10

Bits & Pieces

This is a chapter of scraps and morsels—small admonitions on many points that I have collected under one, as they say, umbrella.

Verbs.

Use active verbs unless there is no comfortable way to get around using a passive verb. The difference between an activeverb style and a passive-verb style —in clarity and vigor—is the difference between life and death for a writer.

"Joe saw him" is strong. "He was seen by Joe" is weak. The first is short and precise; it leaves no doubt about who did what. The second is necessarily longer and it has an insipid quality: something was done by somebody to someone else. It's also ambiguous. How often was he seen by Joe? Once? Every day? Once a week? A style that consists of passive constructions will sap the reader's energy. Nobody ever quite knows what is being perpetrated by whom and on whom.

I use "perpetrated" because it's the kind of word that passive-voice writers are fond of. They prefer long words of Latin origin to short Anglo-Saxon words—which compounds their trouble and makes their sentences still more glutinous. Short is better than long. Of the 701 words in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, a marvel of economy in itself, 505 are words of one syllable and 122 are words of two syllables.

Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum. Active verbs push hard; passive verbs tug fitfully. Active verbs also enable us to visualize an activity because they require a pronoun ("he"), or a noun ("the boy"), or a person ("Mrs. Scott") to put them in motion. Many verbs also carry in their imagery or in their sound a suggestion of what they mean: glitter, dazzle, twirl, beguile, scatter, swagger, poke, pamper, vex. Probably no other language has such a vast supply of verbs so bright with color. Don't choose one that is dull or merely serviceable. Make active verbs activate your sentences, and avoid the kind that need an appended preposition to complete their work. Don't set up a business that you can start or launch. Don't say that the president of the company stepped down. Did he resign? Did he retire? Did he get fired? Be precise. Use precise verbs.

If you want to see how active verbs give vitality to the written word, don't just go back to Hemingway or Thurber or Thoreau. I commend the King James Bible and William Shakespeare.

Adverbs.

Most adverbs are unnecessary. You will clutter your sentence and annoy the reader if you choose a verb that has a specific meaning and then add an adverb that carries the same meaning. Don't tell us that the radio blared loudly; "blare" connotes loudness. Don't write that someone clenched his teeth tightly; there's no other way to clench teeth. Again and again in careless writing, strong verbs are weakened by redundant adverbs. So are adjectives and other parts of speech: "effortlessly easy," "slightly spartan," "totally flabbergasted." The beauty of "flabbergasted" is that it implies an astonishment that is total; I can't picture someone being partly flabbergasted. If an action is so easy as to be effortless, use "effortless." And what is "slightly spartan"? Perhaps a monk's cell with wall-to-wall carpeting. Don't use adverbs unless they do necessary work. Spare us the news that the winning athlete grinned widely.

And while we're at it, let's retire "decidedly" and all its slippery cousins. Every day I see in the paper that some situations are decidedly better and others are decidedly worse, but I never know how decided the improvement is, or who did the deciding, just as I never know how eminent a result is that's eminently fair, or whether to believe a fact that's arguably true. "He's arguably the best pitcher on the Mets," the preening sportswriter writes, aspiring to Parnassus, which Red Smith reached by never using words like "arguably." Is the pitcher—it can be proved by argument—the best pitcher on the team? If so, please omit "arguably." Or is he *perhaps*—the opinion is open to argument—the best pitcher? Admittedly I don't know. It's virtually a toss-up.

Adjectives.

Most adjectives are also unnecessary. Like adverbs, they are sprinkled into sentences by writers who don't stop to think that the concept is already in the noun. This kind of prose is littered with precipitous cliffs and lacy spiderwebs, or with adjectives denoting the color of an object whose color is well known: yellow daffodils and brownish dirt. If you want to make a value judgment about daffodils, choose an adjective like "garish." If you're in a part of the country where the dirt is red, feel free to mention the red dirt. Those adjectives would do a job that the noun alone wouldn't be doing.

Most writers sow adjectives almost unconsciously into the soil of their prose to make it more lush and pretty, and the sentences become longer and longer as they fill up with stately elms and frisky kittens and hard-bitten detectives and sleepy lagoons. This is adjective-by-habit—a habit you should get rid of. Not every oak has to be gnarled. The adjective that exists solely as decoration is a

self-indulgence for the writer and a burden for the reader.

Again, the rule is simple: make your adjectives do work that needs to be done. “He looked at the gray sky and the black clouds and decided to sail back to the harbor.” The darkness of the sky and the clouds is the reason for the decision. If it’s important to tell the reader that a house was drab or a girl was beautiful, by all means use “drab” and “beautiful.” They will have their proper power because you have learned to use adjectives sparsely.

Little Qualifiers.

Prune out the small words that qualify how you feel and how you think and what you saw: “a bit,” “a little,” “sort of,” “kind of,” “rather,” “quite,” “very,” “too,” “pretty much,” “in a sense” and dozens more. They dilute your style and your persuasiveness.

Don’t say you were a bit confused and sort of tired and a little depressed and somewhat annoyed. Be confused. Be tired. Be depressed. Be annoyed. Don’t hedge your prose with little timidities. Good writing is lean and confident.

Don’t say you weren’t too happy because the hotel was pretty expensive. Say you weren’t happy because the hotel was expensive. Don’t tell us you were quite fortunate. How fortunate is that? Don’t describe an event as rather spectacular or very awesome. Words like “spectacular” and “awesome” don’t submit to measurement. “Very” is a useful word to achieve emphasis, but far more often it’s clutter. There’s no need to call someone very methodical. Either he is methodical or he isn’t.

The large point is one of authority. Every little qualifier whittles away some fraction of the reader’s trust. Readers want a writer who believes in himself and in what he is saying. Don’t diminish that belief. Don’t be kind of bold. Be bold.

Punctuation.

These are brief thoughts on punctuation, in no way intended as a primer. If you don’t know how to punctuate—and many college students still don’t—get a grammar book.

The Period. There’s not much to be said about the period except that most writers don’t reach it soon enough. If you find yourself hopelessly mired in a long sentence, it’s probably because you’re trying to make the sentence do more than it can reasonably do—perhaps express two dissimilar thoughts. The quickest way out is to break the long sentence into two short sentences, or even three. There is no minimum length for a sentence that’s acceptable in the eyes of God. Among good writers it is the short sentence that predominates, and don’t tell me about Norman Mailer—he’s a genius. If you want to write long sentences, be a genius. Or at least make sure that the sentence is under control from beginning to end, in syntax and punctuation, so that the reader knows where he is at every

step of the winding trail.

***The Exclamation Point*.** Don't use it unless you must to achieve a certain effect. It has a gushy aura, the breathless excitement of a debutante commenting on an event that was exciting only to her: "Daddy says I must have had too much champagne!" "But honestly, I could have danced all night!" We have all suffered more than our share of these sentences in which an exclamation point knocks us over the head with how cute or wonderful something was. Instead, construct your sentence so that the order of the words will put the emphasis where you want it. Also resist using an exclamation point to notify the reader that you are making a joke or being ironic. "It never occurred to me that the water pistol might be loaded!" Readers are annoyed by your reminder that this was a comical moment. They are also robbed of the pleasure of finding it funny on their own. Humor is best achieved by understatement, and there's nothing subtle about an exclamation point.

***The Semicolon*.** There is a 19th-century mustiness that hangs over the semicolon. We associate it with the carefully balanced sentences, the judicious weighing of "on the one hand" and "on the other hand," of Conrad and Thackeray and Hardy. Therefore it should be used sparingly by modern writers of nonfiction. Yet I notice that it turns up quite often in the passages I've quoted in this book and that I use it often myself—usually to add a related thought to the first half of a sentence. Still, the semicolon brings the reader, if not to a halt, at least to a pause. So use it with discretion, remembering that it will slow to a Victorian pace the early-21st-century momentum you're striving for, and rely instead on the period and the dash.

***The Dash*.** Somehow this invaluable tool is widely regarded as not quite proper—a bumpkin at the genteel dinner table of good English. But it has full membership and will get you out of many tight corners. The dash is used in two ways. One is to amplify or justify in the second part of the sentence a thought you stated in the first part. "We decided to keep going—it was only 100 miles more and we could get there in time for dinner." By its very shape the dash pushes the sentence ahead and explains why they decided to keep going. The other use involves two dashes, which set apart a parenthetical thought within a longer sentence. "She told me to get in the car—she had been after me all summer to have a haircut—and we drove silently into town." An explanatory detail that might otherwise have required a separate sentence is neatly dispatched along the way.

***The Colon*.** The colon has begun to look even more antique than the semicolon, and many of its functions have been taken over by the dash. But it still serves well its pure role of bringing your sentence to a brief halt before you plunge into, say, an itemized list. "The brochure said the ship would stop at the

following ports: Oran, Algiers, Naples, Brindisi, Piraeus, Istanbul and Beirut." You can't beat the colon for work like that.

Mood Changers.

Learn to alert the reader as soon as possible to any change in mood from the previous sentence. At least a dozen words will do this job for you: "but," "yet," "however," "nevertheless," "still," "instead," "thus," "therefore," "meanwhile," "now," "later," "today," "subsequently" and several more. I can't overstate how much easier it is for readers to process a sentence if you start with "but" when you're shifting direction. Or, conversely, how much harder it is if they must wait until the end to realize that you have shifted.

Many of us were taught that no sentence should begin with "but." If that's what you learned, unlearn it—there's no stronger word at the start. It announces total contrast with what has gone before, and the reader is thereby primed for the change. If you need relief from too many sentences beginning with "but," switch to "however." It is, however, a weaker word and needs careful placement. Don't start a sentence with "however"—it hangs there like a wet dishrag. And don't end with "however"—by that time it has lost its howeverness. Put it as early as you reasonably can, as I did three sentences ago. Its abruptness then becomes a virtue.

"Yet" does almost the same job as "but," though its meaning is closer to "nevertheless." Either of those words at the beginning of a sentence—"Yet he decided to go" or "Nevertheless he decided to go"—can replace a whole long phrase that summarizes what the reader has just been told: *"Despite the fact that all these dangers had been pointed out to him*, he decided to go." Look for all the places where one of these short words will instantly convey the same meaning as a long and dismal clause. "Instead I took the train." "Still I had to admire him." "Thus I learned how to smoke." "It was therefore easy to meet him." "Meanwhile I had talked to John." What a vast amount of huffing and puffing these pivotal words save! (The exclamation point is to show that I really mean it.)

As for "meanwhile," "now," "today" and "later," what they also save is confusion, for careless writers often change their time frame without remembering to tip the reader off. "Now I know better." "Today you can't find such an item." "Later I found out why." Always make sure your readers are oriented. Always ask yourself where you left them in the previous sentence.

Contractions.

Your style will be warmer and truer to your personality if you use contractions like "I'll" and "won't" and "can't" when they fit comfortably into what you're writing. "I'll be glad to see them if they don't get mad" is less stiff than "I will be glad to see them if they do not get mad." (Read that aloud and

hear how stilted it sounds.) There's no rule against such informality—trust your ear and your instincts. I only suggest avoiding one form—"I'd," "he'd," "we'd," etc.—because "I'd" can mean both "I had" and "I would," and readers can get well into a sentence before learning which meaning it is. Often it's not the one they thought it was. Also, don't invent contractions like "could've." They cheapen your style. Stick with the ones you can find in the dictionary.

That and Which.

Anyone who tries to explain "that" and "which" in less than an hour is asking for trouble. Fowler, in his *Modern English Usage*, takes 25 columns of type. I'm going for two minutes, perhaps the world record. Here (I hope) is much of what you need to bear in mind:

Always use "that" unless it makes your meaning ambiguous. Notice that in carefully edited magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, "that" is by far the predominant usage. I mention this because it is still widely believed—a residue from school and college—that "which" is more correct, more acceptable, more literary. It's not. In most situations, "that" is what you would naturally say and therefore what you should write.

If your sentence needs a comma to achieve its precise meaning, it probably needs "which." "Which" serves a particular identifying function, different from "that." (A) "Take the shoes that are in the closet." This means: take the shoes that are in the closet, not the ones under the bed. (B) "Take the shoes, which are in the closet." Only one pair of shoes is under discussion; the "which" usage tells you where they are. Note that the comma is necessary in B, but not in A.

A high proportion of "which" usages narrowly describe, or identify, or locate, or explain, or otherwise qualify the phrase that preceded the comma:

The house, which has a red roof,
The store, which is called Bob's Hardware,
The Rhine, which is in Germany,
The monsoon, which is a seasonal wind,
The moon, which I saw from the porch,

That's all I'm going to say that I think you initially need to know to write good nonfiction, which is a form that requires exact marshaling of information.

Concept Nouns.

Nouns that express a concept are commonly used in bad writing instead of verbs that tell what somebody did. Here are three typical dead sentences:

The common reaction is incredulous laughter.

Bemused cynicism isn't the only response to the old system.
The current campus hostility is a symptom of the change.

What is so eerie about these sentences is that they have no people in them. They also have no working verbs—only "is" or "isn't." The reader can't visualize anybody performing some activity; all the meaning lies in impersonal nouns that embody a vague concept: "reaction," "cynicism," "response," "hostility." Turn these cold sentences around. Get people doing things:

Most people just laugh with disbelief.
Some people respond to the old system by turning cynical; others say …
It's easy to notice the change—you can see how angry all the students are.

My revised sentences aren't jumping with vigor, partly because the material I'm trying to knead into shape is shapeless dough. But at least they have real people and real verbs. Don't get caught holding a bag full of abstract nouns. You'll sink to the bottom of the lake and never be seen again.

Creeping Nounism.

This is a new American disease that strings two or three nouns together where one noun—or, better yet, one verb—will do. Nobody goes broke now; we have money problem areas. It no longer rains; we have precipitation activity or a thunderstorm probability situation. Please, let it rain.

Today as many as four or five concept nouns will attach themselves to each other, like a molecule chain. Here's a brilliant specimen I recently found: "Communication facilitation skills development intervention." Not a person in sight, or a working verb. I think it's a program to help students write better.

Overstatement.

"The living room looked as if an atomic bomb had gone off there," writes the novice writer, describing what he saw on Sunday morning after a party that got out of hand. Well, we all know he's exaggerating to make a droll point, but we also know that an atomic bomb *didn't* go off there, or any other bomb except maybe a water bomb. "I felt as if ten 747 jets were flying through my brain," he writes, "and I seriously considered jumping out the window and killing myself." These verbal high jinks can get just so high—and this writer is already well over the limit—before the reader feels an overpowering drowsiness. It's like being trapped with a man who can't stop reciting limericks. Don't overstate. You didn't really consider jumping out the window. Life has more than enough truly horrible funny situations. Let the humor sneak up so we hardly hear it coming.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

Credibility.

Credibility is just as fragile for a writer as for a President. Don't inflate an incident to make it more outlandish than it actually was. If the reader catches you in just one bogus statement that you are trying to pass off as true, everything you write thereafter will be suspect. It's too great a risk, and not worth taking.

Dictation.

Much of the "writing" done in America is done by dictation. Administrators, executives, managers, educators and other officials think in terms of using their time efficiently. They think the quickest way of getting something "written" is to dictate it to a secretary and never look at it. This is false economy—they save a few hours and blow their whole personality. Dictated sentences tend to be pompous, sloppy and redundant. Executives who are so busy that they can't avoid dictating should at least find time to edit what they have dictated, crossing words out and putting words in, making sure that what they finally write is a true reflection of who they are, especially if it's a document that will go to customers who will judge their personality and their company on the basis of their style.

Writing Is Not a Contest.

Every writer is starting from a different point and is bound for a different destination. Yet many writers are paralyzed by the thought that they are competing with everybody else who is trying to write and presumably doing it better. This can often happen in a writing class. Inexperienced students are chilled to find themselves in the same class with students whose byline has appeared in the college newspaper. But writing for the college paper is no great credential; I've often found that the hares who write for the paper are overtaken by the tortoises who move studiously toward the goal of mastering the craft. The same fear hobbles freelance writers, who see the work of other writers appearing in magazines while their own keeps returning in the mail. Forget the competition and go at your own pace. Your only contest is with yourself.

The Subconscious Mind.

Your subconscious mind does more writing than you think. Often you'll spend a whole day trying to fight your way out of some verbal thicket in which you seem to be tangled beyond salvation. Frequently a solution will occur to you the next morning when you plunge back in. While you slept, your writer's mind didn't. A writer is always working. Stay alert to the currents around you. Much of what you see and hear will come back, having percolated for days or months or even years through your subconscious mind, just when your conscious mind, laboring to write, needs it.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

The Quickest Fix.

Surprisingly often a difficult problem in a sentence can be solved by simply getting rid of it. Unfortunately, this solution is usually the last one that occurs to writers in a jam. First they will put the troublesome phrase through all kinds of exertions—moving it to some other part of the sentence, trying to rephrase it, adding new words to clarify the thought or to oil whatever is stuck. These efforts only make the situation worse, and the writer is left to conclude that there *is* no solution to the problem—not a comforting thought. When you find yourself at such an impasse, look at the troublesome element and ask, "Do I need it at all?" Probably you don't. It was trying to do an unnecessary job all along—that's why it was giving you so much grief. Remove it and watch the afflicted sentence spring to life and breathe normally. It's the quickest cure and often the best.

Paragraphs.

Keep your paragraphs short. Writing is visual—it catches the eye before it has a chance to catch the brain. Short paragraphs put air around what you write and make it look inviting, whereas a long chunk of type can discourage a reader from even starting to read.

Newspaper paragraphs should be only two or three sentences long; newspaper type is set in a narrow width, and the inches quickly add up. You may think such frequent paragraphing will damage the development of your point. Obviously *The New Yorker* is obsessed by this fear—a reader can go for miles without relief. Don't worry; the gains far outweigh the hazards.

But don't go berserk. A succession of tiny paragraphs is as annoying as a paragraph that's too long. I'm thinking of all those midget paragraphs—verbless wonders—written by modern journalists to make their articles quick 'n' easy. Actually they make the reader's job harder by chopping up a natural train of thought. Compare the following two arrangements of the same article—how they look at a glance and how they read:

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

The No. 2 lawyer at the White House left work early on Tuesday, drove to an isolated park overlooking the Potomac River and took his life.

A revolver in his hand, slumped against a Civil War–era cannon, he left behind no note, no explanation.

Only friends, family and colleagues in stunned sorrow.

And a life story that until Tuesday had read like any man's fantasy.

The No. 2 lawyer at the White House left work early on Tuesday, drove to an isolated park overlooking the Potomac River and took his life. A revolver in his hand, slumped against a Civil War–era cannon, he left behind no note, no explanation—only friends, family and colleagues in stunned sorrow. He also left behind a life story that until Tuesday had read like any man's fantasy.

The Associated Press version *(left)*, with its breezy paragraphing and verbless third and fourth sentences, is disruptive and condescending. "Yoo-hoo! Look how simple I'm making this for you!" the reporter is calling to us. My version *(right)* gives the reporter the dignity of writing good English and building three sentences into a logical unit.

Paragraphing is a subtle but important element in writing nonfiction articles and books—a road map constantly telling your reader how you have organized your ideas. Study good nonfiction writers to see how they do it. You'll find that almost all of them think in paragraph units, not in sentence units. Each paragraph has its own integrity of content and structure.

Sexism.

One of the most vexing new questions for writers is what to do about sexist language, especially the "he-she" pronoun. The feminist movement helpfully revealed how much sexism lurks in our language, not only in the offensive "he" but in the hundreds of words that carry an invidious meaning or some overtone of judgment. They are words that patronize ("gal"), or that imply second-class status ("poetess"), or a second-class role ("housewife"), or a certain kind of empty-headedness ("the girls"), or that demean the ability of a woman to do a certain kind of job ("lady lawyer"), or that are deliberately prurient ("divorcée," "coed," "blonde") and are seldom applied to men. Men get mugged; a woman who gets mugged is a shapely stewardess or a pert brunette.

More damaging—and more subtle—are all the usages that treat women as possessions of the family male, not as people with their own identity who played an equal part in the family saga: "Early settlers pushed west with their wives and children." Turn those settlers into pioneer families, or pioneer couples who went west with their sons and daughters, or men and women who settled the West. Today there are very few roles that aren't open to both sexes. Don't use

constructions that suggest that only men can be settlers or farmers or cops or firefighters.

A thornier problem is raised by the feminists' annoyance with words that contain "man," such as "chairman" and "spokesman." Their point is that women can chair a committee as well as a man and are equally good at spoking. Hence the flurry of new words like "chairperson" and "spokeswoman." Those makeshift words from the 1960s raised our consciousness about sex discrimination, both in words and in attitudes. But in the end they are makeshift words, sometimes hurting the cause more than helping it. One solution is to find another term: "chair" for "chairman," "company representative" for "spokesman." You can also convert the noun into a verb: "Speaking for the company, Ms. Jones said …" Where a certain occupation has both a masculine and a feminine form, look for a generic substitute. Actors and actresses can become performers.

This still leaves the bothersome pronoun. "He" and "him" and "his" are words that rankle. "Every employee should decide what he thinks is best for him and his dependents." What are we to do about these countless sentences? One solution is to turn them into the plural: "All employees should decide what they think is best for them and their dependents." But this is good only in small doses. A style that converts every "he" into a "they" will quickly turn to mush.

Another common solution is to use "or": "Every employee should decide what he or she thinks is best for him or her." But again, it should be used sparingly. Often a writer will find several situations in an article where he or she can use "he or she," or "him or her," if it seems natural. By "natural" I mean that the writer is serving notice that he (or she) has the problem in mind and is trying his (or her) best within reasonable limits. But let's face it: the English language is stuck with the generic masculine ("Man shall not live by bread alone"). To turn every "he" into a "he or she," and every "his" into a "his or her," would clog the language.

In early editions of *On Writing Well* I used "he" and "him" to refer to "the reader," "the writer," "the critic," "the humorist," etc. I felt that the book would be harder to read if I used "he or she" with every such mention. (I reject "he/she" altogether; the slant has no place in good English.) Over the years, however, many women wrote to nudge me about this. They said that as writers and readers themselves they resent always having to visualize a man doing the writing and reading, and they're right; I stand nudged. Most of the nudgers urged me to adopt the plural: to use "readers" and "writers," followed thereafter by "they." I don't like plurals; they weaken writing because they are less specific than the singular, less easy to visualize. I'd like every writer to visualize *one* reader struggling to read what he or she has written. Nevertheless I found three or four hundred places where I could eliminate "he," "him," "his," "himself" or "man," mainly by switching to the plural, with no harm done; the sky didn't fall in. Where the male pronoun remains in this edition I felt it was the only solution that wasn't cumbersome.

The best solutions simply eliminate “he” and its connotations of male ownership by using other pronouns or by altering some other component of the sentence. “We” is a handy replacement for “he.” “Our” and “the” can often replace “his.” (A) “First *he* notices what’s happening to *his* kids and he blames it on *his* neighborhood.” (B) “First *we* notice what’s happening to *our* kids and we blame it on *the* neighborhood.” General nouns can replace specific nouns. (A) “Doctors often neglect their wives and children.” (B) “Doctors often neglect their families.” Countless sins can be erased by such small changes.

One other pronoun that helped me in my repairs was “you.” Instead of talking about what “the writer” does and the trouble *he* gets into, I found more places where I could address the writer directly (“You’ll often find …”). It doesn’t work for every kind of writing, but it’s a godsend to anyone writing an instructional book or a self-help book. The voice of a Dr. Spock talking to the mother of a child with a fever, or the voice of a Julia Child talking to the cook stalled in mid-recipe, is one of the most reassuring sounds a reader can hear. Always look for ways to make yourself available to the people you’re trying to reach.

Rewriting.

Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it’s where the game is won or lost. That idea is hard to accept. We all have an emotional equity in our first draft; we can’t believe that it wasn’t born perfect. But the odds are close to 100 percent that it wasn’t. Most writers don’t initially say what they want to say, or say it as well as they could. The newly hatched sentence almost always has something wrong with it. It’s not clear. It’s not logical. It’s verbose. It’s klunky. It’s pretentious. It’s boring. It’s full of clutter. It’s full of clichés. It lacks rhythm. It can be read in several different ways. It doesn’t lead out of the previous sentence. It doesn’t … The point is that clear writing is the result of a lot of tinkering.

Many people assume that professional writers don’t need to rewrite; the words just fall into place. On the contrary, careful writers can’t stop fiddling. I’ve never thought of rewriting as an unfair burden; I’m grateful for every chance to keep improving my work. Writing is like a good watch—it should run smoothly and have no extra parts. Students don’t share my love of rewriting. They think of it as punishment: extra homework or extra infield practice. Please—if you’re such a student—think of it as a gift. You won’t write well until you understand that writing is an evolving *process*, not a finished *product*. Nobody expects you to get it right the first time, or even the second time.

What do I mean by “rewriting”? I don’t mean writing one draft and then writing a different second version, and then a third. Most rewriting consists of reshaping and tightening and refining the raw material you wrote on your first try. Much of it consists of making sure you’ve given the reader a narrative flow he can follow with no trouble from beginning to end. Keep putting yourself in the reader’s place. Is there something he should have been told early in the sentence

that you put near the end? Does he know when he starts sentence B that you've made a shift—of subject, tense, tone, emphasis—from sentence A?

Let's look at a typical paragraph and imagine that it's the writer's first draft. There's nothing really wrong with it; it's clear and it's grammatical. But it's full of ragged edges: failures of the writer to keep the reader notified of changes in time, place and mood, or to vary and animate the style. What I've done is to add, in bracketed italics after each sentence, some of the thoughts that might occur to an editor taking a first look at this draft. After that you'll find my revised paragraph, which incorporates those corrective thoughts.

There used to be a time when neighbors took care of one another, he remembered. *[Put "he remembered" first to establish reflective tone.]* It no longer seemed to happen that way, however. *[The contrast supplied by "however" must come first. Start with "But." Also establish America locale.]* He wondered if it was because everyone in the modern world was so busy. *[All these sentences are the same length and have the same soporific rhythm; turn this one into a question?]* It occurred to him that people today have so many things to do that they don't have time for old-fashioned friendship. *[Sentence essentially repeats previous sentence; kill it or warm it up with specific detail.]* Things didn't work that way in America in previous eras. *[Reader is still in the present; reverse the sentence to tell him he's now in the past. "America" no longer needed if inserted earlier.]* And he knew that the situation was very different in other countries, as he recalled from the years when he lived in villages in Spain and Italy. *[Reader is still in America. Use a negative transition word to get him to Europe. Sentence is also too flabby. Break it into two sentences?]* It almost seemed to him that as people got richer and built their houses farther apart they isolated themselves from the essentials of life. *[Irony deferred too long. Plant irony early. Sharpen the paradox about richness.]* And there was another thought that troubled him. *[This is the real point of the paragraph; signal the reader that it's important. Avoid weak "there was" construction.]* His friends had deserted him when he needed them most during his recent illness. *[Reshape to end with "most"; the last word is the one that stays in the reader's ear and gives the sentence its punch. Hold sickness for next sentence; it's a separate thought.]* It was almost as if they found him guilty of doing something shameful. *[Introduce sickness here as the reason for the shame. Omit "guilty"; it's implicit.]* He recalled reading somewhere about societies in primitive parts of the world in which sick people were shunned, though he had never heard of any such ritual in America. *[Sentence starts slowly and stays sluggish and dull. Break it into shorter units. Snap off the ironic point.]*

He remembered that neighbors used to take care of one another. But that no longer seemed to happen in America. Was it because everyone was

so busy? Were people really so preoccupied with their television sets and their cars and their fitness programs that they had no time for friendship? In previous eras that was never true. Nor was it how families lived in other parts of the world. Even in the poorest villages of Spain and Italy, he recalled, people would drop in with a loaf of bread. An ironic idea struck him: as people got richer they cut themselves off from the richness of life. But what really troubled him was an even more shocking fact. The time when his friends deserted him was the time when he needed them most. By getting sick he almost seemed to have done something shameful. He knew that other societies had a custom of "shunning" people who were very ill. But that ritual only existed in primitive cultures. Or did it?

My revisions aren't the best ones that could be made, or the only ones. They're mainly matters of carpentry: altering the sequence, tightening the flow, sharpening the point. Much could still be done in such areas as cadence, detail and freshness of language. The total construction is equally important. Read your article aloud from beginning to end, always remembering where you left the reader in the previous sentence. You might find you had written two sentences like this:

The tragic hero of the play is Othello. Small and malevolent, Iago feeds his jealous suspicions.

In itself there's nothing wrong with the Iago sentence. But as a sequel to the previous sentence it's very wrong. The name lingering in the reader's ear is Othello; the reader naturally assumes that Othello is small and malevolent.

When you read your writing aloud with these connecting links in mind you'll hear a dismaying number of places where you lost the reader, or confused the reader, or failed to tell him the one fact he needed to know, or told him the same thing twice: the inevitable loose ends of every early draft. What you must do is make an arrangement—one that holds together from start to finish and that moves with economy and warmth.

Learn to enjoy this tidying process. I don't like to write; I like to have written. But I love to rewrite. I especially like to cut: to press the DELETE key and see an unnecessary word or phrase or sentence vanish into the electricity. I like to replace a humdrum word with one that has more precision or color. I like to strengthen the transition between one sentence and another. I like to rephrase a drab sentence to give it a more pleasing rhythm or a more graceful musical line. With every small refinement I feel that I'm coming nearer to where I would like to arrive, and when I finally get there I know it was the rewriting, not the writing, that won the game.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

Writing on a Computer.

The computer is God's gift, or technology's gift, to rewriting and reorganizing. It puts your words right in front of your eyes for your instant consideration—and reconsideration; you can play with your sentences until you get them right. The paragraphs and pages will keep rearranging themselves, no matter how much you cut and change, and then your printer will type everything neatly while you go and have a beer. Sweeter music could hardly be sung to writers than the sound of their article being retyped with all its improvements—but not by them.

It's no longer necessary for this book to explain, as earlier editions did, how to operate the wonderful new machine called a word processor that had come into our lives and how to put its wonders to use in writing, rewriting, and organizing. That's now common knowledge. I'll just remind you (if you're still not a believer) that the savings in time and drudgery are enormous. With a computer I sit down to write more willingly than I did when I used a typewriter, especially if I'm facing a complex task of organization, and I finish the task sooner and with far less fatigue. These are crucial gains for a writer: time, output, energy, enjoyment and control.

Trust Your Material.

The longer I work at the craft of writing, the more I realize that there's nothing more interesting than the truth. What people do—and what people say—continues to take me by surprise with its wonderfulness, or its quirkiness, or its drama, or its humor, or its pain. Who could invent all the astonishing things that really happen? I increasingly find myself saying to writers and students, "Trust your material." It seems to be hard advice to follow.

Recently I spent some time as a writing coach at a newspaper in a small American city. I noticed that many reporters had fallen into the habit of trying to make the news more palatable by writing in a feature style. Their leads consisted of a series of snippets that went something like this:

Whoosh!

It was incredible.

Ed Barnes wondered if he was seeing things.

Or maybe it was just spring fever. Funny how April can do that to a guy.

It wasn't as if he hadn't checked his car before leaving the house.

But then again, he didn't remember to tell Linda.

Which was odd, because he always remembered to tell Linda. Ever since they started going together back in junior high.

Was that really 20 years ago?

And now there was also little Scooter to worry about.

Come to think of it, the dog was acting kind of suspicious.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

The articles often began on page 1, and I would read as far as "Continued on page 9" and still have no idea of what they were about. Then I would dutifully turn to page 9 and find myself in an interesting story, full of specific details. I'd say to the reporter, "That was a good story when I finally got over here to page 9. Why didn't you put that stuff in the lead?" The reporter would say, "Well, in the lead I was writing color." The assumption is that fact and color are two separate ingredients. They're not; color is organic to the fact. Your job is to present the colorful fact.

In 1988 I wrote a baseball book called *Spring Training*. It combined my lifelong vocation with my lifelong addiction—which is one of the best things that can happen to a writer; people will write better and with more enjoyment if they write about what they care about. I chose spring training as my small corner of the large subject of baseball because it's a time of renewal, both for the players and for the fans. The game is given back to us in its original purity: it's played outside, in the sun, on grass, without organ music, by young men who are almost near enough to touch and whose salaries and grievances are mercifully put aside for six weeks. Above all, it's a time of teaching and learning. I chose the Pittsburgh Pirates as the team I would cover because they trained in an old-time ballpark in Bradenton, Florida, and were a young club just starting to rebuild, with a manager, Jim Leyland, who was committed to teaching.

I didn't want to romanticize the game. I don't like baseball movies that go into slow motion when the batter hits a home run, to notify me that it's a pregnant moment. I *know* that about home runs, especially if they're hit with two out in the bottom of the ninth to win the game. I resolved not to let my writing go into slow motion—not to nudge the reader with significance—or to claim baseball as a metaphor for life, death, middle age, lost youth or a more innocent America. My premise was that baseball is a job—honorable work—and I wanted to know how that job gets taught and learned.

So I went to Jim Leyland and his coaches and I said, "You're a teacher. I'm a teacher. Tell me: How do you teach hitting? How do you teach pitching? How do you teach fielding? How do you teach baserunning? How do you keep these young men *up* for such a brutally long schedule?" All of them responded generously and told me in detail how they do what they do. So did the players and all the other men and women who had information I wanted: umpires, scouts, ticket sellers, local boosters.

One day I climbed up into the stands behind home plate to look for a scout. Spring training is baseball's ultimate talent show, and the camps are infested with laconic men who have spent a lifetime appraising talent. I spotted an empty seat next to a weathered man in his sixties who was using a stopwatch and taking notes. When the inning was over I asked him what he was timing. He said he was Nick Kamzic, Northern Scouting Coordinator of the California Angels, and he was timing runners on the base paths. I asked him what kind of information he was looking for.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

"Well, it takes a right-handed batter 4.3 seconds to reach first base," he said, "and a left-handed batter 4.1 or 4.2 seconds. Naturally that varies a little—you've got to take the human element into consideration."

"What do those numbers tell you?" I asked.

"Well, of course the average double play takes 4.3 seconds," he said. He said it as if it was common knowledge. I had never given any thought to the elapsed time of a double play.

"So that means …"

"If you see a player who gets to first base in less than 4.3 seconds you're interested in him."

As a fact that's self-sufficient. There's no need to add a sentence pointing out that 4.3 seconds is remarkably little time to execute a play that involves one batted ball, two thrown balls and three infielders. Given 4.3 seconds, readers can do their own marveling. They will also enjoy being allowed to think for themselves. The reader plays a major role in the act of writing and must be given room to play it. Don't annoy your readers by over-explaining—by telling them something they already know or can figure out. Try not to use words like "surprisingly," "predictably" and "of course," which put a value on a fact before the reader encounters the fact. Trust your material.

Go with Your Interests.

There's no subject you don't have permission to write about. Students often avoid subjects close to their heart—skateboarding, cheerleading, rock music, cars—because they assume that their teachers will regard those topics as "stupid." No area of life is stupid to someone who takes it seriously. If you follow your affections you will write well and will engage your readers.

I've read elegant books on fishing and poker, billiards and rodeos, mountain climbing and giant sea turtles and many other subjects I didn't think I was interested in. Write about your hobbies: cooking, gardening, photography, knitting, antiques, jogging, sailing, scuba diving, tropical birds, tropical fish. Write about your work: teaching, nursing, running a business, running a store. Write about a field you enjoyed in college and always meant to get back to: history, biography, art, archaeology. No subject is too specialized or too quirky if you make an honest connection with it when you write about it.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012