

Here, in short, is what I want to tell you.  
Know what each sentence says,  
What it doesn't say,  
And what it implies.  
Of these, the hardest is knowing what each sentence  
actually says.

At first, it will help to make short sentences,  
Short enough to feel the variations in length.  
Leave space between them for the things that words  
can't really say.

Pay attention to rhythm, first and last.

Imagine it this way:  
One by one, each sentence takes the stage.  
It says the very thing it comes into existence to say.  
Then it leaves the stage.  
It doesn't help the next one up or the previous one  
down.  
It doesn't wave to its friends in the audience  
Or pause to be acknowledged or applauded.  
It doesn't talk about what it's saying.  
It simply says its piece and leaves the stage.

This isn't the whole art of writing well.  
It isn't even most of it.  
But it's a place to begin, and to begin from again and  
again.

Short sentences aren't hard to make.  
The difficulty is forcing yourself to keep them short.

There are innumerable ways to write badly.  
The usual way is making sentences that don't say what  
you think they do.  
Which can the reader possibly believe? Your sentences  
or you?

The only link between you and the reader is the sen-  
tence you're making.  
There's no sign of your intention apart from the sen-  
tences themselves,  
And every sentence has its own motives, its own  
commitments,  
Quite apart from yours.  
It adheres to a set of rules—grammar, syntax, the his-  
tory and customs of the language, a world of echoes  
and allusions and social cues—that pay no heed to your  
intentions,  
If you don't heed those rules.

It's hard to pay attention to what your words are actu-  
ally saying.  
As opposed to what you mean to say or what you think  
they're saying.  
Knowing what you're trying to say is always important.  
But knowing what you've actually said is crucial.  
It's easier to tell what you're saying in a short sentence.

You've been taught to believe that short sentences are  
childish,  
Merely a first step toward writing longer sentences.  
You'd like to think your education has carried you well  
past short sentences.  
But you've been delivered into a wilderness of false  
assumptions and bad habits,  
A desert of jargon and weak constructions, a land of  
linguistic barbarism,  
A place where it's nearly impossible to write with clar-  
ity or directness,  
Without clichés or meaningless phrases.  
True, you can sound quite grown-up, quite authorita-  
tive, in the manner of college professors and journalists  
and experts in every field.

(You may be a college professor, a journalist, or  
an expert in some field.)

How well do they write?  
How much do you enjoy reading them?

You'll make long sentences again, but they'll be short  
sentences at heart.  
Sentences listening for the silence around them.  
Listening for their own pulse.

Here's an experiment:  
Pay attention to all the noise in your head as you go  
about writing.

Much of it is what you already know about writing, which includes:

The voices of former teachers, usually uttering rules. Rules like, "Don't begin sentences with 'and.'"

(It's okay. You can begin sentences with "and.")

The things everybody knows or assumes about writers and how they work,

Whether they're true or not.

The things you feel you must or mustn't do, without really knowing why.

The things that make you wonder, "Am I allowed to . . . ?"

(Yes, you're allowed to. Not forever and always, but until you decide for yourself what works and what doesn't.)

Write these things down—the contents of the noise in your head as you write.

You can't revise or discard what you don't consciously recognize.

These assumptions and prohibitions and obligations are the imprint of your education and the culture you live in.

Distrust them.

What you don't know about writing is also a form of knowledge, though much harder to grasp.

Try to discern the shape of what you don't know and

why you don't know it,

Whenever you get a glimpse of your ignorance.

Don't fear it or be embarrassed by it.

Acknowledge it.

What you don't know and why you don't know it are information too.

Let's make a simple list from the preceding lines:

1. What you've been taught.
2. What you assume is true because you've heard it repeated by others.
3. What you feel, no matter how subtle.
4. What you don't know.
5. What you learn from your own experience.

These are the ways we know nearly everything about the world around us.

Keep them in mind, especially when you begin to think about *what* to write and *how* to write about it.

Let's think about what you already know.

In your head, you'll probably find two models for writing.

One is the familiar model taught in high school and college—a matter of outlines and drafts and transitions and topic sentences and argument.

The other model is its antithesis—the way poets and novelists are often thought to write.

Words used to describe this second model include “genius,” “inspiration,” “flow,” and “natural,” sometimes even “organic.”

Both models are useless.

I should qualify that sentence.

Both models are completely useless.

Loosely linked to these models are two assumptions:

1. Many people assume there's a correlation between sentence length and the sophistication or complexity of an idea or thought—even intelligence generally.

There isn't.

2. Many people assume there's a correlation between the reader's experience while reading and the writer's experience while writing—her state of mind, her ease or difficulty in putting words together.

There isn't.

You can say smart, interesting, complicated things using short sentences.

How long is a good idea?

Does it become less good if it's expressed in two sentences instead of one?

Learn to distrust words like “genius,” “inspiration,” “flow,” “natural,” and “organic” when you think about your work.

(Don't use them when you talk about it either.)

They have nothing to do with writing

And everything to do with venerating writers.

Why short sentences?

They'll sound strange for a while until you can hear what they're capable of.

But they carry you back to a prose you can control, To a stage in your education when your diction—your vocabulary—was under control too.

Short sentences make it easier to examine the properties of the sentence.

(Learn to diagram sentences. It's easy.)

They help eliminate transitions.

They make ambiguity less likely and easier to detect.

There's nothing wrong with well-made, strongly constructed, purposeful long sentences.

But long sentences often tend to collapse or break down or become opaque or trip over their awkwardness.

They're pasted together with false syntax

And rely on words like “with” and “as” to lengthen the sentence.

SEVERAL SHORT SENTENCES ABOUT WRITING

They're short on verbs, weak in syntactic vigor,  
Full of floating, unattached phrases, often out of position.  
And worse—the end of the sentence commonly for-  
gets its beginning,  
As if the sentence were a long, weary road to the  
wrong place.

Writing short sentences restores clarity, the directness  
of subject and verb.  
It forces you to discard the strong elements of long  
sentences,  
Like relative pronouns and subordinate clauses,  
And the weak ones as well:  
Prepositional chains, passive constructions, and depen-  
dent phrases.

Writing short sentences will help you write strong,  
balanced sentences of any length.  
Strong, lengthy sentences are really just strong, short  
sentences joined in various ways.

You don't have to write short sentences forever.  
Only until you find a compelling reason for a long  
sentence  
That's as clear and direct as a short sentence.  
You'll be tempted to say, "But short sentences sound  
so choppy."  
Only a string of choppy sentences sounds choppy.  
Think about variation and rhythm,

II

The rhythm created by two or three sentences working  
together,

Rhythm as sound and echo but also rhythm as  
placement.

Learn to use the position of a sentence, the position of  
a word—

First? last?—as an intensifier, an accent in itself.

Can a short sentence sound like a harbinger? An  
adumbration?

Can it sound like a reprise or a coda?

Listen.

How short is short?

That depends on the length of the sentences you're  
used to writing.

One way to keep sentences short is to keep the space  
between them as empty as possible.

I don't mean the space between the period at the end of  
one sentence and the first word of the next.

I mean the space between the period and the *subject* of  
the next sentence.

That space often gets filled with unnecessary words.  
Most sentences need no preamble—or postlude.

It's perfectly possible to make wretched short sentences.  
But it's hard to go on making them for long because  
they sound so wretched

And because it's easy to fix them.

Making them longer is *not* the way to fix them.

To make short sentences, you need to remove every unnecessary word.

Your idea of *necessary* will change as your experience changes.

The fact that you've included a word in the sentence you're making

Says nothing about its necessity.

See which words the sentence can live without,

No matter how inconspicuous they are.

Every word is optional until it proves to be essential,  
Something you can only determine by removing words one by one

And seeing what's lost or gained.

Listen for the sentence that's revealed as you remove one word after another.

You'll hear the improvement when you find it.

Try, for instance, removing the word "the."

See when the sentence can do without it and when it can't.

Without extraneous words or phrases or clauses, there will be room for implication.

The longer the sentence, the less it's able to imply,  
And writing by implication should be one of your goals.

Implication is almost nonexistent in the prose that surrounds you,

The prose of law, science, business, journalism, and most academic fields.

It was nonexistent in the way you were taught to write. That means you don't know how to use one of a writer's most important tools:

The ability to suggest more than the words seem to allow,

The ability to speak to the reader in silence.

Why are we talking about sentences?

Why not talk about the work as a whole, about shape, form, genre, the book, the feature story, the profile, even the paragraph?

The answer is simple.

Your job as a writer is making sentences.

Most of your time will be spent making sentences in your head.

In your head.

Did no one ever tell you this?

*That* is the writer's life.

Never imagine you've left the level of the sentence behind.

Most of the sentences you make will need to be killed.  
The rest will need to be fixed.  
This will be true for a long time.

The hard part now is deciding which to kill and which to fix and how to fix them.

This will get much, much easier, but the decision making will never end.

A writer's real work is the endless winnowing of sentences,

The relentless exploration of possibilities,  
The effort, over and over again, to see in what you started out to say

The possibility of saying something you didn't know you could.

Shape, form, structure, genre, the whole—these have a way of clarifying themselves when sentences become clear.

Once you can actually see your thoughts and perceptions, It's surprising how easy it is to arrange them or discover their arrangement.

This always comes as a revelation.

---

What we're working on precedes genre.  
For our purposes, genre is meaningless.  
It's a method of shelving books and awarding prizes.

Every form of writing turns the world into language.  
Fiction and nonfiction resemble each other far more closely than they do any actual event.

Their techniques are essentially the same, apart from sheer invention.

This is not to disparage accuracy, sound research, and impartiality.

Those are wonderful tools for novelists.

I'm interested in the genre of the sentence,  
The genre that's always overlooked.

Many writers seem to believe we live in a universe of well-defined literary forms:

The memoir, the profile, the feature, the first novel, the book proposal,

A list of predetermined, prescriptive linguistic shapes Heaped on a wagon and headed to market.

Writers worry about these shapes and their dictates Long before they're able to make sentences worth reading.

They aspire to be nature writers,  
Forgetting that nature, as a subject, is only as valid as your writing makes it.

They feel the formal burden of the memoir pressing upon them,

Though there's no such thing.

They believe that writing prose is as formulaic as writing a screenplay,

As ruled as a sonnet.

They believe the genre they've chosen

Determines the way they should write,  
Complete with a road map, if only they could find it.

But genres are merely outlines by another name.  
 Better to be discovering what's worth discovering,  
 Noticing what you notice,  
 And putting it into sentences that, from the very  
 beginning,  
 Open the reader's trust and curiosity,  
 Creating a willingness in the reader to see what you've  
 discovered,  
 No matter what genre you call it.  
 Or, better yet, make the reader forget about genre  
 completely.

If you make strong, supple sentences,  
 Improvise, understand and exploit your mistakes,  
 Keep yourself open to the possibilities each sentence  
 creates,  
 Keep yourself open to thought itself,  
 And read like a writer,  
 You can write in any form.

---

You already possess some important assets.  
 You know how to talk.  
 How to read.  
 And, presumably, how to listen.  
 You've grown up in language.  
 You have the evidence of your senses.  
 The upwelling of your emotions.

The persistent flow of thoughts through your mind.  
 The habit of talking to yourself or staging conversa-  
 tions in your head.

Imagination and memory.  
 With luck, you were read aloud to as a child.  
 So you know how sentences sound when read aloud  
 And how stories are shaped and a great deal about  
 rhythm,  
 Almost as much as you did when you were ten years  
 old.

You may even have the capacity of knowing what  
 interests you—  
 Or, better yet, knowing how to detect what interests  
 you.

You're also two people, writer and reader.  
 This is a tremendous asset.

You can only become a better writer by becoming a  
 better reader.

You have far more experience as a reader than you do  
 as a writer.

You've read millions of words arranged by other  
 writers.

How many sentences have you made so far?

But you've been taught to read in a way that tells you  
 almost nothing about how to write  
 Or what's really to be found in the books you read.

You were taught that reading is extraction.

You learned to gather something called meaning from what you read,

As if the words themselves were merely smoke signals Blowing away in the breeze, leaving a trace of cognition in the brain.

You've been taught, too, that writing is the business of depositing *meaning* to be extracted later,

That a sentence is the transcription of a thought, the husk of an idea,

Valuable only for what it transmits or contains, not for what it is.

You've been taught to overlook the character of the prose in front of you in order to get at its *meaning*.

You overlook the shape of the sentence itself for the *meaning* it contains,

Which means that while you were reading,

All those millions of words passed by

Without teaching you how to make sentences.

We take for granted, as a premise barely worth examining, that changing the words in a sentence—even the order of words—must have an effect on its meaning. And yet we think and read and write as if the fit between language and meaning were approximate, As though many different sentences were capable of meaning the same thing.

Our conventional idea of meaning is something like, “what can be restated.”

It means a summary.

It means “in other words.”

You know how to theorize and summarize,  
How to identify ideologies in the texts you read.  
You do very well on the reading comprehension portion of the test.

But no one said a word about following a trail of common sense

Through the underbrush of the sentences themselves.  
No one showed you the affinities at work among those thickets of ink

Or explained that the whole life of the language  
Lies in the solidity of the sentence and cannot be extracted.

Writing well and reading well mean paying attention to *all* the subtleties embodied in a sentence  
In its exact form and no other.

How many subtleties?

What kinds?

That depends on how perceptive you become.

No two sentences are the same unless they're exactly the same, word for word.

(And, in a lifetime of writing, it's unlikely you'll ever write the same sentence twice.)

Any variation in wording changes the nuances that emanate from the sentence.

Discovering those nuances, and using them, are parts of the writer's job.

We'll discover a few shortly.

---

But first, what if *meaning* isn't the sole purpose of the sentence?

What if it's only the chief attribute among many, a tool, among others, that helps the writer shape or revise the sentence?

What if the virtue, the value, of the sentence is the sentence itself and not its extractable meaning?

What if you wrote as though sentences can't be summarized?

What if you value every one of a sentence's attributes and not merely its *meaning*?

Strangely enough, this is how you read when you were a child.

Children read repetitively and with incredible exactitude.

They demand the very sentence—word for word—and no other.

The *meaning* of the sentence is never a substitute for the sentence itself,

Not to a six-year-old.

. . .

This is still an excellent way to read.

The purpose of a sentence is to say what it has to say but also to be itself,  
Not merely a substrate for the extraction of *meaning*.

The words in a sentence have a degree of specificity or concreteness.

They have complex histories.

They derive from dense contexts—literature, culture, the worlds of work.

They've been shaped by centuries of writing, Centuries of utterance by living human beings.  
They resonate with the ghosts of all their earlier forms.

The sentence itself has a rhythm.

It has velocity.

It uses metaphor and simile

Or hyperbole or metonymy or alliteration or internal rhyme or one of hundreds of other rhetorical devices.  
It helps define the dramatic gesture that you—the writer—are making in the piece.

It stirs or gratifies the reader's expectations, on many levels.

It identifies the reader.

It gives the reader pause.

It names the world, using the actual names the world already contains.

Perhaps it renames the world.

And this is only the beginning.