

# ENG100:

# Effective

# Writing



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## CLASS 1.1 : INTRODUCTION

- actively engage with the readings
  - Annotating readings helps with retention and engagement
  - underline key phrases and annotate in the margins
- "Binge" reading isn't the best method
- Read like a writer

### GRAMMAR GIRL : Sentence length

- leave out a subject, verb or necessary object, it becomes a fragment
- medium sized sentences. But include varying sentence length. Do NOT fall into a monotonous, medium sized rhythm that anesthetizes readers.
- most sentences should have no more than 30/40 words - it will lose the reader's attention span
- Microsoft word does notice long sentences & sentence fragments

### How to write clear sentences

- Good writing is clear and concise.
  - cut modifiers like 'very', 'totally', 'actually'
    - ↳ deadwood phrases
1. front-load your copy : put imp. info where eyes will spot immediately [headlines, first para, subject lines]
  2. Organize to help readers who skim
  3. Cut anything that isn't pulling its weight

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LITERARY  
HUB

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VIA ALFRED A. KNOPF

# Joan Didion: Why I Write

it is often difficult to establish what we think before we have put it down in words

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." \* Analysis below \*

By Joan Didion

January 26, 2021

A lot of her explanations for why write has to do with I, me, the self. It's a process of self discovery of figuring out who she is, not just as a writer, but what she does and doesn't know.

Of course I stole the title for this talk from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I ↳ the entire piece is an answer to the question.

I The answer takes the form of an argument

I

So, Didion talks a lot about using writing to clarify what she calls the shimmering pictures in her mind but I've already and I've already mentioned this a little bit. But is she talking about actual pictures. Maybe sometimes, sometimes but not always so she's using pictures in a less literal sense right she's talking about her own thoughts and experiences and ideas the images that stick in her mind that she feels she needs to write about in order to figure out to stabilize and clarify and this is, I think this is what she's getting at with that. With that qualifier of shimmering so they're not just pictures they're shimmering pictures and you can think of, you know, if you see you ever seen a movie or been in a desert yourself, I think that's what she's getting at is that these thoughts and ideas and impressions. They're always kind of unstable they're always kind of shimmering and the process of writing for her as a way to stabilize them as a way to really kind of make them firmer and really figure out what they actually mean they actually look like.

So, the essay actually starts quite forcefully, she actually uses the word aggressive in this passage, and she's arguing that no matter how much we try to disguise it writing is the writers attempt to bring the reader around to their way of thinking. So an act of persuasion by writer by writing writers try to convince the reader to make them understand things in a certain way. And that's where that line comes from Listen to me see it my way change your mind. And I think this is almost like a mantra, a mantra you can keep in mind as you're writing like these should essentially be your purposes when you're writing for a reader, listen to me see up my way, change your mind.

In many ways, writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

I stole the title not only because the words sounded right but because they seemed to sum up, in a no-nonsense way, all I have to tell you. Like many writers I have only this one "subject," this one "area": the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. I may have other interests: I am "interested," for example, in marine biology, but I don't flatter myself that you would come out to hear me talk about it. I am not a scholar. I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word "intellectual" I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts. During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.

*article about  
why she writes:  
her main subject*

All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.

*supporting para: she does not think in abstract*

→ impossible to stop

In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered, by everyone I knew then and for that matter have known since, the peripheral. I would try to contemplate the Hegelian dialectic and would find myself concentrating instead on a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor. I would try to read linguistic theory and would find myself wondering instead if the lights were on in the Bevatron up the hill. When I say that I was wondering if the lights were on in the Bevatron you might immediately suspect, if you deal in ideas at all, that I was registering the Bevatron as a political symbol, thinking in shorthand about the military-industrial complex and its role in the university community, but you would be wrong. I was only wondering if the lights were on in the Bevatron, and how they looked. A physical fact.

*writing @ Berkeley didn't let her talk about the ideas that actually mean something to her*

I had trouble graduating from Berkeley, not because of this inability to deal with ideas—I was majoring in English, and I could locate the house-and-garden imagery in *The Portrait of a Lady* as well as the next person, “imagery” being by definition the kind of specific that got my attention—but simply because I had neglected to take a course in Milton. For reasons which now sound baroque I needed a degree by the end of that summer, and the English department finally agreed, if I would come down from Sacramento every Friday and talk about the cosmology of *Paradise Lost*, to certify me proficient in Milton. I did this. Some Fridays I took the Greyhound bus, other Fridays I caught the Southern Pacific’s City of San Francisco on the last leg of its transcontinental trip. I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the earth at the center of his universe in *Paradise Lost*, the central question of at least one century and a topic about which I wrote ten thousand words that summer, but I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco’s dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Strait into a grayed and obscurely sinister light. In short my attention was always on the

periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch, on the butter, and the Greyhound bus. During those years I was traveling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers: I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think. All I knew then was what I couldn't do. All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.

Which was a writer.

By which I mean not a “good” writer or a “bad” writer but simply a writer, a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper. Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. Why did the oil refineries around Carquinez Strait seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956? Why have the night lights in the Bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years? *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?*

Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem

to have been out of school the year the rules  
were mentioned.

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges. There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions. People on hallucinogens describe the same perception of objects. I'm not a schizophrenic, nor do I take hallucinogens, but certain images do shimmer for me. Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.

*she calls the pictures in her mind, the pictures that shimmer at the edges*

Just as I meant "shimmer" literally I mean "grammar" literally. Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that

ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. *Nota bene:*

**It tells you.**

You don't tell it.

Let me show you what I mean by pictures in the mind. I began *Play It as It Lays* just as I have begun each of my novels, with no notion of “character” or “plot” or even “incident.” I had only two pictures in my mind, more about which later, and a technical intention, which was to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all. About the pictures: the first was of white space. Empty space. This was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book—a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a “white” book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams—and yet this picture told me no “story,” suggested no situation. The second picture did. This second picture was of something actually witnessed. A young woman with long hair and a short white halter dress walks through the casino at the Riviera in Las Vegas at one in the morning. She crosses the casino alone and picks up a house telephone. I watch her because I have heard her paged, and recognize her name: she is a minor actress I see around Los Angeles from time to time, in places like Jax and once in a gynecologist’s office in the Beverly Hills Clinic, but have never met. I know nothing about her. Who is paging her? Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this? It was precisely this moment in Las Vegas that made *Play It as It Lays* begin to tell itself to me, but the moment appears in the novel only obliquely, in a chapter which begins:

Maria made a list of things she would never do. She would never: walk through the Sands or Caesar's alone after midnight. She would never: ball at a party, do S-M unless she wanted to, borrow furs from Abe Lipsey, deal. She would never: carry a Yorkshire in Beverly Hills.

That is the beginning of the chapter and that is also the end of the chapter, which may suggest what I meant by "white space." *The non-academic writing she started to do in her novels was the kind that allowed her to learn, discover things, that meant something to her*

I recall having a number of pictures in my mind when I began the novel I just finished, *A Book of Common Prayer*. As a matter of fact one of these pictures was of that Bevatron I mentioned, although I would be hard put to tell you a story in which nuclear energy figures. Another was a newspaper photograph of a hijacked 707 burning on the desert in the Middle East. Another was the night view from a room in which I once spent a week with paratyphoid, a hotel room on the Colombian coast. My husband and I seemed to be on the Colombian coast representing the United States of America at a film festival (I recall invoking the name Jack Valenti a lot, as if its reiteration could make me well), and it was a bad place to have fever, not only because my indisposition offended our hosts but because every night in this hotel the generator failed. The lights went out. The elevator stopped. My husband would go to the event of the evening and make excuses for me and I would stay alone in this hotel room, in the dark. I remember

standing at the window trying to call Bogotá (the telephone seemed to work on the same principle as the generator) and watching the night wind come up and wondering what I was doing eleven degrees off the equator with a fever of 103. The view from that window definitely figures in *A Book of Common Prayer*, as does the burning 707, and yet none of these pictures told me the story I needed.

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges.

The picture that did, the picture that shimmered and made these other images coalesce, was of the Panama airport at 6 am. I was in this airport only once, on a plane to Bogotá that stopped for an hour to refuel, but the way it looked that morning remained superimposed on everything I saw until the day I finished *A Book of Common Prayer*. I lived in that airport for several years. I can still feel the hot air when I step off the plane, can see the heat already rising off the tarmac at 6:00 a.m. I can feel the skirt damp and wrinkled on my legs. I can feel the asphalt stick to my sandals. I remember the big tail of a Pan American plane floating motionless down at the end of the tarmac. I remember the sound of a slot machine in the waiting room. I could tell you that I remember a particular woman in the airport, an American woman, a *norteamericana*, a thin *norteamericana* about forty who wore a big square emerald in lieu of a wedding ring, but there was no such woman there.

I put this woman in the airport later. I made this woman up, just as I later made up a country to put the airport in, and a family to run the country. This woman in the airport is neither catching a plane nor meeting one. She is ordering tea in the airport coffee shop. In fact she is not simply “ordering” tea but insisting that the water be boiled, in front of her, for twenty minutes. Why is this woman in this airport? Why is she going nowhere, where has she been? Where did she get that big emerald? What derangement, or disassociation, makes her believe that her will to see the water boiled can possibly prevail?

She had been going to one airport or another for four months, one could see it, looking at the visas on her passport. All those airports where Charlotte Douglas’s passport had been stamped would have looked alike. Sometimes the sign on the tower would say “BIENVENIDOS” and sometimes the sign on the tower would say “BIENVENUE,” some places were wet and hot and others were dry and hot, but at each of these airports the pastel concrete walls would rust and stain and the swamp off the runway would be littered with the fuselages of cannibalized Fairchild F-227s and the water would need boiling.

I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.  
I knew about airports.

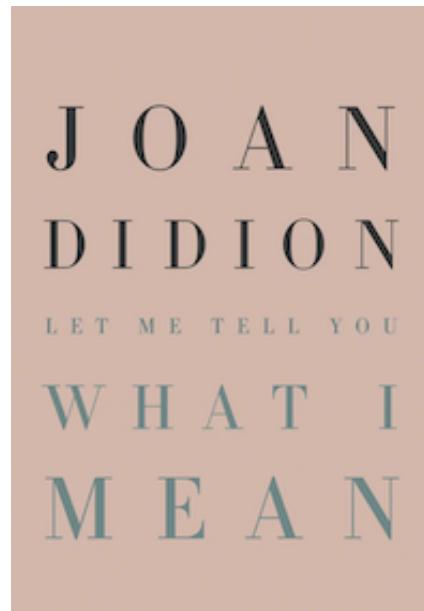
These lines appear about halfway through *A Book of Common Prayer*, but I wrote them during the second week I worked on the book, long before I had any idea where Charlotte Douglas had been or why she went to airports. Until I wrote these lines I had no character called Victor in mind: the necessity for mentioning a name, and the name Victor, occurred to me as I wrote the sentence. *I knew why*

*Charlotte went to the airport* sounded incomplete. *I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not* carried a little more narrative drive. Most important of all, until I wrote these lines I did not know who “I” was, who was telling the story. I had intended until that moment that the “I” be no more than the voice of the author, a nineteenth-century omniscient narrator. But there it was:

“I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.”

“I knew about airports.”

This “I” was the voice of no author in my house. This “I” was someone who not only knew why Charlotte went to the airport but also knew someone called Victor. Who was Victor? Who was this narrator? Why was this narrator telling me this story? Let me tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write a novel.



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# WWA #6 : Field Report

## Elevator pitch

Mine:

Peers: Emily (Gossip Girl), Yifei (World War Z)

My Intro: I have always been a Disney fiend, looked up at Disney princesses when I was young. Recently, when I was rewatching the Disney movies with my little sister, I began to see them in a whole new light

- My MRP aims to analyse the misogynistic behaviour of Disney by looking at lyrics of Disney princess songs
- damsel in distress trope
- no vocational or educational desires, just wanna find prince charming & live happily ever after

## Publication Pitch

Peers: SAME

Spotify podcast

Mine: I would chose a personal as the publication venue for my research project as it provides a personal opinion on the misogynistic behavior of Disney in the portrayal of Disney princesses

My primary audience is young girls, particularly teens but can be targeted to a broader audience as it uses simple jargon to convey the message which can be understood by most.

I hope to reach young girls who look up to Disney princesses and wish to be them when they are older. Disney portrays its princesses as one-dimensional characters with no vocational or educational desires, whose life's ambition is to find their "happy-ever-after" prince.

I chose a Spotify podcast, as I assume many youngsters would be using that platform

