiving Proclamation there are no 4-syllable words & only 10 3-syllable words, 3 of which are proper nouns he was stuck with. Notice how many of the governor's words are anything but vague: leaves, wind, frost, air, evening, earth, comforts, soil, labor, breath, body, justice, courage, peace, land, rites, home. They are homely words in the best sense – they catch the rhythm of the seasons & the dailiness of life. Also notice that all of them are nouns. After verbs, plain nouns are your strongest tools; they resonate with emotion.

But ultimately eloquence runs on a deeper current. It moves us with what it leaves unsaid, touching off echoes in what we already know from our reading, our religion & our heritage. Eloquence invites us to bring some part of ourselves to the transaction. It was no accident that Lincoln's speeches resounded with echoes of the King James Bible; he knew it almost by heart from his boyhood, & he had so soaked himself in its sonorities that his formal English was more Elizabethan than American. The 2nd Inaugural Address reverberates with Biblical phrases & paraphrases: "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged." The 1st half of the sentence borrows a metaphor from Genesis, the 2nd half reshapes a famous command in Matthew, & "a just God" is from Isaiah.

If this speech affects me more than any other American document, it's not only because I know that Lincoln was killed 5 weeks later, or because I'm moved by all the pain that culminated in this plea for a reconciliation that would have malice toward none & charity for all. It's also because Lincoln tapped some of Western man's oldest teachings about slavery, clemency & judgment. His words carried stern overtones for the men & women who heard him in 1865, reared, as he was, on the Bible. But even in the 21st century it's hard not to feel a wrath almost too ancient to grasp in Lincoln's notion that God might will the Civil War to continue "until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, & until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3000 years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true & righteous altogether."

Wilbur Cross's Thanksgiving Proclamation also echoes with trusts that we know in our bones. To such mysteries as the changing of the seasons & the bounty of the earth we bring strong emotions of our own. Who hasn't looked with awe at Orion? To such democratic processes as "the long search after truth" & "liberty & justice freely granted" we bring fragments of our own searches after truth, our own grantings & receivings, in a nation where so many human rights have been won & so many still elude us. Governor Cross doesn't take our time to explain these processes, & I'm grateful to him for that. I hate to think how many clichés a hack orator would marshal to tell us far more – & nourish us far less.

Therefore remember the uses of the past when you tell your story. What moves us in writing that has regional or ethnic roots – Southern writing, African-American writing, Jewish-American writing – is the sound of voices far older than the narrator's, talking in cadences that are more than ordinarily rich. Toni Morrison, 1 of the most eloquent of black writers, once said: "I remember the language of the people I grew up with. Language was so important to them. All that power was in it. & grace & metaphor. Some of it was very formal & Biblical, because the habit is that when you have something important to say you go into parable, if you're from Africa, or you go into another level of language. I wanted to use language that way, because my feeling was that a black novel was not black because I wrote it, or because there were black people in it, or because it was about black things. It was the style. It had a certain style. It was inevitable. I couldn't describe it, but I could produce it."

Go with what seems inevitable in your own heritage. Embrace it & it may lead you to eloquence." – Zinsser, 2016, pp. 217–225

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References

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