On Writing Well

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM ZINSSER

A self-described sheltered child, William Zinsser was born in New York City, where his family has lived and managed a shellac factory since the early 1800s. He attended the prestigious Deerfield Academy prep school in Massachusetts and then studied at Princeton University. During World War II, he was conscripted into the U.S. Army and fought in North Africa and Italy. In the war, Zinsser's commanding officer noticed his penchant for writing and assigned him to write a history of their unit. This made a lasting impact on Zinsser, and after the war, he got his dream job working for his favorite newspaper, the *New York Herald Tribune*. He wrote for the paper's education section, then helped edit its Sunday review, then took charge of its drama section, became its movie critic, and wrote various editorials until 1959, when he quit and became a freelancer. During the 1960s, he wrote seven books and numerous columns for magazines like *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. During this period, some of his favorite projects were travel articles and commissioned books for the New York Public Library and the Book-of-the-Month Club. He started teaching nonfiction writing at Indiana University in 1968, then went on to teach and edit the alumni magazine at Yale University during the 1970s. During this period, he also served as the master of Yale's Branford College and wrote his biggest hit, *On Writing Well*, which earned him speaking gigs all around the United States. During the 1980s, he oversaw the Book-of-the-Month Club, continued writing articles for major national magazines, and published several of his most important nonfiction books, like *Mitchell & Ruff* and *Spring Training*. From the 1990s onward, he dedicated himself to writing, mentoring young writers, and playing jazz piano around New York. Zinsser died in 2015 at the age of 92.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Zinsser believes that the elements of good writing never change, so he sees his writing advice as timeless. Still, *On Writing Well* is firmly rooted in the history and literary traditions of the 20th-century United States. For example, Zinsser examines how World War II and its aftermath shaped the history of American literature and journalism. Zinsser served in the war himself, and he credits a life-changing boxcar journey across North Africa with inspiring his interest in travel and adventure. (He returns to North Africa with his piece on Timbuktu, which he cites in the chapter "A Writer's Decisions.") Similarly, Zinsser argues that the war opened Americans' eyes to the world, inspired them to read more about it, and eventually made nonfiction more popular than fiction for the first time in the United States. In other passages, Zinsser notes how the rise of television, the Vietnam War, and the early days of the internet changed Americans' reading habits. By the 1970s, he argues, nonfiction had become the true American literature. He also covers several fads and trends in American nonfiction, like the memoir boom of the 1990s. Finally, Zinsser updated *On Writing Well* several times over the years in order to incorporate writing samples and advice that better reflect the changing face of American literature. For instance, he included excerpts from a number of women writers and writers of color. He added several chapters and updated the references in several others. For instance, he updated his "Science and Technology" chapter to include writing about more recent scientific discoveries. He also added advice for writing on a word processor, then removed it once word-processing became a universal skill.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

William Zinsser's wrote 19 books and countless magazine pieces during his lengthy career as a writer, which lasted from 1946 to 2012. *On Writing Well* is still by far his most popular work, but *Mitchell & Ruff: An American Profile in Jazz* was his favorite to write. Zinsser's other major nonfiction books include *Spring Training: The Unique American Story of Baseball's Annual Season of Renewal* and *American Places: A Writer's Pilgrimage to Sixteen of This Country's Most Visited and Cherished Sites*. His other books on writing include *Writing to Learn: How to Write—and Think—Clearly about Any Subject at All* and *Writing About Your Life: A Journey into the Past*. Finally, Zinsser's memoir, *Writing Places: The Life Journey of a Writer and Teacher*, includes two chapters about the making of *On Writing Well*. He explains that his models for *On Writing Well* were Strunk and White's famous guide *Elements of Style* and one of his favorite nonfiction books, Alec Wilder's *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900–1950*. He also credits Casey Miller and Kate Swift's *Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: For Writers, Editors, and Speakers* for teaching him to use gender-neutral language. In *Writing Places*, he also admits that he referenced almost no women in the original version of *On Writing Well*—the sole exception was Joan Didion's collection of magazine pieces, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. However, he tried to remedy this in later editions by excerpting works by writers like Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*) and Janice Kaplan (*Women and Sports*). All in all, he references dozens of prominent writers in *On Writing Well*. For instance, he admires H.L. Mencken's magazine writing, which is collected in *The Vintage Mencken* and Red Smith's sports writing, which is collected in books like *The*

Red Smith Reader.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction
- **When Written:** June–August 1975
- **Where Written:** Niantic, Connecticut
- **When Published:** 1976 (1st ed.); 1980 (2nd ed.); 1985 (3rd ed.); 1990 (4th ed.); 1994 (5th ed.); 1998 (6th ed.); 2001 (25th Anniversary ed.); 2006 (30th Anniversary ed.)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's in a Name. Zinsser originally wanted to call his book *Writing Well*. But his editor, Buz Wyeth, noted that the poet Donald Hall had already published a book by that name, so he suggested that Zinsser add "On" to the title.

Careful Quoting. In *On Writing Well*, Zinsser had to cut most excerpts from other writers' work to 300 words in order to stay within "fair use" rules (and avoid paying most of his book's profits in royalties). However, he actually appreciated this limit, because it forced him to guide his readers through other writers' work, rather than just turning his book into an anthology of their work.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, journalist and writing professor William Zinsser argues that good writing boils down to a few essential principles. The best writers use clear and precise language, show warmth and personality, and work hard to entertain the reader. These key elements are the same for everyone, regardless of their age, experience, or field. And everyone can benefit from improving their writing. For instance, businesspeople can communicate more effectively with their teams, scientists can better explain their work, and elders can leave memoirs for their descendants. The fundamentals of good writing never change because all writers have the same goal: "saying something that other people will want to read." Zinsser organizes his book into four parts: "Principles," "Methods," "Forms," and "Attitudes."

Zinsser starts the "Principles" section by admitting that every writer finds their own process: there's no right or wrong way to put words on paper. But all writing processes require vulnerability and tension, because all writers are trying to tell a basic truth that they're holding inside. So, all writing is really a "personal transaction" between the writer and reader.

To actually reach their readers, writers should try to be clear and direct. But first, they have to learn to *think* clearly. This can be hard, because many people think that they should use complex language to sound more sophisticated. But actually, they use cluttered language and end up sounding confused. Poor writers replace short words with long ones, single words with phrases, and common terms with popular jargon. They say things like "at the present time" instead of "now," or they stick "I might add" or "it is interesting to note" at the end of every sentence.

Many writers confuse this kind of clutter for style, but the first step to developing a true style is actually learning to eliminate clutter. Only later can writers find their authentic voices. To do this, they should write for themselves, rather than trying to satisfy any specific audience. In particular, they should be obsessive about choosing the right words. The range of acceptable usages changes over time, but jargon is never good taste.

In the "Methods" section, Zinsser argues that writing is really about problem-solving: writers have to decide what material to include and how to organize it. First, they should create *unity* in their work by sticking to the same pronouns, tense, mood, and voice throughout each piece. Next, the most important part of an article is the very beginning, or the *lead*, which has to grab and hold the reader's attention. But Zinsser uses examples to show that many different kinds of leads can work, depending on the story and the writer's style. Similarly, instead of trying to conclude their articles with a summary, writers should just end when they run out of fresh, relevant material—and preferably on an entertaining note.

The next chapter, "Bits & Pieces," covers tips that don't fit elsewhere in the book. Zinsser starts with basic mechanics: writers should use active verbs, avoid unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, and choose gender-neutral terms. Then, he turns to more general principles. For instance, writing well is mostly about rewriting, and the best writers let their most interesting details speak for themselves, rather than putting spin on them.

In the "Forms" section of *On Writing Well*, Zinsser advises his readers on how to approach all the major forms of nonfiction writing. He starts by defending the controversial idea that nonfiction counts as literature, just like fiction and poetry. He points out that many of the most influential American writers after World War II, like Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe, mix traditional reporting, personal narrative, and literary techniques to tell compelling true stories. Most of these stories are about people and places, so Zinsser's next two chapters focus on effective interviewing and travel writing skills. Writers should learn to draw "the human element" out of interviews, take useful notes, and arrange people's quotes without misrepresenting their views. Next, travel writing is often unfocused and full of clichés, so travel writers should learn to be extremely selective with both their language and the scope

of their work. Similarly, the best memoirists focus on compelling characters and specific details, which let them give readers new perspectives on life and identity.

Science and technology assignments tend to scare new writers, but they actually depend on the same basic skill as all other nonfiction: clear, logical thinking. Good science writers shape complex information into an accessible, relatable story about how specific discoveries shape people's lives. Next, Zinsser turns to business writing, which tends to be artificial, cluttered, and uninspiring. Businesspeople should cut out the jargon and write in their own voices. This is the best way to connect with colleagues and customers, who want to hear from real people, not faceless institutions.

Like travel writing, sports writing is full of tired clichés. The best sportswriters know how to cut them out and tell compelling stories that connect sports to universal human experiences. Art and entertainment writers get the luxury of presenting their opinions to the public, but they also have an important responsibility to help readers understand the context and history of certain art forms. Finally, humor is writers' "secret weapon," because it lets them say things that they wouldn't be able to publish otherwise. Whether humorists are making serious political arguments or just entertaining, Zinsser argues, they have a responsibility to speak the truth.

Finally, in the "Attitudes" section of his book, Zinsser gives aspiring writers more general advice on how to approach the craft. The best way to develop a distinctive voice is by studying and imitating other writers. The most successful writers are enthusiastic about their work because they write about what interests them.

Aspiring writers should also focus more on the writing process and less on the final product. Zinsser explains how he trains students to tackle the "big decisions" in writing, like how widely to research and how to structure long pieces. And he walks the reader through his article "The News from Timbuktu" to show how he makes the countless "little decisions," like what words to use and how to hold the reader's attention.

In his second-to-last chapter, Zinsser explains how elders should approach writing family histories and memoirs, to create a valuable record for future generations. He concludes *On Writing Well* by imploring writers to take accountability for their work. They're responsible for maintaining high standards, defending their style against unruly editors, and preserving their own moral integrity.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

William Zinsser – Zinsser, the author of *On Writing Well*, was a respected American journalist, professor, and nonfiction writer. After growing up in New York City and attending Princeton University, Zinsser was conscripted into the U.S. Army during World War II. His commanding officer noticed Zinsser's writing talent and assigned him to write about their unity's history. After the war, Zinsser went on to write hundreds of newspaper articles and 19 books on topics ranging from travel and autobiography to jazz and baseball. In the 70s and 80s, he was the executive editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Zinsser also became a writing professor during this time; he wrote *On Writing Well* in 1976, while teaching his nonfiction writing course at Yale University. His aim in writing the book was to help all of his readers—including professional writers, students, educators, and corporate professionals—write clear, engaging, well-organized nonfiction.

Dr. Brock – Dr. Brock is a surgeon and amateur writer who speaks about the writing profession alongside Zinsser at a local school's "day devoted to the arts." His opinions on writing are generally the opposite of Zinsser's, which shows that there's no formula for succeeding as a writer—everyone finds their own individual process.

E.B. White – E.B. White was a popular American writer whose "seemingly effortless style" made him a role model for Zinsser. Although he wrote in a wide variety of genres, White is best remembered for his essays, his revision to William Strunk Jr.'s The Elements of Style, and especially his children's novels, like *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Webb*.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Woody Allen – Woody Allen is a noted American comedian and filmmaker. Zinsser cites Allen's early magazine pieces as examples of successful comedy writing.

Joan Didion – Joan Didion is an American novelist and nonfiction writer closely associated with California and the literary New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

H.L. Mencken – H.L. Mencken was an American journalist, activist, and scholar best known for his satirical reporting about American politics.

Red Smith – Walter ("Red") Smith was a prominent 20th-century American sports columnist. Zinsser praises his distinctive, original style.

Tom Wolfe – Tom Wolfe was an influential American journalist best known for pioneering New Journalism, a style of nonfiction writing that mixes literary techniques with conventional reporting.

S.J. Perelman – S.J. Perelman was an influential American humorist best known for his contributions to *The New Yorker*.

Roger Tory Peterson – Roger Tory Peterson was a prominent American birdwatcher, artist, and environmentalist.

TERMS

The Elements of Style – *The Elements of Style* is one of the most well-known and influential style guides for American English writing. English professor William Strunk Jr. originally wrote it in 1918, and his student **E.B. White** published a revised version in 1959.

Lead – A "lead" is the beginning (and, **William Zinsser** argues, the most important part) of a nonfiction article. An effective lead can be of any length, as long as it attracts the reader's attention.

Timbuktu – Timbuktu is a city on the edge of the Sahara Desert in present-day northern Mali. In Western culture, it's famously viewed as a mythical, unreachable, or even nonexistent place. In reality, it was an important commercial and educational capital for many centuries, but it is now a small provincial capital. In the chapter "A Writer's Decisions," **William Zinsser** goes through the many stylistic choices that nonfiction writers have to make by walking the reader through an article he wrote for *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine about traveling to Timbuktu.

Book-of-the-Month Club – The Book-of-the-Month Club is a subscription book service that has played an important role in the United States publishing industry since the 1920s.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

In *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, William Zinsser offers guidance for anyone who wants to improve their writing skills. While the book is most relevant to people whose day-to-day lives are based around writing (e.g., students, writers, and journalists), Zinsser thinks that anyone can learn to write effectively in any genre, as long as they're willing to put in the necessary time and effort. He argues that all good writing shares a few common traits: it's clear, it's logically-structured, and most importantly, it tells people a story they want to hear. Usually, the most compelling stories connect with the reader on a human level: they're relatable, funny, surprising, full of rich details, or at least entertaining to read. Therefore, the best writers know how to present a compelling persona or tell relatable stories about interesting people—preferably, both. Since all writing is based on a "personal transaction" between the writer and reader, Zinsser argues that writers should learn to focus on the human element in their stories and communicate their own humanity through their style.

Zinsser argues that there's a "personal transaction" at the core of nonfiction writing, which means that the writer offers their voice and story in exchange for the reader's time. In the first chapter of *On Writing Well*, Zinsser suggests that people become writers and readers for simple, complementary reasons. People write because they want to communicate some deep truth, knowledge, or experience. And people read to experience the emotions that good writing arouses in them: interest, surprise, delight, and so on. Therefore, the writer's job is to use language as a bridge to make a personal and emotional connection with the reader. Because writing is so personal, Zinsser notes that it heavily depends on the individual writer's psychology. Every writer has their own unique process and faces their own unique challenges. But all writers have to be *vulnerable* in order to "put some part of themselves on paper," and they have to be *tense* when they sculpt their words into a polished product. Thus, the writer's half of the transaction is always deeply personal: even when they're writing about someone else, the writer has to dig into themselves in order to find a story worth telling. Put differently, writers have to find the "humanity and warmth" in their story, then figure out how to convey those qualities to the reader. This gives good writing the "aliveness that keeps the reader reading." Therefore, for Zinsser, the personal transaction really means that a writer has to offer the reader soul, emotion, and humanity in order to connect with them.

The most important way for writers to capture humanity on the page is by finding the human element in their stories. Often, random quotes and unexpected details are the best sources of this richness and soul. For instance, Zinsser ends his article about Timbuktu by describing his random encounter with a generous Bedouin family in the Sahara Desert. He thinks that this meeting best captures his piece's message about "the nobility of living on the edge." In general, quotes, facts, and anecdotes capture the reader's attention by helping them relate to other people's lives. Zinsser also thinks that the best way to grab the reader's attention is by faithfully portraying other people. This is why he believes that interviews are one of the most powerful genres of writing and defends always quoting other people instead of paraphrasing their thoughts. Readers prefer to learn about a living, breathing person through their own words. Thus, Zinsser always spices up boring topics by finding a human angle. For instance, in his pieces about the New York Public Library, the Sotheby's auction house, and the Book-of-the-Month Club, Zinsser could have easily just recounted these institutions' histories. But instead, he interviewed each institution's leaders and based his writing on the "information that [was] locked inside people's heads." He reaffirms that to keep readers engaged, writers should reach for the human element in any story.

Writers can also add humanity to their work and connect to their readers by developing a distinctive voice. Zinsser thinks a writer's best commodity—or their unique selling point—is their own voice. Nobody else can copy it, and it's what makes their work worth reading. Put differently, "a writer is someone who asks us to travel with [them]," and readers prefer the travel companion with the best personality. A unique, authentic perspective is always a draw for readers. Zinsser's tip for finding a distinctive style is to "be yourself." Faking style won't do—readers can see right through it. It can take years for writers to find their voices, and they can only do so by writing what *they* care about. For instance, the best measure of whether something is interesting, surprising, or funny enough to print is simply if the writer finds it interesting, surprising, or funny. But once they find their voice, Zinsser argues, their enthusiasm will hook their readers and bring them back for more. Zinsser admits that he often keeps reading about topics he doesn't care about, simply because the writer's enthusiasm is infectious. For instance, he adores E.B. White's essay about hens, even though he thinks poultry is extraordinarily boring. This proves that a writer's style alone can make a piece interesting.

For thousands of years, writers have had one deceptively simple job: "saying something that other people will want to read." In Zinsser's view, people will always want to read stories that inspire, surprise, and entertain them. In other words, readers want personality and humanity, whether those things come through a writer's style or the content they explore.

SIMPLICITY VS. CLUTTER

Throughout *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser repeats one piece of advice more than any other: be clear, direct, and precise. Inexperienced writers tend to think that they'll sound intelligent if they use complicated language, but Zinsser believes that this is wrong. With very few exceptions, the best writers use as few words as possible and try to say exactly what they mean. They stick to plain English, no matter their job or field of expertise. Zinsser argues that simplicity is the key to effective writing because it's the only way to keep the reader's attention and make a deep impression on them.

Zinsser tells aspiring writers to avoid the cluttered style that's common in business, government, academia, and journalism. Clutter is confusing, unpersuasive, and unlikely to hold a reader's attention. Jargon, vagueness, and unnecessary words all make writing cluttered. First, bad writers use jargon and long words instead of common, short words. For instance, the word "help" is perfectly fine, but many people ask for "assistance" instead. They want to "dialogue" with "individuals" instead of just talking to people. In these cases, there's no benefit to choosing the longer words. The writer might expect to sound smarter, but they actually end up sounding confused.

Next, bad writers use vague language to confuse others or avoid blame. For instance, companies use it to avoid taking responsibility for their errors, and politicians use it to avoid committing to policy change. Vague language lets people pretend to say something when they're really saying nothing at all. This is the opposite of good writing, which requires clearly communicating a specific idea. Journalists, travel writers, and sportswriters tend to choose vague language because they're lazy or overworked: they use common terms, clichés, and metaphors without paying attention to their exact meaning. This makes for confusing and uninspiring writing.

Finally, bad writers use unnecessary words. For instance, they say "a personal friend of mine" instead of "my friend," they tack qualifiers like "it is interesting to note" onto half of their sentences, or they use redundant adjectives (such as "yellow daffodil"). By adding more words without adding new meaning, these writers lose their readers' attention, interest, and goodwill.

By contrast, effective writers choose simplicity, clarity, and efficiency over clutter. Where bad writers hide behind jargon, good writers choose the simplest word that achieves their purpose. Their makes reading their work easier and more enjoyable. Where bad writers are vague, good writers are precise—they use active verbs and vivid adjectives. In fact, Zinsser says, they tend to obsessively look for the best possible word and eliminate ambiguous phrasing.

Where bad writers clutter their writing with unnecessary words, good writers make sure that every word counts. They care about how their sentences sound, and they always look for shorter, more elegant ways to make their point because they value the reader's time and attention. All writers are also readers, so they intuitively know that the same story is simply more pleasurable to read in plain English than in the "modern bureaucratic fuzz" that most people write nowadays. To emphasize this point, Zinsser remembers how the writer George Orwell once rewrote a famous Bible verse from Ecclesiastes in bureaucrat-speak. The original starts, "I returned and saw under the sun [...]" while the cluttered version starts, "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that [...]" Clutter ruins the story, while plain English lets it shine through.

Fortunately, even the most cluttered and confused writers can improve. In one of his workshops, Zinsser even taught school administrators to "dejargonize" their writing. The key to writing clean, effective prose is just to revise, rewrite, and practice. First drafts are usually messy, but revisions will seldom make them worse. In fact, this is the key to writing in general. Zinsser argues that writing is deceptively simple—it just requires paper and a writing implement—but it actually takes a lifetime of hard work to write well. The best writers are constantly practicing, rewriting, and imitating their models. For instance, Zinsser has tried to emulate E.B. White's simple, breezy style all his life.

Seven decades in, he admits that he still has a ways to go. Writing with ease and grace is difficult—it's much harder than writing "bureaucratic fuzz." But for Zinsser, anyone who takes themselves seriously as a writer should strive for clarity and simplicity.

PROCESS AND ORGANIZATION

For William Zinsser, the writing process is really about solving a series of problems about what to say and how to say it. While most writers rightfully focus on refining their style and finding a compelling story, Zinsser thinks that few pay enough attention to how their books and articles should be structured. In fact, Zinsser argues that structure is the most "untaught and underestimated skill" in the writing profession, so he dedicates plenty of attention to it in *On Writing Well*. At the beginning of the writing process, he argues, writers should make key organizational decisions about their project's scope, main point, and "unities"—or the stylistic patterns (tone, tense, and narrator) that tie it together. Since the key to writing well is developing good habits, writers can significantly improve their work—and save themselves time, energy, and stress—by learning to treat organizational decisions as a key step in the writing process.

Just like a piece of writing has to have a compelling story and interesting style, it also has to have the right structure in order to attract and hold reader's attention. The most important part of any article is the lead, which has to introduce its key themes while entertaining the reader. However, Zinsser explains that many different kinds of leads can be successful, depending on the material they need to cover. (For instance, in an article about the poultry industry, he leads with a joke about hot dogs.) Writers should choose approaches that fit their distinctive voices and material.

But to keep readers going past the lead, a piece of writing also needs to have a logical structure. Zinsser points out that many otherwise excellent writers can't figure out how to organize their ideas, so their books and articles fizzle out halfway through. Therefore, he tells writers to have a plan when they start drafting. For instance, he advises memoirists to spend several months collecting memories and then arrange them all on the floor. Only then will they find their overarching narrative arc. Without some plan, writers are bound to confuse—and lose—their readers partway through the story. In fact, they can even lose their readers at the very end, so conclusions are almost as important as leads. Zinsser suggests ending on a funny or interesting note: the reader should initially be surprised to see the piece end, but once it does, they should appreciate the writer's clever craftsmanship.

Finally, Zinsser emphasizes that writers should establish unity to tie a piece together. This means that they should stick to the same style, voice, pronouns (first, second, or third person), and tense (past, present, or future). This brings coherence to the reader's experience. In contrast, disunity ruins it. To illustrate how, Zinsser quotes a travel article that switches from first-person travelogue to a third-person brochure and back again. It's jarring, confusing, and unpleasant, which shows that unity is essential to giving a piece of writing a solid structure.

Zinsser concludes that if writers want to structure their work better, they should devote more time to planning. In fact, big-picture planning should start even before the research—writers should carefully ask themselves what they want to write about and why. Writers often try to do too much: they want to interview dozens of people, explain everything that happened on their trip, or tell their entire family history. This won't work. The piece will be confusing and stressful to write, and when it's done, it'll be too confusing to hold a reader's attention. Over-researching is helpful, but only within the scope of a manageable project. Instead, Zinsser thinks, writers should "think small." They should try to convey one "provocative thought"—and only one—with each piece. In travel articles, they should try to convey one idea about a place, and in memoirs they should focus on one specific period from the past. This makes the project more manageable for both the writer and the reader. Another way that writers can clarify their work is by defining their *quest* and their *intention*. Their quest is what are they trying to find out (and in their writing, they have to figure out how to bring the reader on this quest along with them). Their intention is what they want to do with their writing—namely, if they want to "affirm and celebrate" something or "debunk and destroy" something. By determining what they're trying to do, writers can give themselves a sense of direction throughout the writing process.

Finally, after writers have finished the bulk of their research, but before they start writing, Zinsser believes that they should set aside some time to organize their work on a smaller scale. They should think about how to lead, how to conclude, and what unities to use. They should also decide what persona to adopt, what their piece's main idea is, and what pronouns and tense to use. Together, this keeps writing coherent and unified. This planning is one of the most important habits that turn aspiring writers into masters of the craft.

While Zinsser strongly defends planning, he also thinks that writers should be flexible later on. For instance, a writer might decide to switch their article's tense to the first person or rewrite it in a different voice—and if these changes will improve the work, the writer should absolutely make them. But Zinsser's main point still stands: the more a writer plans ahead, the less they'll have to redo later on, and the more likely their work will be unified and compelling to their reader.

THE GIFT OF WRITING

On Writing Well is a book about how to write, but it's also a book about how to become a writer and what writing can do in the world. William Zinsser doesn't

just tell his readers how to put words on a page—he also tells them why it matters when they do so. He loves writing because it allows him to pursue his curiosity and share his discoveries with other people. But good writing also has important real-world effects, beyond just entertaining people: it can bring down governments, launch careers, reconnect families, and much more. Thus, Zinsser views writing as more than an enjoyable job—it's also an important tool for understanding the world and even a form of public service. He argues that good writing is a valuable gift to the world because it enriches the writer's life, the reader's life, and society at large.

For Zinsser, writing is one of the greatest things anyone can do for themselves. As a career choice, he thinks it's liberating and life-affirming. Successful writers get to follow their interests and passions full-time—and those who do manage to follow their interests, Zinsser points out, tend to be the most successful ones. In Zinsser's words, "no subject is too specialized or too quirky if you make an honest connection with it when you write about it." Some writers get to focus their entire careers on niche subjects like gardening, knitting, or scuba diving. Others, like Zinsser, are generalists and get to pursue a wide range of interests about a wide range of subjects. In both cases, writers are free to learn about—and teach their readers—whatever they want. But Zinsser also thinks that writing benefits people even if they don't do it full-time. In his chapter on memoir and family history, he notes that many people have written memoirs in order to understand their heritage, overcome childhood trauma, or define their own legacy. In all these cases, writing helps people fulfill important personal goals and develop emotionally because it gives them a reason to reflect on their lives.

Next, Zinsser also sees writing as a gift to the reader. Most fundamentally, the best writers take their readers on exciting quests and enrich their day-to-day lives, which is why writing can inspire so many people. Of course, Zinsser is one of them—throughout the book, he cites the numerous writers who have inspired and entertained him, ranging from Red Smith and S.J. Perelman to Joan Didion and E.B. White. In his chapters on form, Zinsser also points out how writing helps readers navigate the world. He takes writers' obligation to inform their readers just as seriously as their obligation to entertain them. The daily news is an obvious example, but entertainment criticism also helps readers evaluate new works of art, sports writing helps them understand the limits of the human body, and science writing helps them understand the implications of complex new discoveries that they wouldn't understand otherwise. Finally, memoirs give their readers an even more profound gift: a record of someone's knowledge, experience, and voice that continues on after their death. For families, this can be invaluable. Zinsser writes about how grateful he is for his father's memoir, which preserved details of his parents' and grandparents' lives forever. Through memoirs, the departed can gift their memories to the living.

Finally, Zinsser argues that writing plays an essential role in a functioning society—which also means that writers have an important responsibility to the public. Zinsser views writers as guardians of the truth who are responsible for identifying and recording what a culture does, thinks, and values. For instance, he repeatedly says that "writers are the custodians of memory," because they pass on a record of a society's past. While this responsibility once fell on novelists, after World War II, nonfiction writers took it over. American cultural life started to center on magazines like *Life* and *Harper's* and books like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. These nonfiction writers articulated and influenced the national culture, just like writers have done throughout history.

Finally, Zinsser also thinks that writers have an obligation to speak truth to power. He points out that humor can be an especially powerful channel for political and social criticism: by exaggerating "some crazy truth" to the point that people see its craziness, satirical works like the novel *Catch-22* make unforgettable political arguments. But writers could never make those same arguments in a column or essay—they probably wouldn't get published, and even if they did, they wouldn't get taken seriously as they do when they write humor. (Zinsser used the same strategy to critique more innocuous cultural trends, too, like the popularity of hair curlers in the 1960s.) Thus, writers' work isn't just an important part of social and cultural history—it can also change the course of that history.

Zinsser clearly thinks that writing—especially *good* writing—can do a lot to better the world. But writers also have responsibilities proportional to their power. Most importantly, they have to tell the truth, because otherwise they violate the public's trust. This sense of trust and honor helps explain Zinsser's lofty sense of purpose as a writer. At the end of the book, he admits that he frequently argues with editors in order to defend the integrity of his work. Given his view of his profession as a form of public service, this makes sense: honesty and integrity are the writer's highest values, because the best writers devote themselves to speaking the truth and bettering humanity.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ZINSSER'S PHOTO OF E.B. WHITE

William Zinsser has a picture of his role model, E.B. White, hanging on his office wall. This photo represents how writing well is fundamentally simple: the best

writing requires simple materials and is concise and jargon-free. Moreover, it reflects the idea that the best way to learn to write is simply to emulate one's role models.

Zinsser describes this photo in his introduction to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *On Writing Well*. It shows White working at a plain wood table with his typewriter, an ashtray, and a wastebasket. This is all writers need: a way to put words on paper and a way to get rid of the words that don't come out right. The photo reminds Zinsser and his visitors that the basic ingredients of good writing will never change. Today, writers face the same basic challenges as they did in the past and will in the future. The basic solution to these challenges is also the same: simple, precise, jargon-free writing. E.B. White mastered this style, and he also famously advocated it in his revised edition of The Elements of Style. Therefore, White's photo represents how both the writing process and the best writing have to be simple.

Since the basic elements of good writing never change, Zinsser argues that one of the best ways for beginners to improve is by studying and emulating successful writers from the past. Specifically, Zinsser always sought to emulate E.B. White, and *On Writing Well* seeks to emulate *The Elements of Style* by applying its principles to contemporary nonfiction. Therefore, White's photo also symbolizes how learning to write well is simple: beginning writers should figure out which writers inspire them and then emulate those writers until they find their own voice.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *On Writing Well* published in 2016.

Introduction Quotes

One of the pictures hanging in my office in mid-Manhattan is a photograph of the writer E. B. White. It was taken by Jill Krementz when White was 77 years old, at his home in North Brooklin, Maine. A white-haired man is sitting on a plain wooden bench at a plain wooden table—three boards nailed to four legs—in a small boathouse. The window is open to a view across the water. White is typing on a manual typewriter, and the only other objects are an ashtray and a nail keg. The keg, I don't have to be told, is his wastebasket.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker), E.B. White

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: ix

Explanation and Analysis

William Zinsser begins his 30th Anniversary Edition of *On Writing Well* by describing this photo of E.B. White in his office. The photo represents how good writing is simple, in terms of both process and product. Writing requires the most basic of materials, and its fundamentals don't change through the ages. The best writing is clear, direct, and straightforward—just like E.B. White's famously breezy, informal work.

In fact, Zinsser spent his whole life trying to write like White, whom he considers a master of the craft. After all, he argues that imitation is one of the best ways for writers to learn—not because they should try to sound like someone else, but rather because trying on other writers' styles is the best way for them to identify and develop their own. Therefore, this photo also represents Zinsser's relationship to other writers and the American nonfiction tradition.

Finally, the photo reflects this book's aims. E.B. White famously revised his college professor William Strunk Jr.'s landmark style guide, *The Elements of Style*, which provided part of Zinsser's inspiration for *On Writing Well*. Zinsser's goal in this book is to explain Strunk and White's basic principles in his own words, and then apply them to nonfiction.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not the subject being written about, but who he or she is. I often find myself reading with interest about a topic I never thought would interest me—some scientific quest, perhaps. What holds me is the enthusiasm of the writer for his field. [...]

This is the personal transaction that's at the heart of good nonfiction writing. Out of it come two of the most important qualities that this book will go in search of: humanity and warmth. Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to "personalize" the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength.

Can such principles be taught? Maybe not. But most of them can be learned.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser argues that all good nonfiction is ultimately based on a "personal transaction." This transaction goes far deeper than writers simply offering their work in exchange for the reader's time. In their work, writers are really offering *themselves*: their distinctive voice, their sensibility with language, and their enthusiasm for some particular material. And, whether they know it or not, readers are looking for more than just an interesting story: they want to be surprised, delighted, entertained, moved, inspired, or awestruck.

Therefore, the best writers don't just manage to present their material clearly and directly—they also know how to communicate "humanity and warmth" through their work. They develop a distinct voice and style, and they tell interesting stories about extraordinary but relatable people. This is why Zinsser notes that, in the right hands, any material can be compelling. His goal in *On Writing Well* is to teach writers how to offer the most on their side of the "personal transaction."

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

According to Zinsser, clutter—or extra language that doesn't add meaning—is good writing's single greatest enemy. Many writers confuse clutter with sophistication, and most fail to edit it out of their work. Clutter ruins the reader's experience and weakens the writer's message. And it's everywhere—it's actually the norm in business, government, academia, medicine, and media. So, for Zinsser, good writing isn't just the solution to clutter: it's also a tool for shifting American culture toward honesty, simplicity, and honor.

Most first drafts are hopelessly cluttered, but poor writers confuse clutter for style, while good writers refine their work over time. Here, Zinsser gives just a few examples of clutter. For instance, poor writers embellish their work with unnecessary words—they might say "a personal friend of mine" instead of just "my friend." And like the college president who describes student protests as "very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction," they replace plain English with pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

❝ The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser believes that writing clearly means eliminating clutter—words or sentences that are unnecessarily complicated or clunky. Good writers use as few words as possible and make sure that every single one pulls its weight. They say more with less, where clutter says less with more. They constantly tinker with their work, looking for ways to cut out words and simplify phrases to make their writing as straightforward as possible. And, according to Zinsser, they're never fully satisfied.

Therefore, Zinsser thinks that aspiring writers should spend as much time as they can learning to identify and eliminate clutter. They should approach their work from the reader's perspective, identify every wasted or confusing word, and then find a shorter, clearer way to make their point. Cutting through clutter is the greatest possible step writers can take to improve. Only then can they start to develop a distinctive voice, which is what Zinsser believes makes writing engaging for readers.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Beware, then, of the long word that's no better than the short word: "assistance" (help), "numerous" (many), "facilitate" (ease), "individual" (man or woman), "remainder" (rest), "initial" (first), "implement" (do), "sufficient" (enough), "attempt" (try), "referred to as" (called) and hundreds more. Beware of all the slippery new fad words: paradigm and parameter, prioritize and potentialize. They are all weeds that will smother what you write. Don't dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don't interface with anybody.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

The most common kind of clutter is also the most dangerous: using complicated words instead of simple ones. Zinsser points out that American culture tends to confuse complexity with sophistication. For instance, many businesspeople, professors, and government officials avoid using ordinary language because they fear that this will make them seem simple-minded. But actually, it's the opposite: when they use complicated language, they seem confused and unprepared. As a result, they use long words like "implement" instead of perfectly good, common ones like "do."

Good nonfiction writers learn to edit this clutter out of their writing and find the simplest possible way to make their point. When their point is complex, their vocabulary can be, too—but only if it's precise. They let their ideas speak for themselves, rather than trying to embellish them through fancy language. In short, they never make their writing more complicated than it needs to be.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Few people realize how badly they write. Nobody has shown them how much excess or murkiness has crept into their style and how it obstructs what they are trying to say. If you give me an eight-page article and I tell you to cut it to four pages, you'll howl and say it can't be done. Then you'll go home and do it, and it will be much better. After that comes the hard part: cutting it to three.
The point is that you have to strip your writing down before you can build it back up.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

In his chapter on style, Zinsser notes that most writers have never learned exactly how clutter negatively impacts their writing. A major reason why writers avoid cutting out clutter because they're afraid of losing their distinctive style. But Zinsser argues that this approach is completely wrongheaded, because clutter isn't style—it only gets in the way of style. Most writers need to eliminate it before they can really say what they want to, and any writer who confuses clutter with style has a lot to learn.

Zinsser thinks that cutting an eight-page article to three is as difficult as it sounds, but it's also an excellent way to write better. This kind of exercise forces writers to distinguish the essential components of their work from the nonessential. And once they do, they can learn to make the essential components more precise, vivid, and entertaining. *That*, Zinsser thinks, is real style.

There is no style store; style is organic to the person doing the writing, as much a part of him as his hair, or, if he is bald, his lack of it. Trying to add style is like adding a toupee. At first glance the formerly bald man looks young and even handsome. But at second glance—and with a toupee there's always a second glance—he doesn't look quite right. The problem is not that he doesn't look well groomed; he does, and we can only admire the wigmaker's skill. The point is that he doesn't look like himself.

This is the problem of writers who set out deliberately to garnish their prose. You lose whatever it is that makes you unique. The reader will notice if you are putting on airs. Readers want the person who is talking to them to sound genuine. Therefore a fundamental rule is: be yourself.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser argues that the best writers find their own distinctive style, because that's what makes their writing entertaining and holds the reader's attention. But in this passage, he uses this toupee metaphor to warn aspiring writers against trying too hard to develop their style. He

points out that while a toupee may look good "[a]t first glance," under closer scrutiny, it makes the wearer look inauthentic. In the same way, it's impossible to fake writing style; it has to be natural, and so writers have to be patient. They have to build an instinct for eliminating clutter, and they have to practice rewriting for years. Only then will they come to their style—or, really, their style will come to *them*.

In fact, Zinsser claimed that he didn't find his authentic voice until he first wrote *On Writing Well* in his fifties. This is yet another reminder that writing is a lifelong craft, and writers who overcompensate by trying too hard and too soon actually set themselves up to fail.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ […] "Who am I writing for?"

It's a fundamental question, and it has a fundamental answer: You are writing for yourself. Don't try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person. Don't try to guess what sort of thing editors want to publish or what you think the country is in a mood to read. Editors and readers don't know what they want to read until they read it. Besides, they're always looking for something new.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Most writers try to write for someone else—usually an idealized reader, editor, friend, or teacher. But Zinsser thinks that this is the wrong approach. Writing has to appeal to readers and editors, of course, and writers should focus on clarity when they revise in order to make their readers' lives as easy as possible. But writers shouldn't pander to their readers—instead, they should just write for themselves.

Zinsser argues that individuality and enthusiasm make for the most compelling writing, so writers have to follow their own interests and whims in order to find a distinctive voice and style. Because writing is so personal and psychological, writers simply do best when they're personally invested in their work. This is why they can find success working on topics as quirky and specialized as hydroponic gardening, vegan knitting, or freestyle rock climbing. This is one of writing's greatest advantages as a profession: writers get to follow their interests wherever they lead, and they make a living by bringing their readers along for the ride.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Make a habit of reading what is being written today and what was written by earlier masters. Writing is learned by imitation. If anyone asked me how I learned to write, I'd say I learned by reading the men and women who were doing the kind of writing *I* wanted to do and trying to figure out how they did it. But cultivate the best models. Don't assume that because an article is in a newspaper or a magazine it must be good.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker), H.L. Mencken , E.B. White

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Careful word choice is the foundation of all good writing: it's writers' main tool for articulating their ideas, entertaining their readers, and expressing their individual styles. Therefore, Zinsser advises aspiring writers to become obsessive about it, and he argues that imitating other writers is the best way to improve.

Readers might be surprised to that Zinsser advocates imitation, because he repeatedly argues that writers should develop unique personal styles. But there's no contradiction here. He doesn't think writers should spend their careers trying to sound like other people—instead, he views imitation as a learning tool. In short, writers should imitate others in order to figure out what their own voices sound like. They'll find certain styles more and less comfortable, and they'll choose the tones and techniques that best fit them. But ultimately, they have to incorporate these bits and pieces into their own styles. For Zinsser, this meant closely studying many of the writers he cites throughout *On Writing Well*—like E.B. White and H.L. Mencken. By reading these other writers, he figured out his own values and priorities.

In fact, these individual values are the ultimate measure of quality. As Zinsser points out in this passage, plenty of magazines and newspapers publish terrible work, so writers shouldn't think that their work is excellent just because it gets published. Instead, they have to trust their own judgment, and they should constantly look for new role models and strive for improvement.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ You learn to write by writing. It's a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it's true. The only way to learn to write is to force yourself to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Many laypeople and aspiring writers think that good writing is a matter of genius—they assume that the best writers just sit down and let pure brilliance tumble out of their heads. But according to Zinsser, this idea couldn't be more wrong. In fact, the best writers are usually the ones who spend the most time practicing and painstakingly revising. They delete huge chunks of their work. They spend hours on details of structure and word choice. And most importantly, they spend decades gradually honing their craft.

Therefore, Zinsser urges his readers to take the long view. If they want to become great writers, they should be ready to dedicate their entire lives to the art. And then, they actually have to "force [themselves] to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis." This is why Zinsser swears by routine—if writers aren't writing most days, then they probably aren't improving. This constant practice can be arduous, but it pays off. It's much easier to get better over time than to get worse.

❝ Unity is the anchor of good writing. So, first, get your unities straight. Unity not only keeps the reader from straggling off in all directions; it satisfies your readers' subconscious need for order and reassures them that all is well at the helm. Therefore choose from among the many variables and stick to your choice.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser boils good writing down to three major factors: personality, clarity, and unity. In the second part of *On Writing Well*, he focuses on the last. In order to keep their readers' attention, he explains, writers have to use the same tense, tone, and point of view throughout their work. They also have to present a unified narrative arc. For instance, instead of switching from the first-person perspective to the third-person perspective halfway through an article, they should choose one and stick to it. Instead of trying to pack several life lessons into a short article, they should just pick one.

According to Zinsser, writers should make these decisions about unity as early as possible. They will inevitably make some changes while rewriting, but they should start with a clear sense of their main idea and the person, tone, and tense they will use. By setting aside time for these decisions at the outset, Zinsser argues, writers save themselves plenty of headaches during the rewriting process.

Chapter 9 Quotes

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

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In Zinsser's view, the most important part of a nonfiction article is the beginning, or the lead. There's no single best way to lead, neither for a specific writer nor for a specific topic. Instead, each lead is unique: it always has to fit the writer *and* their material.

Here, Zinsser explains that a lead has to do two main things to be successful: "capture the reader immediately" and "force [them] to keep reading." He gives several examples of how the writer can elicit a specific emotional response in the reader to achieve these goals. But these two goals are often at odds: the best way to *grab* the reader's attention is with a single notable detail, while *holding* their attention requires giving them the context that they need to understand the rest of the article. Therefore, writing a successful lead is extremely difficult—it requires a delicate balancing act. Writers have to present a compelling detail to surprise the reader, then explain that detail and transition into the rest of their piece without boring the reader.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser opens his "Bits & Pieces" chapter of assorted writing advice by arguing that writers should use active verbs, which make prose vibrant and lucid. Besides eliminating clutter, this is the most important step that writers can take to improve their work at the sentence level. The passive voice describes a frozen world and makes the acting subject invisible, but the active voice makes people the protagonists of their own stories. Good writers reward their readers with dynamic, entertaining stories in the active voice. They also choose specific, descriptive verbs. This doesn't excuse clutter or jargon, but it does justify testing various options when searching for the best way to make a point.

As writers revise, Zinsser argues, they should always seek better, bolder verbs that will enrich their sentences. For instance, "set up" and "step down" are bland and unimaginative compared to "launch" and "resign." There's no comparison: the reader practically skips over "set up," which adds no imagery or mental association to the sentence. But "launch" evokes a clear image and heightens the reader's connection to the material.

❝ Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *On Writing Well*, Zinsser argues that good writing is really a series of habits, and rewriting is the most important of them all. Most people assume that writers spend their days filling blank pages with new material, but actually, they are usually rephrasing, refining, and reimagining things they've already written down. No first draft is perfect, he believes, and few are even publishable. All good writers—and Zinsser really means *all* of them—spend at least as much time rewriting their work as they do drafting it.

Of course, there isn't always a clear division between these two processes: few writers genuinely start over from the beginning and write a second draft. For most, rewriting means deleting, shuffling around, and tinkering with the material they already have. Still, this process is "the essence of writing well" because it allows writers to constantly improve their work. Unlike other kinds of artists, writers get as many redoes and second chances as they want—they can spend as much time as they need choosing the right word or trying out new approaches to their material. Of course, this also means that they must have higher standards and lower margins of error than other artists. This all contributes to Zinsser's love for his profession: it lets him be a perfectionist, but it also gives him endless chances to fix his imperfections.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ Get people talking. Learn to ask questions that will elicit answers about what is most interesting or vivid in their lives. Nothing so animates writing as someone telling what he thinks or what he does—in his own words.

His own words will always be better than your words, even if you are the most elegant stylist in the land. They carry the inflection of his speaking voice and the idiosyncrasies of how he puts a sentence together. They contain the regionalisms of his conversation and the lingo of his trade. They convey his enthusiasms. This is a person talking to the reader directly, not through the filter of a writer. As soon as a writer steps in, everyone else's experience becomes secondhand.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

A straightforward theory of writing underlies all of Zinsser's advice in *On Writing Well*. He thinks that good nonfiction writers are the ones who tell their readers compelling true stories, and compelling true stories are always fundamentally about people. Therefore, all good writers must know how to write about people—and the key to this is letting them speak in their own words, which requires knowing how to interview them. This explains why Zinsser starts his "Forms" section of *On Writing Well* by explaining how to conduct interviews.

As Zinsser explains in this passage, lived experience is always more interesting than secondhand reports. People's life experiences leave an imprint on their words and speaking styles, so it's essential to get those words right. Effective interviewers know how to elicit and package them. This helps explain why Zinsser values clarity so much: he thinks that a nonfiction writer's job is really to package other people's stories for the reader. Good nonfiction writers don't put their own spin on their subjects' stories; where they do arrange or modify them, it's with the subject's position and the express intention of faithfully expressing their ideas. Even when they focus on themselves—like in memoirs—nonfiction writers put storytelling before embellishment.

❝ What's wrong, I believe, is to fabricate quotes or to surmise what someone might have said. Writing is a public trust. The nonfiction writer's rare privilege is to have the whole wonderful world of real people to write about. When you get people talking, handle what they say as you would handle a valuable gift.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser confronts a thorny ethical problem in his chapter on interviews: how can writers stay faithful to both the people they interview and the readers they serve? To fulfill their responsibility to their subjects, writers have to accurately represent their words and beliefs. But to fulfill their duties to their audience, writers have to present their subjects' words as clearly and concisely as possible.

The solution is to arrange people's words without misrepresenting them. Zinsser believes that it's acceptable—and, in fact, usually necessary—to combine and move around quotes for literary effect. But a writer should only do this in order to make their interviewee's ideas *clearer*. For instance, when someone makes a point at the beginning of the interview and then gives the perfect supporting evidence for it many minutes later, it's perfectly acceptable to print these two quotes back-to-back.

Similarly, many people make perfectly logical points without speaking in full sentences. But because readers *do* expect full sentences, printing these people's exact words would actually be doing them a disservice. So, Zinsser thinks that it's perfectly legitimate to add the necessary connective tissue to turn their words into complete sentences. When in doubt, a writer can always just run their articles by their subject to make sure they feel that the writer is accurately representing their views.

What's never acceptable, however, is outright lying. Zinsser notes that several writers have fallen into public scandal for making up quotes. He thinks this response is appropriate: by fabricating quotes, writers violate the sacred trust at the foundation of their profession. They have the privilege to share stories with the world, which means that they're also responsible for the accuracy of those stories. If they lie, they betray the public trust and undermine their own credibility forever.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ What McPhee has done is to capture the *idea* of Juneau and Anchorage. Your main task as a travel writer is to find the central idea of the place you're dealing with.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Like all nonfiction writers, travel writers—and anyone else who writes about places—should "think small." Instead of indiscriminately mentioning everything they see, know, and believe about the places they describe, writers should focus on conveying a single powerful idea about them. This kind of unity is the best way to hold the reader's interest.

Zinsser uses John McPhee's book about Alaska, *Coming Into*

the Country, as an example of how to write successfully about places. In a passage about the Alaska state government's interest in moving the capital from Juneau to Anchorage, McPhee uses Juneau's extreme winds and cramped living conditions as a metaphor for its stifling political climate. He contrasts this with Anchorage's typical suburban design, which makes it eerily identical to any other sprawling American metropolis. Anchorage "has in come on the wind, an American spore."

McPhee condenses the whole political dilemma into this neat metaphor; he's successful because he packages each city into a single, unified idea. He gives the reader a picture of each city without losing his core message or piling on unnecessary details. This shows how writers can bring places to life by choosing a single key idea to represent them.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Think narrow, then, when you try the form. Memoir isn't the summary of a life; it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition. It may look like a casual and even random calling up of bygone events. It's not; it's a deliberate construction.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser argues that many writers underestimate the power of memoir, which they can use not only to share lessons from their own lives with the world, but also to better understand themselves. But memoirs aren't the same as autobiographies. Autobiographers try to cover the entirety of their lives, while memoirists are selective—they usually focus on a narrow slice of the past.

Zinsser strongly prefers memoirs. This is perhaps unsurprising, since one of his mantras is to "think small." Like articles that try to defend too many main ideas, Zinsser thinks that autobiographies tend to become unfocused and uninteresting. Memoirs, in contrast, have much more potential because they're organized around a single unifying point. Of course, Zinsser believes the same principle applies to all writing: the more it coheres around a specific, thought-provoking idea, the more successful it's likely to be. By providing "a window into a life" instead of "the summary of a life," memoirists give their stories form and meaning. Since they're highly selective about what to include, they're also much more likely to be inspiring and thought-provoking.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ For the principle of scientific and technical writing applies to all nonfiction writing. It's the principle of leading readers who know nothing, step by step, to a grasp of subjects they didn't think they had an aptitude for or were afraid they were too dumb to understand.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In school, humanities students (those studying subjects like literature, language, philosophy, and history) learn to fear science, and science students learn to fear writing. But Zinsser believes that professionals have to tear down this barrier. There's no inherent opposition between writing and science—writers and scientists shouldn't be afraid of each other.

In fact, Zinsser argues here, the basic rule of science writing is really just the basic rule of all nonfiction: writers have to present complex ideas as clearly, logically, and precisely as possible. It doesn't matter if writers know nothing about science at the outset, because their job is to learn about it from experts, make a record of their learning, and then use that record to teach what they've learned back to uninformed lay readers. In fact, the most compelling science stories really have human stories behind them, so basic social and interview skills are as essential to science writing as they are to any other genre. In this way, explaining complicated scientific phenomena is actually just like explaining political events, telling a story, or describing a place. Writers just have to grasp the whole story, then break it down into smaller pieces, and then shuffle those pieces around until they find the most logical, entertaining, and attention-grabbing arrangement.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Any organization that won't take the trouble to be both clear and personal in its writing will lose friends, customers and money. Let me put it another way for business executives: a shortfall will be experienced in anticipated profitability.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Zinsser takes a break from his usual audience—students and writers—and instead addresses the millions of readers who work ordinary office jobs in corporations, schools, and government institutions. While writing isn't their main professional skill, it's still an essential part of their jobs, because it's one of the main ways they communicate with the people around them. However, office workers tend to be frightened of writing, and with good reason: most of them, Zinsser suggests, are terrible at it. Clutter plagues business writing, perhaps more than any other field. This is why Zinsser makes fun of it in this passage: businesspeople are more likely to say, "a shortfall will be experienced in anticipated profitability" than "we will lose money."

Fortunately, Zinsser's advice for businesspeople comes down to the same basic principle as his advice for everyone else: they have to write clearly and use their own voices. Instead of using jargon to feign sophistication, they should just write the way they speak.

Good writing doesn't just make for better communication—it also makes for better business. Zinsser points out that most clients and consumers want to deal with real people. So, the more cluttered and confused a business's communication is, the less likely it is to attract customers. Therefore, for businesses, good writing isn't just window dressing—it's actually an important strategic decision.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Something in Updike made contact with something in Williams: two solitary craftsmen laboring in the glare of the crowd. Look for this human bond. Remember that athletes are men and women who become part of our lives during the season, acting out our dreams or filling some other need for us, and we want that bond to be honored. Hold the hype and give us heroes who are believable.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser is a lifelong sports fan, but unfortunately, most of the sports writing he reads is terrible. Sportswriters' jobs tend to be repetitive, so they often give up on finding new stories and start recycling the same clichés instead. When they do make an effort to be original, they focus on the wrong parts of their work—for instance, they make up new jargon or tell irrelevant anecdotes about players' personal lives. Zinsser dedicates this chapter to explaining how sportswriters can improve, so that readers actually pay attention to their columns rather than just scanning them for results.

The key to good sports writing is also the key to all other nonfiction: cut the clutter and tell an interesting, relatable story about real people. Zinsser cites John Updike's book about Ted Williams to show how this is possible. Updike, a solitary writer, connects with Williams's loner persona and explains what it says about baseball and American culture at large. Updike connects Williams to broader social and cultural questions without losing track of the game, and he connects his own experience to Williams's without losing track of the reader. In short, he rescues sports writing from its focus on statistics and results in order to remind readers why they care about sports in the first place.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Criticism is a serious intellectual act. It tries to evaluate serious works of art and to place them in the context of what has been done before in that medium or by that artist.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In art criticism, unlike in other nonfiction genres, the writer's opinions are actually supposed to stand out. Interviewers are supposed to faithfully communicate their subjects' views, science writers are supposed to stick to the facts, and even memoirists are supposed to focus on their experiences, not their opinions or judgments. But an art critic's job is actually to give their own opinion, then explain and defend it.

Whether art critics focus on movies, books, theater, dance, music, visual art, television, or something else, they also have an important responsibility to the public. Like most other nonfiction writers, they have to further the public's

knowledge and appreciation of the area they focus on. In particular, they're supposed to give audiences the historical and thematic context that they need to understand an artist's choices and style. Whether they judge a work positively or negatively, an art critic's judgment carries authority and shapes readers' expectations. And critics have to be aware of these responsibilities: their work is "a serious intellectual act" and often carries serious real-world consequences.

Chapter 19 Quotes

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

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Paradoxically, Zinsser explains, humor is usually about something completely serious. Often, humorists' points are far more nuanced and relevant than the ones that circulate in ordinary columns on the same issues. This is because humor gives writers a special kind of protection—it lets them make points that are too provocative to publish seriously. They can ruthlessly critique mainstream politics and culture where other writers have to tread lightly. Some of their readers might not get the joke, but those who do are likely to remember it.

For instance, novels like *Catch-22* and movies like *Dr. Strangelove* use humor to critique militarism in U.S. culture. But serious works dealing with the same issues simply never attracted the same attention or loyal following. They were less entertaining, more easily shot down by the government, and not generally directed to a popular audience. These examples—and the many others that Zinsser cites throughout this chapter—show that humorists wield a powerful tool. Depending on their intentions, they can use it for good or evil—but Zinsser argues that they should be careful and use it for the betterment of society.

Humor is not a separate organism that can survive on its own frail metabolism. It's a special angle of vision granted to certain writers who already write good English. They aren't writing about life that's essentially ludicrous; they are writing about life that's essentially serious, but their eye falls on areas where serious hopes are mocked by some ironic turn of fate—"the strange incongruity," as Stephen Leacock put it, "between our aspiration and our achievement."

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Writers might assume that humor is a totally separate genre that requires a totally separate skillset, but it's not. Many writers try too hard to sound funny and end up sounding confused and insincere instead. Like all other style, Zinsser believes, humor has to come naturally. And doing it well requires all the same skills as writing other kinds of nonfiction. Humorists need to write precise, clutter-free "good English," and they need to know how to structure an article around a single compelling idea.

Of course, this main idea can't just be true—it also has to be clever. Similarly, while it's always easy to find an original angle in memoirs and interviews, jokes get stale fast, so humorists have to understand their field and constantly innovate. In many ways, then, humor is even *harder* to master than serious writing. But the path to mastering both is the same—it requires practice, imitation, and lots of rewriting.

Chapter 20 Quotes

My commodity as a writer, whatever I'm writing about, is me. And your commodity is you. Don't alter your voice to fit your subject. Develop one 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 and condescension and clichés.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker), E.B. White

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser argues that all nonfiction writing is based on a

"personal transaction." In that transaction, the writer isn't just offering their story. They're also offering their own distinctive voice. A lively, enthusiastic writer can make even the most mundane subjects interesting—in his chapter on the audience, Zinsser uses E.B. White's essay about poultry as an example. Zinsser admits that even though he finds White's subject matter boring, he continues reading because White's enthusiasm makes the essay so compelling. But a pretentious, dull, or cluttered writer will ruin even the most fascinating story.

In other words, a writer's specific voice is their main selling point: along with their approach to their material, it determines whether the reader keeps going. But to be compelling, writers have to stick to their own authentic voices. As Zinsser explains here, they shouldn't alter their style, even when it seems like it's necessary to fit their material—if anything, they should adapt the material to fit their style.

Chapter 21 Quotes

"The reader has to feel that the writer is feeling good. [...] Even if he isn't."

Related Characters: S.J. Perelman (speaker), William Zinsser

Related Themes:

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

When the influential humorist and *New Yorker* columnist S.J. Perelman presented in one of Zinsser's classes, this was his advice. Writers' enthusiasm is infectious. Their goal is to give their readers an interesting, enjoyable experience, and the best way to do this is by being interested in their material and enjoying themselves, too. (The second-best way is by rewriting to at least pretend to enjoy the process.) The reader will notice, and they'll want to see where the writer's interest has taken them.

The best way for writers to be enthusiastic about their work is to follow their own interests. As Zinsser explained earlier in his book, writers are their own best audience: they should write for themselves rather than trying to appeal to any specific reader. They are ultimately responsible for deciding how to write and what to publish. And they should genuinely be enjoying themselves, because their job gives them a rare luxury: free rein to learn about whatever they wish. (If writers aren't enjoying themselves during at least some part of the writing process, Zinsser suggests, they're doing it wrong.)

Living is the trick. Writers who write interestingly tend to be men and women who keep themselves interested. That's almost the whole point of becoming a writer. I've used writing to give myself an interesting life and a continuing education. If you write about subjects you think you would enjoy knowing about, your enjoyment will show in what you write. Learning is a tonic.

Related Characters: Red Smith, William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

According to Zinsser, the secret to enjoyable writing is the same for the writer and the reader. Most writers choose the profession in order to chase their curiosity full time. Zinsser believes that the writing life is an extraordinary gift: writers get to spend their whole lives learning about interesting people, places, and events. If they're lucky, they get to chase exactly the knowledge that interests them, exactly when they want to learn it. And for readers, the most enjoyable thing to read is whatever the writer happens to be interested in, because that's what they'll write about compellingly.

Therefore, it's best for everyone if the writer gets to pursue their interests. As the sportswriter Red Smith once put it, "Living is the trick." The more writers care about their work, the more it will merge with their lives. And the more life and passion they show in their work, the better their writing will turn out. The best writers focus their energy on leading interesting lives; their work is just a careful, creative paper trail.

If you master the tools of the trade—the fundamentals of interviewing and of orderly construction—and if you bring to the assignment your general intelligence and your humanity, you can write about *any* subject. That's your ticket to an interesting life.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker), Roger Tory Peterson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248-249

Explanation and Analysis

Writing is a dynamic and exciting profession because writers get to be generalists. They're constantly meeting new people, learning about new topics, and improving their craft. But this can also present challenges. Often, writers face difficult, unfamiliar assignments. For instance, Zinsser often has to interview specialists whose work he doesn't understand. In this chapter, he explains how he approached such an interview with the acclaimed naturalist, artist, and birdwatcher Roger Tory Peterson.

Zinsser is a born-and-bred New Yorker—he knows nothing about birdwatching and isn't even comfortable in nature. But he still managed to connect Peterson's work to his own interests, by focusing his interview on Peterson's art and work ethic. Peterson's specialist knowledge about birds was an important part of the interview, but it wasn't the main point of Zinsser's article. Zinsser avoided having to explain birds to the world when he simply decided that he didn't want that burden. It's that easy: writers who don't like something shouldn't write about it unless they absolutely have to.

By finding his own unique angle, Zinsser made Peterson's story interesting. And this unique angle also inspired Zinsser's readers to view Peterson in a new way. Therefore, Zinsser argues that writers should never despair at difficult or unfamiliar topics. Instead, they should rely on their fundamental skills—their "general intelligence" and "humanity"—in order to find an angle that fits their style.

Chapter 22 Quotes

This fixation on the finished article causes writers a lot of trouble, deflecting them from all the earlier decisions that have to be made to determine its shape and voice and content. It's a very American kind of trouble. We are a culture that worships the winning result: the league championship, the high test score. Coaches are paid to win, teachers are valued for getting students into the best colleges. Less glamorous gains made along the way—learning, wisdom, growth, confidence, dealing with failure—aren't given the same respect because they can't be given a grade.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Zinsser argues that most writers overvalue the product they create and undervalue the process through which they create it. They write in order to finish their work, publish it, and win recognition for it. But they don't care about the actual writing process's rewards, which are far greater than the finished product's rewards. During the process, writers get to pursue their curiosity, solve interesting organizational puzzles, inspire others with their newfound knowledge, and constantly improve at their craft. When they focus on the product instead, writers sacrifice these pleasures and make poor choices about the scope and organization of their work.

In fact, in writing, there is no fixed final product: writers can always modify and improve their work. For good writers, at least, the writing process never ends. So, Zinsser argues that if writers really want to improve, they should learn to embrace the process—including all the uncertainty it carries. Unlike in school, in nonfiction there are usually no hard deadlines or preset formats to follow. Therefore, writers have to learn to approach their work in a totally new way: with a focus on quality and an indifference to the clock. This is why Zinsser taught a semester-long class entirely on planning—his students didn't need to turn in any writing. Once they switched to focusing on the process, Zinsser's students unlocked their true potential as writers. Instead of stressing about deadlines, they let themselves brainstorm, explore, and experiment.

Chapter 23 Quotes

What struck me most powerfully when I got to Timbuktu was that the streets were of sand. I suddenly realized that sand is very different from dirt. Every town starts with dirt streets that eventually get paved as the inhabitants prosper and subdue their environment. But sand represents defeat. A city with streets of sand is a city at the edge.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

In the chapter "A Writer's Decisions," Zinsser focuses on all the small-scale organizational problems that writers face.

While these problems always depend on writers' style, material, and angle, Zinsser models some general approaches to them by walking the reader through one of his own articles, "The News From Timbuktu."

This short paragraph is Zinsser's lead. He uses Timbuktu's sand streets as a metaphor for its place on "the edge" of human civilization and the Western imagination. With this lead, he hopes to accomplish a few main things: he wants to grab the reader's attention, convince them to keep reading, and introduce his article's main themes. He starts with the storied name Timbuktu and the image of sand streets because he thinks that readers will immediately be surprised and want to learn more. He distinguishes between dirt and sand streets in order to clarify the reader's mental image—he wants to show them that Timbuktu is even more exotic and undeveloped than they're probably imagining. And he connects this to two of the main motifs that run throughout his piece: Timbuktu's "defeat" (by history and the desert) and its place "at the edge" (of human society and experience).

By the end of the lead, Zinsser hopes, readers should have a basic image of Timbuktu in their heads. They will probably remember its common association with remoteness and adventure, and they should be curious about why Zinsser went there and what it's like—if it even exists at all.

But Zinsser sets up all these associations without complex sentences or heavy-handed metaphors. As always, he lets the facts speak for themselves. He uses simple, direct sentences to sketch out his point, but he forces the reader to reach their own conclusions. What is Timbuktu "at the edge" of? How was it defeated? The only way to find out is to keep reading—and by the time the reader realizes this, they're already hooked.

> At such moments I ask myself one very helpful question: "What is the piece *really* about?" (Not just "What is the piece about?") Fondness for material you've gone to a lot of trouble to gather isn't a good enough reason to include it if it's not central to the story you've chosen to tell. Self-discipline bordering on masochism is required. The only consolation for the loss of so much material is that it isn't totally lost; it remains in your writing as an intangible that the reader can sense. Readers should always feel that you know more about your subject than you've put in writing.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

On his trip to Mali, Zinsser spent as much time visiting Bamako, Djenné, and Dogon country as he did in Timbuktu. He remembers plenty of rich detail about these other places, but he decides not to include them in his final article. Instead, he describes each place in a brief paragraph and then returns to his trip to Timbuktu.

Cutting interesting, vivid detail is difficult for most writers. It's easy to get attached to certain anecdotes, then refuse to cut them out even when they no longer fit. But Zinsser argues that writers have to learn to let them go. They might need "self-discipline bordering on masochism," but the sooner they can learn to develop it, the better. Writers have to value unity above all else. If it's irrelevant to a story's single main idea, then rich detail ceases to add to it. This is why Zinsser has to ask himself, "What is the piece *really* about?" His story is *really* about Timbuktu, and to maintain that focus, he has to avoid giving too much attention to any other subject. No matter how interesting Djenné was, it simply doesn't belong in this article. If it's so interesting, perhaps it deserves another article, elsewhere. If not, Zinsser points out, then at least it's still an "intangible" influence on his story about Timbuktu.

> Getting on the plane has taken me to unusual stories all over the world and all over America, and it still does. That isn't to say I'm not nervous when I leave for the airport; I always am—that's part of the deal. (A little nervousness gives writing an edge.) But I'm always replenished when I get back home.

As a nonfiction writer you must get on the plane. If a subject interests you, go after it, even if it's in the next county or the next state or the next country. It's not going to come looking for you.

Decide what you want to do. Then decide to do it. Then do it.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his chapter on "A Writer's Decisions," Zinsser addressees one last important planning dilemma: should writers pursue a story if they don't know that it will amount to anything? Yes, says Zinsser. The best stories are often uncertain or unexpected—and no story is totally predictable

from the outset. Besides, good writers tend to have a taste for adventure and are willing to follow their stories wherever they lead. (Of course, Zinsser is assuming that it's safe and financially possible to do so.)

For Zinsser, this freedom is writing's great gift to writers. Their profession lets them pursue their curiosity and drop in on other people's lives full time. Inevitably, some stories won't pan out, but others will materialize when writers least expect it. In the long term, Zinsser believes, the rich, unexpected stories will almost always be worth the lost time. And at the very least, "getting on the plane" will always be exciting.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ That's a highly specialized subject for a piece of writing; not many people owned a mechanical baseball game. But everybody had a favorite childhood toy or game or doll. The fact that I had such a toy, and that it was brought back to me at the other end of my life, can't help connecting with readers who would like to hold *their* favorite toy or game or doll one more time. They don't identify with my baseball game; they identify with the *idea* of the game—a universal idea. Remember this when you write your memoir and worry that your story isn't big enough to interest anyone else. The small stories that still stick in your memory have a resonance of their own. Trust them.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

In his chapter on memoir and family history, Zinsser reiterates that less is more. Rather than trying to fit their whole lives into their books, memoirists should focus on a few memories, people, or themes from the past. The smaller a project's scope, the more interesting and vivid a work is likely to be. In fact, Zinsser thinks that a compelling book or article should center on one main provocative idea.

Zinsser uses his own experience as an example. In a *New York Times* article, he wrote about a mechanical baseball game he used to play as a child. Although this is just a minor detail from his childhood, he knows that it has universal appeal because everyone fondly remembers their own favorite childhood toys. Because it was a single story, he could tell it with rich, precise detail. In contrast, if he tried to write a column about childhood toys in general, he likely wouldn't have inspired the same emotional connection with his readers because he wouldn't have shown them his *own* emotional connection to the mechanical baseball game.

His story was a success, and he received the most inspiring possible response to it: an executive at a toy company wrote him and offered to play the mechanical baseball game with him. Zinsser's experience is evidence that a single well-told story is the best way to attract and inspire readers.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ I've always felt that my "style"—the careful projection onto paper of who I think I am—is my main marketable asset, the one possession that might set me apart from other writers. Therefore I've never wanted anyone to tinker with it, and after I submit an article I protect it fiercely. Several magazine editors have told me I'm the only writer they know who cares what happens to his piece after he gets paid for it.

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *On Writing Well*, Zinsser repeatedly argues that a writer's main selling point is their specific style (or voice). He suggests that writers should never compromise their voice—not to try on someone else's, not to fit different material, and certainly not to please pesky editors. While his position might sound a bit extreme, the principle behind it is clear and consistent. Just as writers have a sacred obligation to speak the truth and accurately represent the views of the people they interview, editors have an obligation to honor each writer's voice. They should make edits that advance the writer's purpose, not ones that change it.

Writing is fundamentally based on trust between writers, the editors and publishers who promote their work, and the public that consumes it. Without this trust, writing becomes meaningless: nobody knows if writers are telling the truth or if editors are acting in good faith. Therefore, Zinsser believes that writers have to enforce these professional standards for themselves. They're the only people who can make sure editors respect their work, and Zinsser believes that they must, so long as they want to preserve their honor and moral integrity.

> My favorite definition of a careful writer comes from Joe DiMaggio, though he didn't know that's what he was defining. DiMaggio was the greatest player I ever saw, and nobody looked more relaxed. He covered vast distances in the outfield, moving in graceful strides, always arriving ahead of the ball, making the hardest catch look routine, and even when he was at bat, hitting the ball with tremendous power, he didn't appear to be exerting himself. I marveled at how effortless he looked because what he did could only be achieved by great daily effort. A reporter once asked him how he managed to play so well so consistently, and he said: "I always thought that there was at least one person in the stands who had never seen me play, and I didn't want to let him down."

Related Characters: William Zinsser (speaker), E.B. White

Related Themes:

Page Number: 302-303

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *On Writing Well*, Zinsser explains his commitment to quality by comparing good writers to baseball player Joe DiMaggio. Since he's a baseball superfan, this is a fitting analogy—it lets him end the book in his own particular voice, which he believes all writers should do.

Just like the best writing, Zinsser explains, DiMaggio's plays seemed both effortless and superhuman. He worked so hard to improve that, ironically, he ended up looking like a natural athlete who never needed to train a day in his life. DiMaggio was just like E.B. White, who meticulously rewrote all his sentences until they sounded like natural, spontaneous speech. In other words, writers—just like baseball players—have to put in effort in order to look effortless. The harder they work, the less it looks like they're working at all. The more they practice, the simpler their performance looks—and the more they achieve.

Finally, Zinsser quotes DiMaggio at the end in order to show what motivates great writers to improve: their sense of duty to the reader. Even though DiMaggio was one of the greatest baseball players to ever live, he constantly pushed himself because he constantly wanted to surprise his audience. He believed that excellence was its own reward, and he measured it by his own standards. Zinsser thinks that writers should approach their craft the same way: they should always strive for improvement and never settle for good enough. They have to hold themselves accountable for quality—since nobody else will—and they ought to do so out of a respect for the reader's time, attention, and experience. The purpose of writing, after all, is to be read and appreciated. Zinsser hopes that his writing will always be able to move, entertain, and inspire the people who read it, regardless of whether they expect to be impressed or are encountering him for the first time.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

On William Zinsser's office wall, there's **a photo** of E.B. White with a typewriter. This represents the simplicity of writing: it just requires paper, a writing implement, and a wastebasket. Even though most people write on computers now, a writer's job is still the same: "saying something that other people will want to read." In part, *On Writing Well* is a guide to doing just that. Zinsser has always used E.B. White's "seemingly effortless style" as a model, but he can't teach it any better than White did in his revised version of William Strunk Jr.'s The Elements of Style. Instead, Zinsser decided to write a book about how to apply Strunk and White's principles to journalism and nonfiction.

Zinsser introduces the 30th anniversary edition of his book with an image that he hopes his readers won't forget. The photo of E.B. White also shows off Zinsser's distinct personality as a writer. It demonstrates how he places himself in a specific American literary tradition, and it represents his main priorities in writing: simplicity and humanity. Of course, it also leads Zinsser into his case for why "other people will want to read" this book. He wants to build on Strunk and White's legacy by offering context and practical advice for how readers should apply the principles Strunk and White laid out.

Zinsser has seen *On Writing Well* influence generations of writers and journalists over its six editions and more than 30 years in publication. In each new edition, Zinsser has tried to accommodate changes in technology, the English language, and the writing profession itself. He's added sections about successful writers' attitudes and adapted his 2004 book *Writing About Your Life* into a new chapter about writing family history and memoir.

Zinsser has done for many other writers what E.B. White did for him: helped them to write clearer, more engaging prose. He's grateful for the opportunity to shape other writers, but he also knows that he has a serious responsibility to those other writers: he has to stay relevant and provide the best advice he possibly can. Therefore, he has periodically updated his book to reflect how writing and its place in society have changed.

Word processing, the internet, and email have revolutionized writing since the 1980s. While they made writing far easier and more popular, they didn't make it any better. Word processing helps good writers revise, but also lets bad writers throw anything they want on a page and pretend it's complete. Email forces everyone to write, but it prioritizes impromptu efficiency over revision and rewriting. In short, technology can "make writing twice as easy," but it can't "make writing twice as good." The basic principles of this book will never change, and neither will the basic tools of good writing: hard thinking and the English language.

Although he's revised On Writing Well *over the years, Zinsser thinks that its core message remains the same because the basic rules of good writing are timeless. Good writing fundamentally depends on the writer's mindset, effort, and decisions. Of course, this is why Zinsser loves his craft: a writer's work is an expression of their individual mind and humanity. All writers grapple with the same basic challenge, whether in the past, present, or future. Technology doesn't change this, even if it does make the writing process slightly easier.*

CHAPTER 1: THE TRANSACTION

A local school invites Zinsser to present to students about the writing profession. It also invites the professional surgeon and budding amateur writer Dr. Brock, who disagrees with Zinsser on everything. Brock says that writing is fun and easy, while Zinsser says that writing is hard, frustrating, and lonely. Brock doesn't believe in rewriting, while Zinsser argues that "rewriting is the essence of writing." Brock rejects routine, loves hanging out with other writers, and intentionally puts symbols in his work, while Zinsser embraces routine, never meets with other writers, and doesn't believe in symbolism.

Readers might assume that Zinsser mentions Dr. Brock in order to show that amateurs don't understand what it takes to be a professional writer. But actually, Zinsser isn't saying that there's anything wrong with Dr. Brock's routine (with the possible exception of his failure to rewrite). Instead, Zinsser and Brock simply represent all the ways that writers disagree about how to approach their craft. But this is actually liberating for writers, because it means that good writing has nothing to do with what time they get up, how much coffee they drink, or where they write their first draft. Zinsser isn't interested in telling writers how to live their lives, or even what style to use—instead, this book focuses on the writing challenges that truly are universal, like how to be clear and how to connect with the reader.

Brock and Zinsser both find their disagreements fascinating. Their conversation proves that there's no "right" way to write: each writer follows the method that works for them. But all writing processes involve *vulnerability* and *tension*. People become writers because they want to communicate something deep within them, so all writing is based on a fundamental "personal transaction." Effective writers show "humanity and warmth" through lively, clear prose. While teaching these techniques is hard, it's possible to learn them.

All writers face the same basic problem: how to set up the "personal transaction"—or how to say something meaningful and connect with the reader. This is fundamentally a human problem, not a technical one. Therefore, Zinsser won't be giving his readers a set of hard-and-fast rules. Instead, he wants to help other writers think critically about their purpose, craft, and identity, so that they can do the work that is most meaningful to them.

CHAPTER 2: SIMPLICITY

Zinsser argues that "clutter is the disease of American writing." Good writers make their sentences as clean and direct as possible. Many educated Americans use complicated language to sound sophisticated, like the university president who describes protests as "very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction." Zinsser gives examples of writers like Franklin D. Roosevelt, who made an effort to simplify his government's documents, or Henry David Thoreau, whose prose is powerful because it's plain and direct.

Readers prefer plain English to clutter, so writers should, too. This was also Strunk and White's core point in The Elements of Style. *Writers who assume that complicated prose makes them sophisticated usually fail to imagine the reader's perspective or truly understand their own purpose for writing. Unlike schoolteachers, readers aren't usually measuring a writer's competence or intellect. They can also put down a piece of writing that doesn't interest them. They really want to be informed, entertained, warned, enlightened, and so on, depending on what they happen to be reading. Good writers understand this, so they try to be direct, not waste the reader's time by showing off their intellect.*

Zinsser explains that clear writing requires clear thinking. Today's readers are busy and constantly fighting distractions, so careless writing won't hold their attention for long. Writers have to identify what they're trying to say and ask themselves if they're successfully saying it. Clear thinking isn't an innate talent—it's a habit that writers have to learn. And doing it well is incredibly difficult. To make his point, Zinsser includes two pages from this book's first manuscript. He had already rewritten them several times, but they're full of edits anyway.

Effective writing is really just a well-crafted string of thoughts, and good writers are people who know how to present interesting thoughts in a digestible way. So the key to writing well isn't genius or luck: it's habit. Writers must learn to define their purpose, clarify their thinking, and structure their work effectively. This is hard, but anyone can learn to do it if they're willing to put in the work.

CHAPTER 3: CLUTTER

Zinsser argues that cluttered language spreads like weeds in American culture. One person starts replacing a simple word with a complicated phrase, and then everyone else follows. For instance, Americans added the word "personal" to phrases like "a personal friend of mine" (which means "my friend") or "her personal physician" (which means "her doctor"). Instead of just saying "now," people say "currently" or "at the present time." Doctors use clutter to sound professional. The government uses it to sound politically correct. Companies use it to cover up their mistakes, and the military uses it to justify war crimes. The examples could go on forever.

Writing clearly is as easy as removing clutter, or extra words that that don't add meaning to a text. Cluttered writing uses more words to say less, while plain English uses fewer words to say more. For instance, "at the present time" is clutter because it just means "now," but it takes up much more space. Every word either pulls its weight or distracts the reader. Clutter distracts, so it's only useful for writers trying to confuse or mislead their readers. In contrast, Zinsser hopes, clear writing can promote honesty in American culture.

Zinsser lists some of the main kinds of clutter. People use long words instead of short ones (like "assistance" instead of "help"). They use popular jargon words like "paradigm" and "potentialize." They waste words on useless phrases like "I might add" and "it is interesting to note." When Zinsser edits student writing, he uses square brackets to mark unnecessary words, phrases, and sentences. These brackets are his way of saying, "I may be wrong, but I think this can be deleted and the meaning won't be affected. But *you* decide." This helps his students identify and eliminate clutter. He suggests that his readers should do the same.

To fix clutter, writers should use the simplest language that's adequate to express their ideas. This doesn't mean they should never use long words or complex sentence structures—just that they usually don't need to. Still, writers shouldn't expect to avoid clutter in their first drafts—rather, removing it is a key rewriting skill. Again, this shows that effective habits are the secret to good writing. This is why Zinsser teaches his students to identify and fix their own clutter, rather than simply editing their writing for them.

CHAPTER 4: STYLE

Many writers worry that they'll lose their distinctive voice if they try to simplify their style too much. In theory, Zinsser says, this is true. But in practice, "you have to strip your writing down before you can build it back up." Writers have to master the basics before they can embellish their writing.

It might sound like Zinsser wants everyone to copy his own style. He doesn't. He's just pointing out the difference between mechanics and style. Nobody can develop a compelling style without first getting the mechanics right—which means learning to write in clear, precise English. All good style is clear, and unclear writing is never compelling. In fact, without clarity, a writer can't even get their own voice across to the reader.

New writers try too hard to develop a "style." In reality, true style comes from a writer's personality. Zinsser jokes that faking style is like wearing a toupee: people will notice. The secret to developing a real style is to "be yourself." But this requires two things that writers are terrible at: relaxation and confidence. Most writers start by imagining the beautiful, finished article they're going to write, so they're stressed out when they actually sit down and start. It often takes them several paragraphs to start sounding like themselves—and good editors often just cut out those first paragraphs.

Style is a writer's unique selling point in their personal transaction with the reader. Ironically, while writers have to be themselves in order to develop a style, most writers start out by trying to sound like someone else. This is another reason that good writing is essentially subconscious: writers can only succeed when they're willing to expose their true selves on paper. Thus, although writers can improve through practice, their style is largely outside their control.

Since style depends on each writer's individual personality, Zinsser recommends writing in the first person. Many writers see this as egotistical and unprofessional, and it's true that the first person is unacceptable in many genres of writing. Still, when they can't use "I," writers should try to "convey a sense of I-ness."

In school, many students learn never to use "I" in formal writing. But Zinsser thinks that the first person helps the personal transaction succeed. Even when it's necessary to stick with the third person, as in news articles or academic papers, Zinsser thinks that it's still important for writers to convey their own personal voice.

Since style basically expresses the writer's subconscious, Zinsser thinks that writers resist using "I" for psychological reasons. He argues that many Americans are simply afraid of commitment. This fear also explains why politicians use vague language to avoid defending any specific position. But effective writers, like effective leaders, have to be clear and confident to inspire their audiences. If they want to succeed, writers have to sell themselves through their writing.

Writing takes vulnerability, and vulnerability takes courage. This is why good writers are like good leaders: they have to be a voice of conscience for their culture. Again, Zinsser thinks that bad writing is a symptom of a broader cultural trend toward dishonesty and evasiveness. But this trend also makes good, honest writing much more refreshing—and important—by comparison.

CHAPTER 5: THE AUDIENCE

Writers often wonder who they're writing for. The only real answer is *themselves*. Rather than trying to imagine an ideal editor or reader, Zinsser argues, writers should focus on enjoying themselves. This is the best way to attract and entertain the reader. It's true that writers should be extremely attentive to their readers in terms of *craft*—they should avoid being sloppy or confusing. But in terms of *attitude*, great writers communicate their own feelings and ignore the reader's. Zinsser admits that this distinction can be confusing. Craft, or rewriting sentences to make them cleaner, is a *mechanical* process. But attitude is a *creative* process based on self-expression. It can take years for writers to find their true voice, which is essential for all good writing.

The difference between craft and attitude is the same as the difference between mechanics and style. Mechanics are a pre-requisite to style: writers can't be compelling until they're clear. And once they're clear, they still have to be interesting, honest, and courageous. Zinsser advocates writing for oneself because it's the best way to develop these traits. Writers are more likely to be interesting if they're writing about things that truly interest them. And if they can't be honest and vulnerable with themselves, they certainly won't be with their readers.

Zinsser looks at three examples of writers who successfully convey their personality without losing clarity. First, E.B. White writes about his sincere love for hens, and Zinsser finds it inspiring even though he couldn't care less about poultry. Next, H.L. Mencken's ornate, sarcastic account of the Scopes "Monkey Trial" is just as compelling, even though its style couldn't be any more different from White's. Both were successful because they wrote for themselves and didn't care whether their readers agreed with them or not. Finally, in his memoir about teaching eighth grade, James Herndon manages to be righteous but not pretentious because his writing conveys his original sense of humor.

White is sincere, Mencken is sarcastic, and Herndon is both. But all of them are clear, and all of them are enjoying themselves. These examples show that clarity never prevents writers from developing a style—it can only ever help them. They also show that a wide variety of styles can captivate the reader. The only thing that makes a style right or wrong is whether it fits the writer. E.B. White's eager, genuine style makes a mundane topic interesting, but poor style can ruin even the most compelling topic. This shows that writers' passion and enthusiasm are infectious: they tend to excite a reader and keep them going. Meanwhile, Mencken and Herndon both use satire to effectively make serious points, which foreshadows Zinsser's argument in his chapter on humor.

CHAPTER 6: WORDS

Zinsser warns his readers against using "journalese," or the lazy, clichéd style that dominates popular newspapers and magazines. Journalese mixes parts of speech and strings together common phrases and metaphors without regard for their real meaning. To avoid it, successful writers have to be obsessive about understanding words and choosing the right ones.

By analyzing journalese, Zinsser argues that word choice is the foundation of style. Journalese is the opposite of good writing. Its defining feature is poor word choice, and its cardinal sin is imprecision. It's boring to read because there's nothing original in it—writers use it when they have no distinctive voice of their own. In contrast, good writing is precise because the best writers are always looking for the best possible word.

Writers ought to read as much as possible—because imitation is the best way to learn to write—and they need a good dictionary and thesaurus on hand. They should be aware of how their sentences *sound*, not just how they look. As E.B. White pointed out in The Elements of Style, famous sentences lose their power when they're rearranged. Zinsser suggests reading everything out loud during the editing process.

Zinsser believes that style is original to every writer—he has even compared faking style to wearing a toupee. So why should writers try on other people's styles in order to find their own? This isn't as paradoxical as it seems. Writers shouldn't try to copy everything that their idols do, but they should try to understand how their idols found their own voices. They can also borrow elements that they admire, just like a dancer might borrow another dancer's move for their own choreography. Zinsser again encourages writers to approach their work from the reader's perspective when rewriting—not only by reading it, but also by listening to it.

CHAPTER 7: USAGE

Zinsser asks when it's appropriate for writers to use new words. He approves of useful new words like "hassle" and "freak," but not useless ones like "notables" and "upcoming." Why? There's no definitive answer, because language is constantly changing. In the 1960s, the editors of *The American Heritage Dictionary* surveyed a panel of 104 experts, including Zinsser, to come up with "usage notes" for new words.

Zinsser's list of new words might seem outdated to 21st century readers—after all, he sat on the dictionary panel more than half a century ago. "Hassle," "freak," and "upcoming" are all common today. But Zinsser anticipated this by pointing out that language constantly changes and there are no firm rules for usage. Each writer has to decide for themselves—but Zinsser argues that there's still a difference between good and poor taste.

The panel rejected sloppy phrases like "healthwise" and "rather unique," while approving new words like "dropout," "rambunctious," and "trek." It tried to evaluate whether each word met a "real need" in the language. Still, there was always some disagreement, which shows that there are no objective laws of usage. Some writers rejected "O.K." and "regime," while others embraced them. They rejected words that now clearly *do* meet a need, like "TV personality." They deemed some words, like "ain't," acceptable in speech but not in writing, and they ruled that other words are only acceptable in sarcastic writing.

The panel decided that new words and phrases are useful when they meet a "real need"—or when they serve a specific purpose that no other word can. Words that don't meet a "real need" are either clutter, because they don't mean anything, or jargon, because they mean the same thing as simple words that already exist. For instance, the "rather" in "rather unique" doesn't mean anything, while it's always possible to replace "healthwise" with an ordinary adjective that already exists.

In general, the panel leaned toward admitting new words but preserving traditional grammar rules. The language needs new words for technology, business, and social change. But there's no reason to overturn traditional grammar rules (like "fewer" versus "less") or accept common usage errors (like confusing "flaunt" with "flout").

The panel's goal was to keep the English language clear, rich, and precise. New words improve the language because they describe new phenomena, while traditional grammar rules strengthen the language by reducing ambiguity for readers.

New words continue to spread, so debates about usage are ongoing. In general, Zinsser favors accepting new *usages* while rejecting new *jargon*. For instance, "bottom line" and "printout" are helpful new usages that refer to specific things. But "prioritize" and "input" are jargon, because they're used to replace perfectly good words that already exist.

Zinsser returns to his basic principle for all good writing: express ideas in the simplest possible way. By replacing perfectly good words with complicated jargon, writers make their readers work too hard for too little reward. Writers can usually communicate even the most complex ideas in simple, jargon-free language.

CHAPTER 8: UNITY

Writers learn through practice, and writing is really about solving a series of problems: what material to include, how to organize it, and so on. In good writing, unity is crucial. This includes pronouns (first, second, or third person), tenses (past, present, or future), and moods (casual, formal, or any other). Zinsser quotes from a poorly-written article about a trip to Hong Kong. It starts as a first-person memoir, then switches into the practical third-person of a travel guidebook. These jarring shifts show how disunity makes for bad writing.

Like the subject of the last two chapters (word choice), structure *is also essential to good writing. Zinsser suggests that writers should choose pronouns, tenses, and moods to set up a unified structure for their work. The Hong Kong travel article is bad writing because its shifts in tone are likely to confuse the reader. Since it lacks unity, it has no overall narrative arc. Writers can avoid this kind of embarrassing mistake by simply taking the time to establish unity before they start.*

To create unity, writers should ask certain questions before they start. They should determine their writerly persona, the attitude they want to convey, and the pronouns and tense they want to use. Most importantly, they should define their article's scope and decide their main point. Most nonfiction writers try to say too much, but it's better to "think small." To help determine tone, writers should choose which "provocative thought" they want to inspire in readers. If the travel writer had asked these questions, he could have incorporated his personal story *and* his practical advice into his article without losing his readers' attention. Writers often have to adjust their "unities" after they've already started, but there's nothing wrong with doing so.

Simplicity is a useful principle for structure as well as style. By "think[ing] small," writers improve their writing in two ways at once: they refine their message and they avoid researching topics that wouldn't end up in their work anyway. Therefore, Zinsser thinks writers should choose one narrow topic and get to work, rather than trying to say everything that comes to mind. The Hong Kong article fails to hold the reader's attention because, in trying to say everything, it fails to say anything at all.

CHAPTER 9: THE LEAD AND THE ENDING

The most important part of an article is the lead, or the very beginning, which has to catch the reader's attention. The lead can be any length, as long as it's effective. But usually, it has to be entertaining *and* explain why the article is important; effective articles transition from entertaining readers to giving them key details. And the last sentence of every paragraph should be as interesting as possible, to hold the reader's attention for one more paragraph.

A lead is a hook, not an introduction: its goal is to win readers over, not present the writer's main ideas. As with word choice, unities, and style, Zinsser can't give one-size-fits-all advice about leads. Instead, leads have to fit the writer, material, and context. Some readers might find his broad advice frustrating, but Zinsser wants to help them succeed in the broad range of situations they'll likely encounter. If he just focused on how to write a specific kind of lead, he would be denying writers' own creativity. Plus, since leads have to surprise and entertain the reader, they give writers an opportunity to show off their style and personality.

Zinsser compares a few different effective leads. He starts with one of his own, from an article about the poultry industry's campaign to promote chicken hot dogs. He uses humorous comments and quotes to grab the reader's attention before going into more detail. Next, Zinsser looks at a slower lead from an article he wrote about the Baseball Hall of Fame. He opens by describing the tree bark that a player chewed to create more saliva and improve his spitballs. This lead depends more on piquing the reader's curiosity than surprising them or making them laugh.

Zinsser's leads fit the overall message and tone of his articles. The chicken hot dog piece is worth reading because it's funny and lighthearted, so he leads with a series of jokes to introduce this tone. The baseball article is really about the obsession that drives players to greatness and brings fans to visit the Hall of Fame, so Zinsser leads with a detail that links both of these obsessions. In both these cases, he could have chosen a number of compelling leads, but he chose these because they introduced his articles' tone, content, and major motifs all at once.

Zinsser notes that his best leads often come from random facts, so he advises writers to over-research, as long as it doesn't distract them from writing. He also suggests looking for material in unexpected places, like billboards, electric bills, restaurant menus, and newspaper classified ads. Finally, he tells writers to avoid cliché leads, like imagining what a "future archaeologist" would think of our civilization or asking what several famous people have in common.

Zinsser's golden rule for leads is that they have to fit the material. That's why quirky facts and unexpected quotes make good leads: they're memorable, and they show the reader what's distinctive about the article they're about to read. Meanwhile, clichés don't do either: they're too overused to grab the reader's attention, and they're too general to signal anything about the specific article.

Zinsser looks at two more leads. In her article about Howard Hughes's defunct L.A. office, Joan Didion uses details about Hollywood's past to surround the building with a sense of mystery. In his article about the Dead Sea Scrolls, Edmund Wilson just explains how a Bedouin boy discovered them in a cave, which shows how simple stories can also be effective leads. Ultimately, many different kinds of leads can be successful, as long as they fit the material and attract the reader. Zinsser points out how seven famous nonfiction books, ranging from the Bible to *The Feminine Mystique*, essentially tell their whole stories in their opening sentences.

In her lead, Joan Didion taps into the emotions that will drive readers' interest in her piece: their curiosity about Hollywood's inner workings and attachment to it as a cultural symbol. Edmund Wilson's lead fits his material because the story of the Dead Sea Scrolls is so extraordinary that it practically speaks for itself. Didion and Wilson's leads are effective not only because they grab the reader's attention, but also because they specifically show the reader why *the article they're about to read is so compelling.*


It's also important to end articles well. Many writers assume that their readers are already hooked, so they drag on long after they should have concluded. Students learn to end their essays with a conclusion section to summarize their point, but professional writers lose their readers if they do that. Instead, nonfiction writers should try to surprise and satisfy their readers with well-timed, clever endings. For example, H.L. Mencken ends an article about Calvin Coolidge with a sarcastic, funny comment about Coolidge's utterly boring presidency. Often, writers can end with a reference to the lead or a funny quote. For instance, Zinsser closed an article about Woody Allen with Allen's irrelevant, totally unexpected comment about his mother.

Zinsser views endings in practically the same way as leads. They're important structural components of a work, and writers should plan them carefully. But good endings surprise and entertain—they don't just summarize, like concluding paragraphs in school essays. Put differently, instead of reminding the reader what they've done throughout the article in their conclusions, writers should simply do more of it. Both Mencken and Zinsser's jokes are successful because they capture each article's main idea—Coolidge is useless and Woody Allen is full of funny nonsequiturs—while also surprising and amusing the reader.

CHAPTER 10: BITS & PIECES

This chapter consists of advice that doesn't fit anywhere else. Zinsser organizes it under a series of different headings. The first is *Verbs*. Writers should use active verbs instead of passive verbs whenever they can. "Joe saw him" is clearer, shorter, and stronger than "he was seen by Joe." Like unnecessarily long words, the passive voice tires readers out and makes it unclear who's doing what to whom. Active verbs push writing forward. Vivid verbs like "dazzle" and "swagger" invigorate it. Precise verbs like "resign" and "retire" make actions clearer than phrasal verbs like "step down."

This chapter is Zinsser's answer to The Elements of Style*: his list of essential dos and don'ts for effective writing. Like Strunk and White, Zinsser doesn't just impose rules on other writers. Rather, he explains why writers enrich their work by following certain rules. First, he argues that verbs are the lifeblood of the English language. By giving verbs the priority they deserve, the active voice simplifies and improves writing at the same time.*

Adverbs. They're usually redundant. There's no reason to say, "effortlessly easy" or "totally flabbergasted." Writers should also avoid qualifying words like "decidedly," "arguably," "eminently," and "virtually."

Most of Zinsser's rules are based on his basic principle: choose simplicity, not clutter. Redundant adverbs and vague qualifiers are classic examples of clutter because they add complexity without adding meaning.

Adjectives. They're also usually redundant. Adjectives should add something to the nouns they modify, not just emphasize something the reader already knows about the noun. For example, use "garish daffodils," not "yellow daffodils." By using fewer adjectives, writers make them more powerful.

Clutter makes for bad writing because it wastes the reader's precious time and energy. Redundant adjectives don't just take up space—they also divert the reader's attention away from more important words.

Little Qualifiers. Qualifiers like "a little," "very," and "in a sense" dilute prose. They make writers sound less confident, persuasive, and authoritative. Writers should eliminate them.

Qualifiers waste the reader's time and *weaken the writer's argument. Zinsser wants writers to say more in fewer words. But by using qualifiers, they use more words to say less.*

Punctuation. Writers should use more periods and break up long sentences into shorter ones. They should avoid exclamation points, which are a cheap and superficial way to add emphasis. The semicolon has fallen out of favor, and modern writers should only use it sparingly. In contrast, the dash is underrated—it helps writers incorporate explanatory details into a sentence. The colon is outdated, like the semicolon, but it's still useful for lists.

Zinsser shows that punctuation rules depend on readers' expectations, so they change over time. His punctuation rules are intended for formal writing, and not 21st century genres like the text message or email. He sticks to the same principles as always: simplicity and clarity. Writers should avoid using fancy words and creative punctuation to exaggerate mediocre ideas. Instead, they should just come up with better ideas.

Mood Changes. Writers should use words like "yet," "therefore," and "subsequently" to show readers when they're shifting direction. It's acceptable to start sentences with "but." "However" is a weaker substitute for "but," but it sounds feeble at the beginning or end of sentences. Other words, like "yet" and "nevertheless," *do* belong at the beginning of sentences. These short words are helpful because they replace long, unruly clauses to explain disagreement. Finally, writers should use words like "meanwhile," "now," and "later" to clarify changes in timeframe.

Writers might assume that transition words are clutter, because they're not strictly necessary. But they actually reduce *clutter by helping readers avoid confusion. Concise transitions like "but" and "nevertheless" are useful replacements for cluttered phrases like "at the same time, this isn't the whole story" or "the opposite could also be true." So Zinsser's rules about clutter ultimately amount to making work as readable as possible, not necessarily using the minimum possible number of words.*

Contractions. They make writing warmer and more readable. Writers should generally use them but avoid ambiguous contractions like "he'd" (he *had*, or he *would*?) and invented ones like "could've."

Zinsser's advice contradicts most English teachers' advice (which is to avoid conjunctions), but he's interested in nonfiction writing for the public, not academic writing for a grade.

That and Which. "That" is almost always better than "which." But after a comma, "which" is often necessary to explain the preceding phrase.

This is Zinsser's only basic grammar tip. Many writers confuse "that" and "which," but professionals never do.

Concept Nouns. Bad writers use abstract nouns where good writers use verbs. For instance, they write "the common reaction is incredulous laughter" instead of "most people just laugh with disbelief." Don't do this.

Concept nouns tend to clutter academic, business, and legal writing. In these fields, writers try to describe how the world is, *rather than what people* do. *"Most people just laugh with disbelief" emphasizes action, while "the common reaction is incredulous laughter" describes a relationship between two abstract concepts.*

Creeping Nounism. Bad writers use several nouns where good writers just need one. Say "rain" instead of "precipitation activity."

Creeping nounism is a classic example of jargon—or replacing a common, simple word with an uncommon, confusing one.

Overstatement. Excessive metaphors are tiresome and ineffective. Don't say that "the living room looked as if an atomic bomb had gone off there."

Overstatement is frustrating to read because it's lazy and imprecise. Everyone knows what the atomic bomb metaphor means, but the writer should work harder to find a better one.

Credibility. When writers lie or inflate the truth even once, they lose their credibility forever.

Zinsser believes that a writer's reputation is one of their most valuable assets. They have a duty to speak the truth, so they should be able to stand by anything they publish.

Dictation. Businesspeople use dictation to save time, but they end up seeming pompous and imprecise on the page. They should at least edit what they dictate.

Reading and listening are different skills that require different kinds of thinking and attention. But when they send dictated letters, businesspeople forget about this difference. They don't consider the reader's perspective because they haven't decided what kind of message they want to send.


Writing Is Not a Contest. Writers tend to compare themselves to more experienced or commercially successful peers, but this is pointless.

Writing is an individual pursuit—one writer's success doesn't affect another's. In fact, the more good writing reaches readers, the better. Zinsser also repeatedly notes that magazines and publishers accept plenty of bad writing, so publication isn't really a measure of quality or success. Instead, writers should judge their work by their own standards and their readers' responses to it.

The Subconscious Mind. Writing largely depends on the subconscious, which is always working. This is why writers often get new ideas when they wake up in the morning, and why old memories tend to resurface when they're relevant to a new piece.

For Zinsser, writing requires writers to bring their entire selves to a work. This means that writing is essentially psychological, which helps explain classic writing problems like writer's block and procrastination


The Quickest Fix. The best way to fix difficult sentences is often to just delete them. Unfortunately, writers usually spend lots of time trying to save them.

Writers are responsible to the reader, so they have to put clarity before their personal attachment to any specific phrases. But this applies to mechanics, not content: writers should still say what they want about the topics that interest them. They just have to do it in a clear, orderly way.

Paragraphs. Shorter is better, especially in newspapers; short paragraphs make text more inviting and digestible. But sometimes, newsrooms take this too far and use too many one-sentence paragraphs, which distracts and condescends to the reader.

Reading is visual, and readers notice a paragraph's length before they start to actually read it. Therefore, paragraph length sets their expectations for a text—and short paragraphs keep them reading.

Sexism. English is full of sexist language. Many words for women carry a demeaning tone (like "gal," "poetess," and "coed"). Don't treat women as men's possessions, like in the construction "settlers pushed west with their wives and children." When possible, find neutral substitutes for gendered terms like "chairman," but "chair" is better than the invented word "chairperson." Most importantly, many writers wrongly use "he" as a generic pronoun. The plural "they" can often, but not always, substitute for "he." Zinsser rejects "he or she" as too clunky, but suggests trying "we," general nouns, or even "you," depending on the context.

Zinsser lived most of his life in an era when men controlled the writing profession and used "he" as a default pronoun. He even followed this sexist norm in the first edition of On Writing Well. *But after reading Miller and Swift's* Handbook of Nonsexist Writing, *he started advocating for equitable language. His principles also apply to other kinds of diversity besides gender. Specifically, inclusive language shouldn't compromise clarity. When it does, the solution isn't to give up: it's to find better inclusive language. The best terms and phrases often depend on context, so writers should rework their sentences until they find a solution that fits.*

Rewriting. It's "the essence of writing well." All first drafts can be improved, and professional writers are constantly rewriting. This doesn't mean starting over from the beginning, but rather "reshaping and tightening and refining" the first draft. Zinsser gives an example of how he would do this with an ordinary paragraph. He notes that sentence-level mechanics are just as important as the logical construction of the piece as a whole. When writers approach their drafts from a reader's perspective, they can easily see where their construction is shoddy or misleading. Zinsser admits that he's learned to love rewriting because he feels like his writing is constantly improving.

Of all Zinsser's tips in this chapter, this one is the most important. Writers are lucky: they get to redo their work and erase their mistakes as many times as they want. But this also makes them responsible for giving their readers clear, digestible prose. For Zinsser, empathizing with those readers is the key to rewriting. By setting their work aside and then reapproaching it from the reader's perspective, writers can almost always improve it.

Writing on a Computer. Computers are a gift to writers because they make it possible to rearrange, rewrite, and reword endlessly. Writing has never been easier than it is today.

Computers make the writing process easier, but as Zinsser argued in his introduction, they don't change the basic elements of good writing. Still, many writers in the 21st century can't imagine working on anything else.

Trust Your Material. The truth is usually more interesting than the spin a writer puts on it. Some reporters start their stories with catchy snippets to get the reader's attention, but they bury their story's actual details. Zinsser thinks this is pointless: the real "color" in a story has to come out of its facts. When he wrote *Spring Training*, his book about baseball, he avoided berating the reader with metaphors and symbols. Instead, he interviewed people about their lives and found information interesting enough to capture his readers' attention without unnecessary embellishment or commentary.

Just like Zinsser thinks that writers have to find their own voice and style over time by learning to write clearly, he thinks that they should learn to make stories interesting by pursuing interesting material. For Zinsser, writers should use language to accurately reveal the truth—not to hide or embellish it. When they use spin to cover up their inadequate research, they are also skipping the most rewarding part of writing: meeting interesting people and pursuing interesting stories.

Go with Your Interests. No subject is off-limits. Writers should follow their interests, no matter how quirky or specialized they are.

For Zinsser, writing is a beautiful profession because it's relevant to everything and needed everywhere. Anything in the world can be interesting enough to write about, and everyone in the world is interested in something. Therefore, every field needs its writers. So writers should follow their interests. After all, people write best about topics that matter to them.

CHAPTER 11: NONFICTION AS LITERATURE

When Zinsser and three women he met at a writing conference went on the radio to talk about their profession, the radio host kept asking about their literary ambitions and comparing them to novelists. The host had never heard of nonfiction writers like Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe. Many contemporary writers face this predicament: people assume that "literature" means fiction and poetry, even though the vast majority of writers now focus on nonfiction.

In this chapter, Zinsser explains why Americans should take nonfiction as seriously as fiction, even though many do not. The radio host's incessant questioning shows that, when people assume that nonfiction isn't literature, they often really think that nonfiction isn't meaningful creative work and writers can't possibly find it fulfilling. Zinsser wants to dispel this harmful myth by showing that nonfiction requires skill, creativity, and passion. He also wants to show that nonfiction is at least as relevant to the public and the literary world as fiction.

In the early 1900s, Americans mostly read fiction. The Book-of-the-Month Club mailed them novels, and popular magazines mainly published short stories. But during World War II, Americans started caring more about the world around them, so they switched to nonfiction. Now, nonfiction is the true American literature, and nonfiction writers cover every imaginable topic. Zinsser lists many books that combine history, social science, and biography to tell compelling stories about the world. Fiction is still important, but well-written nonfiction and journalism also count as literature. Each writer has to follow their own interests in order to develop, and today, most end up writing nonfiction.

There are a few ways to think about the term "literature." It could be a term for any writing with artistic value. By showing that people choose to read nonfiction for the sake of beauty and enjoyment (in addition to mere information), Zinsser suggests that nonfiction is creative enough to count as literature. On the other hand, literature could also refer to the work that reflects a certain nation or culture's consciousness at any given point in time. In this sense of the word, nonfiction is also literature, because it's the main genre that Americans produce and read in order to understand their own culture. Either way, nonfiction is clearly important to contemporary Americans. In Zinsser's view, nonfiction writers have a responsibility to inform the public about the world, but also the privilege to choose what stories they want to spread.

CHAPTER 12: WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE: THE INTERVIEW

The best writers let people tell their own stories in their own words, which requires interviewing them. By finding "the human element" behind a story, writers can make any topic interesting. For instance, Zinsser uses interviews to bring boring institutions to life. He has interviewed the research division curators at the New York Public Library, the department heads at Sotheby's auction firm, and the editors of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The most interesting stories are usually "locked inside people's heads."

A nonfiction writer's job is to tell a compelling story that connects with the reader. The best way to make this connection is to tell relatable stories about people from a human perspective. Zinsser does this by putting a face on a faceless institution: nobody can personally relate to the New York Public Library, but everyone can relate to the curator who spends all day watching paranoid inventors try to patent their ideas. And Zinsser argues that interviews are the only good way to get such personal stories. Just like writers should be clear and let the facts speak for themselves, they should let actual people speak for themselves whenever possible.

To learn interview skills, aspiring writers should practice, starting with interesting people in their communities. Luckily, interviewing always gets easier over time. It just requires knowing what to ask, how to listen, when to push for more information, and when to let go. Preparation is key—interviewers should bring paper and sharpened pencils, do background research, and put together a list of possible questions (even though they sometimes have to throw them away). Inexperienced interviewers sometimes worry about invading their subjects' privacy, but most people actually enjoy talking about their lives. Some are uncomfortable doing it, but the solution is just to come back later and try again.

Zinsser argues that interviewing, like eliminating clutter and organizing a piece, is one of the few absolutely essential skills for writing good nonfiction. Like those other skills, it's possible to improve, so motivated writers should practice as much as possible. But unlike those other skills, interviewing is social: it depends on empathy and human connection. The key to interviewing is understanding how commitments, ideas, and feelings motivate people's behavior. This is what lets writers get into their subjects' heads and see what's compelling about their stories.

While tape recorders are an invaluable tool for interviewing, they're better for social scientists than for writers. They sometimes fail, and they force writers to rewind back and forth through audio, rather than looking at the whole interview together on paper. Therefore, Zinsser recommends physically writing notes, except when honoring a subject's personality or cultural background requires having an exact record of their words. (For instance, Zinsser used a tape recorder when he interviewed the Black jazz musicians Ruff and Mitchell, because he wanted to get their exact phrasing right.) Notetaking can be slow, but interviewers can just pause their subjects and ask for a moment to catch up. With practice, writers learn to abbreviate and take notes faster.

Zinsser's advice about note taking might seem old-fashioned, especially since recording and transcription software keeps improving. But many reporters still prefer taking physical notes because it's simply more reliable and engaging. When they conduct interviews, writers are no longer just accountable to their own integrity and their readers: they're accountable to their subjects, too. This is why Zinsser thinks it's important for interviewers to get details right and understand their own social position in relation to the people they are interviewing. For instance, as a white man researching the largely Black world of American jazz music, Zinsser recognized that he had a special obligation to respect and understand Ruff and Mitchell's work and speech.

After finishing an interview, writers should fill in any gaps in their notes, then go home and type them up. Then, they should choose the most interesting quotes. Writers can move quotes around for the sake of brevity, as long as they represent a subject's words and opinions accurately. For instance, if a comment from the end of the interview helps explain a point from the beginning, it's acceptable to link them together in print—as long as this makes the interviewee's ideas clearer. Similarly, while many subjects speak carefully and deserve to be quoted verbatim, others are messier, and their quotes need cleaning up. When in doubt, it's always possible to just call up a subject to clarify their words or ideas.

Writers have a responsibility to respect their subjects' intentions, but they're also responsible for delivering a coherent, readable product. As with jargon and usage, Zinsser says, the rule of thumb for rearranging quotes is that it's only acceptable when it's necessary to make someone's language more clear and precise. Writers should be confident that their interviewees would be happy with the change—and they can always just ask if they're unsure. At the same time, rearranging quotes to misrepresent a subject's ideas or intentions is always wrong.

In an article based on an interview, writers should start by explaining why the person they interviewed is important, and they should try to find a balance between their own words and their interviewee's. They should put their quotes at the beginning of sentences when possible, and they should only break them up where it sounds natural. Finally, there's usually no need to replace "he said" and "she said" with synonyms like "he replied" or "she added."

Like all nonfiction writing, interviews have to focus on a single provocative idea. This idea is always about the significance of the person being interviewed. And like in any other nonfiction, writers should also ruthlessly cut out anything that doesn't serve this central idea. This is why writers should give relevant context about the people they interview, without stealing the spotlight from them.

Many prominent authors have gotten in trouble for making up quotes, which is obviously unethical. But even the best reporters have to take some liberties with quotes. For instance, in the influential piece "Mr. Hunter's Grave," Joseph Mitchell patches together Mr. Hunter's quotes from a year's worth of interviews into one long paragraph. But this "literary arrangement" helps Mitchell better portray Mr. Hunter's voice and personality, so Zinsser thinks it's acceptable. Other writers might disagree. But all writers know that making up quotes is always wrong, because it means exploiting the public's trust.

There's no clear line to dictate how much "literary arrangement" is too much, but there is an extremely clear ethical line between arrangement and misrepresentation. This line depends on intention. Thus, Mitchell's changes are reasonable because they clarify Hunter's identity and significance. It accentuates the truth and humanity in the story, rather than distorting it. But misrepresentation is a fundamental violation of trust, and it destroys a writer's credibility. This is a serious problem because trust and credibility are foundational to the writing profession: without them, writers can't convince others to take them seriously.

CHAPTER 13: WRITING ABOUT PLACES: THE TRAVEL ARTICLE

Places are the second most important subject in nonfiction, after people. But most writing about them is terrible. Travelers tend to be overly enthusiastic about their travels, and they often imagine that their experience is unique and original, when it isn't. Travel writers often give readers excessive, unnecessary detail. They also frequently use a tired style full of gaudy adjectives (like "dappled"), clichés (like "old meets new"), and altogether meaningless words (like "charm"). Zinsser offers two rules for effective travel writing: "choose your words with unusual care" and "be intensely selective" about which material to include.

Since people and places are the building blocks of all good nonfiction, the lessons in this chapter really apply to setting the scene in any kind of writing. Similarly, Zinsser's basic lessons for travel writers are really based on his fundamental advice for everyone else: think small, avoid "journalese," and empathize with the reader's perspective when revising. Travel writers try to pass their enthusiasm on to the reader, but they tend to overlook the composition of their work as a whole.

Zinsser gives several examples of effective travel writing. In a passage about driving out to a San Bernardino crime scene, Joan Didion carefully chooses details that evoke Southern California's tacky landscape and superficial culture. John McPhee describes the intolerable wind in cramped Juneau, Alaska in order to explain why some officials want to move the state capital elsewhere; he contrasts Juneau with Anchorage, which he compares to any ordinary American city. His descriptions are successful because he identifies the key *idea* associated with each place.

Didion and McPhee's work shows that effective travel writing communicates a single, compelling idea about a place. By citing them, Zinsser indirectly returns to one of the key points from his chapter on unity: successful writing leaves the reader with a single "provocative thought." While amateur travel writers try to say everything they know about a place, the best travel writers carefully make a single, narrow, memorable argument about a place.

Similarly, Jonathan Raban compares the Mississippi River that runs through Minnesota's perfect square farms to nature sending the land's pious Lutherans a message about sin and rebellion. Zinsser adds three more examples of writers who successfully identify three places' distinctive traits: Jack Agueros describes diverse East Harlem, Prudence Mackintosh describes the Southern traditions in her small Texas town, and Tom Wolfe describes the perfectly flat seasonal lake beds that made the Mojave Desert the perfect place for a military base. Zinsser encourages his readers to practice writing about places this way. They don't have to go far away—they should simply go somewhere and figure out what's unique about it.

Usually, good travel writing isn't really about traveling: it's about places. *Like Didion and McPhee, these four writers condense their experience of a place down to a specific, digestible idea. Most importantly, this central idea always connects the place to the people who live there. This shows that people and places are always connected. This is clearest in Agueros and Mackintosh's writing, which is really about the people who make a place what it is. Meanwhile, Raban and Wolfe use landscapes as metaphors for people and their lives.*

Often, the human element is what makes places interesting. For instance, V.S. Pritchett describes Istanbul's mix of bustle and glory by analyzing the way Turkish men sit. Many notable travel articles focus on what the writer learns about themselves while traveling, and describing people's activity is an excellent way to make a place seem alive. Zinsser excerpts James Baldwin's description of preaching in a Harlem church in *The Fire Next Time*, which focuses on the congregants' motion and excitement.

Zinsser reaffirms that the human element is usually the most compelling part of any story. People bring a place to life—their stories are also a place's story. The writer's own story can also be interesting, but only if it's about personal transformation (and not just the excitement of visiting a new place). Of course, this is part of why Zinsser thinks writing is such an enriching and exciting career: it means exposing oneself to interesting places and stories for a living.

Zinsser says that it's still possible to find fresh thoughts about much-visited places. To prove this, he wrote a book about 15 of the U.S.'s most popular and important tourist destinations. At each site, he asked people why they thought so many people visited it, in a quest to understand each place's story. He excerpts the remarkable stories he heard from custodians at Mount Rushmore, Kitty Hawk, and Yellowstone National Park. There's a beautiful story behind every place, Zinsser concludes, but it's better to let people who are connected to that place tell it, rather than trying to take it over.

Zinsser sticks to his tried-and-true method for finding the human element behind any story: asking the people who know the story best. As in his other work, he cuts out anything that distracts from his single main idea about every place. As a writer, his role is simply to help the reader understand the compelling story he's found—and not to get in the way or turn himself into the story.

CHAPTER 14: WRITING ABOUT YOURSELF: THE MEMOIR

Writers know more about themselves than any other subject, but they also generally avoid writing about themselves. Students think they have to write what their teachers want, and professional writers think they have to write what their editors want. But writing memoirs is liberating. When Zinsser convinced one of his journalist friends to try his hand at memoir, the man dug into his family history and reevaluated his own life. Zinsser argues that more writers ought to write about themselves, for themselves, so long as they don't go overboard and become too egotistical. Like all writers, memoirists have to be sure that they only include useful details that push the narrative forward.

Zinsser points out that most people dislike writing because they've never been able to do it of their own will—they've only ever been forced into it. But by writing memoirs, people can develop a new relationship to writing: they can make it relevant to their lives or even learn to love it. They can also learn more about themselves and discover their authentic voices. Therefore, memoir helps writers establish the psychological and emotional connection that Zinsser sees as essential to good writing.

Zinsser says that he loves reading memoirs. Whereas autobiographies often try to cover too much ground, memoirs are powerful because they give a narrow window into a writer's life. Good memoirists know how to give shape to their lives, and specific details are a must. For instance, Eudora Welty starts her memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* by describing her childhood home's various clocks and her father's precise sense of time and weather. In *A Walker in the City*, Alfred Kazin recounts observing the Sabbath with his family in Brooklyn through his sense of smell. In fact, Kazin is largely responsible for popularizing the personal memoir as a literary genre.

The differences between memoir and autobiography are clarity and structure: memoirs have a unified narrative arc, while autobiographies are scattered and unclear. They're also precise about the details they choose to include. Of course, for Zinsser, these are the key differences between good and bad writing in general. Like interviews and travel writing, then, memoir ultimately boils down to the key principles that Zinsser covered in the first two parts of his book. Welty and Kazin's memoirs are effective because they convey the writers' personalities through coherent ideas about their childhoods.

Like numerous other American writers, Kazin also used memoir to explore his unique identity as a minority and immigrant. Similarly, Enrique Hank Lopez writes about his relationship with Mexican identity after immigrating to the U.S. in "Back to Bachimba." In her memoir *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston writes about her intense fear of speaking English in elementary school. Memoir can help the American public understand cultural differences, too. For instance, in "For My Indian Daughter," Lewis P. Johnson discusses how he confronted and overcame his feeling of estrangement from his Native American ancestors.

Zinsser shows why diverse books matter. Kazin, Lopez, Hong Kingston, and Johnson's struggles with identity all provide a model for readers and communities to make sense of their own identities. Thus, memoirs can help both individual writers and the American public grapple with questions of identity and belonging. They give minority communities role models and proof that they belong in the nation, while giving the majority community a window into minority groups' experiences. But they still have to start from individual experience, rather than trying to speak for an entire group.

Colorful characters are the key to good memoirs. For instance, in *Clinging to the Wreckage*, John Mortimer remembers how his blind father kept up his legal practice by asking his wife to read him salacious divorce cases out loud on the public train. But of course, memoirists have to be their own most interesting characters. In turn, memoirs can help others understand and accept themselves. For instance, Kenney Fraser writes about reading Virginia Woolf's memoirs, journals, and letters to help deal with her own struggles as a middle-aged woman. Zinsser concludes that memoir lets authors turn their own lives into a gift for others.

In memoirs, as in any other genre of writing, compelling characters—like Mortimer's parents and Virginia Woolf—are the key to telling a convincing story. But because they're so personal, memoirs can depict these characters better than any other form of writing besides fiction. Zinsser even portrays memoir as a kind of public service: it's a way for authors to identify the key lessons that they've learned and pass them on to their readers.

CHAPTER 15: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Liberal arts students often learn to fear science, and scientists often learn to fear writing—but both of these fears are misguided. Writing is just "thinking on paper," and science is "just another nonfiction subject." Despite his fear of science, Zinsser has become an effective science writer by learning to give clear, linear explanations of technical processes. To practice this skill, Zinsser makes his students explain how a common object works (like a sewing machine, a pump, or the human eye). Science writers have to assume that the reader knows nothing at the outset, then present information clearly and sequentially. But this is the key skill in *all* nonfiction writing: teaching unconfident readers about a subject they don't understand yet.

Zinsser yet again argues that schools set writers up to fail by limiting their horizons. Students learn to view science and writing as opposite disciplines, in which opposite types of people are destined to succeed. Instead, Zinsser wants writers to see that science writing is just like all other writing. Its goals are the same: teaching the reader something while telling them an entertaining story. And most importantly, its key principles are also the same: clear thinking, precise language, and logical structure.

Zinsser compares good science writing to an inverted pyramid: it starts with a single important fact and then expands to describe why that fact matters. To illustrate how this structure works, Zinsser examines a front-page article by Harold M. Schmeck, Jr. The article first describes an experiment in which scientists used brain scans to predict a monkey's mistakes in a game of tick-tac-toe. Then, Schmeck explains why this experiment is significant: it shows that brain scans can measure mental states, which has important applications and relates to broader trends in brain research. After this introduction, he describes the experiment in more detail and then explains its consequences for human medicine.

Scientific and technical explanations are actually more straightforward than other kinds of writing, because the writer doesn't have to worry about what message they want to send or what kind of structure will best serve them. Instead, they have to decide how to present complex information in the right sequence so that it's easily digestible for lay readers. Schmeck's article works because he advances one step at a time, starting with a memorable lead—the memorable image of monkeys playing tic-tac-toe—and ending with a compelling story—the experiment's significance for human beings.

Like all nonfiction, science writing benefits from highlighting the human element. For instance, Will Bradbury recalls his own earliest memories to introduce his article about scientists' attempts to understand the human memory. In his "Annals of Medicine" series, Berton Roueché treats mysterious illnesses as detective stories. In one such story, several men collapse and turn blue in New York, and doctors set out to find the medical culprit.

To do their jobs successfully, science writers have to accurately explain the innovation or discovery they're covering, but they also have to show their readers why it matters by connecting it to ordinary people's lives. Bradbury's lead highlights the common human experience that makes his article significant to readers, while Roueché makes medicine compelling by tapping into his readers' curiosity.

When science writing has to deal with unfamiliar and difficult topics, it can be helpful to start with something readers already know. For instance, in *Beyond Habitat*, architect Moshe Safdie uses examples from nature to show why certain architectural forms are better suited to solve certain problems. Similarly, Diane Ackerman explains how bats use echolocation by giving precise yet relatable details, like the fact that bats can detect "a beetle walking on sand" and "spend their whole lives yelling."

While writers like Bradbury and Roueché explain science and then *make it relevant to people's lives, Safdie and Ackerman explain science* by *making it relevant to people's lives. This technique succeeds because the compelling aspect of their stories is the very beauty and wonder of nature, which stretches the human imagination because it is so far outside the realm of normal human experience.*

Science writers should be themselves and write in clear English, like the naturalist Loren Eiseley describing his love for octopuses in *The Immense Journey* or Lewis Thomas describing microbes in *Lives of a Cell*. These writers are compelling because they show readers how a curiosity and love for nature drove them to become scientists. In fact, scientists often make the best science writers—Zinsser lists some of the best, then gives the example of physicist Robert W. Keyes writing about transistors. In all these cases, science writing is effective when the writer comes across as a real person and shows the reader why science should matter to them.

Like any other nonfiction writers, science writers have to personally connect with their readers in order to succeed. Scientists can do this effectively because, even if their work is objective and technical, their motives for doing it are deeply human and relatable. Most people either choose to do something they love or wish that they could. So a scientist's love for their work both introduces a strong human element into a story and helps readers understand why the science itself is so compelling.

Zinsser ends with one last example of excellent science writing, Glenn Zorpette's award-winning article about the Iraqi nuclear program. Zorpette clearly explains the complicated electromagnetic isotope separation technique, why it's so difficult, and how the U.S. government realized that the Iraqis were using it. He describes how atomic bombs work in great detail, but without using technical jargon and without straying from the underlying detective story that makes his article so compelling.

Zorpette's article is exemplary because it balances science writing's two competing obligations: its obligation to the truth and its obligation to the reader. It's extremely technical and detail-oriented, but it also tells a simple, compelling story that has consequences for readers' lives and connects to a political story they already know all too well.

CHAPTER 16: BUSINESS WRITING: WRITING IN YOUR JOB

Most non-writers still have to write at work, whether in the form of memos, emails, or Post-it notes. Meanwhile, the people who run institutions are often terrified of writing, and they produce stilted and artificial-sounding sentences as a result. The writer George Orwell once mocked this kind of "modern bureaucratic fuzz" by rewriting a famous Ecclesiastes verse in it. While the original resembles real human speech and uses familiar words, Orwell's bureaucratic rewrite is uninspiring and cluttered.

In this chapter, Zinsser shifts from speaking to writers, students, and journalists to address a different population: everyday office workers who have to write at work. He wants to prove that the basic elements of good writing can help everyone, *including people whose jobs don't depend on it. "Bureaucratic fuzz" is a classic example of unclear, cluttered writing that confuses more than it clarifies.*

A school district superintendent once hired Zinsser to "dejargonize" his 40 principals' writing. Zinsser goes through examples of their poor writing: for instance, instead of just asking parents to call their children's teachers, one principal wrote a standoffish letter about the school's new "special phone communication system to provide additional opportunities for parent input." Another principal started with a paragraph of unnecessary jargon before writing a straightforward greeting in his own natural voice. In fact, the principals were often warm and humane when they wrote about student behavior, but vague and incomprehensible when they talked about curriculum. Zinsser taught the principals his rules for good writing: "clarity, simplicity, brevity, and humanity." They spent all day rewriting memos, and their writing dramatically improved.

The principals' cluttered writing prevents them from making genuine human connections with students, parents, and teachers. Since their jobs fundamentally depend on these relationships, their poor writing seriously hurts their performance. Ironically, they instinctively knew *how to connect with people and build strong relationships, but they blocked this instinct because they assumed that they needed to sound formal and professional. This example shows how Zinsser's tried-and-true basic principles, "clarity, simplicity, brevity, and humanity," actually apply to all forms of writing (and everyone who writes).*

When people deal with institutions like schools, companies, and government agencies, they want to hear plain English, not pretentious jargon. Companies lose customers, profits, and prestige when they write badly. Zinsser shows how one "customer bulletin" could be rewritten in plain English, but he notes that most customers will just give up on reading it. Normally, institutions avoid simple, understandable language because their managers think that complexity is a sign of sophistication—but it's actually a sign of confusion and laziness.

Zinsser suggests that business success really depends on the trust and personal connections that a company shares with its customers. Since writing really enables a similar kind of personal transaction—writers tell stories to connect with readers—it's an extremely useful tool in business. However, most businesspeople seem more interested in using complex writing to show off to other businesspeople than writing well to connect with their customers. This bad writing isn't just bad taste: it's also bad business. Zinsser thinks this might persuade corporations to take it more seriously.

In his corporate workshops, Zinsser usually ends up telling writers to find the people behind the story. For instance, he told one team of writers that, instead of dryly describing a new product, they should talk to the engineers who built it. But the writers complained that the engineers insisted on using acronyms and jargon in order to seem smart. Plus, the writers didn't want to cause any controversy by trying to sound too personal. Executives make the same grave mistakes: they use complicated language to sound smart, and they write in the company's generic voice instead of their own personal voice. Zinsser concludes that the basic rule of nonfiction applies to business writing: "whatever your job, whatever your level, be yourself when you write."

Zinsser rests on his basic principle about the human element in storytelling: living, breathing people are more compelling than abstract nouns and technical language. This is true of style as well as content—the best stories involve real people writing about real people. Unfortunately, Zinsser is fighting an uphill battle, because hierarchical institutions like businesses are generally designed to stifle human connection, not foster it. But he hopes that good writing can help people see the problems in this culture and, eventually, take steps to shift it.

CHAPTER 17: SPORTS

Every sport has a specialized lingo—for instance, baseball writers call pitchers "southpaws," "portsiders," and "hurlers." These overused terms make for terrible writing. Good sportswriters, like Red Smith, avoid these words and develop an original style instead. But most sportswriters try to sound original by replacing basic terms with synonyms and clichés. For instance, one college sportswriter replaces tennis players' names with epithets like "the Memphis native" and "the Yankee," which makes it impossible to know who he's talking about. Most sportswriters also focus too much on statistics—Zinsser quotes one article that quickly turns into a list of numbers and season records.

Sportswriters and travel writers make many of the same mistakes because they work in fields where most stories don't automatically have a unique hook or appeal. This makes it much harder to find an original angle—but also much more important. Instead, many sportswriters confuse clichés for style and try to dazzle the reader with fancy language. But Zinsser thinks they should take on the hard work of finding an interesting story to tell. Just as interviewers should worry more about finding interesting quotes than replacing "he said" with more colorful synonyms, sports writers should spend their creative energy telling interesting storis, not just replacing a player's name with a confusing epithet.

Many excellent writers have found rich, inspiring stories in sports by focusing on the players' humanity. For instance, John Updike connected baseball player Ted Williams's lonely temperament to his sport's place in American life. In his biographies, Robert Creamer depicts sports legends as real people, with their own weaknesses and complexities. Writers can also connect sports to important social issues, like drug abuse, minority rights, and economic inequality.

The human element is just as important in sports as in travel, science, memoir, and business writing. Updike and Creamer write about sports figures, but unlike the articles Zinsser quoted above, their work isn't only about games, scores, and season records. Rather, they tell interesting human stories. Just like effective science writers connect discoveries to their readers' lives, effective sportswriters use sports as a lens to address broader social and cultural questions.

As athletes are now highly-paid celebrities, many sportswriters wrongly focus on money, fame, and scandal rather than actual sports. Some sportswriters try to stand out by starting their articles with long, irrelevant anecdotes, while others try to psychoanalyze athletes or mock the losing side. But readers don't want this fluff—they want to know what happened in the game. As Red Smith explained, readers used to play sports in their childhood, and they're thinking about how it felt.

Zinsser has just finished arguing that sportswriters should emphasize human interest stories and broader social problems, but here, he tells them to cut out the fluff and focus on the game. To understand this paradox, readers should keep two distinctions in mind. First, writers have much more liberty in books and long-form articles—like the biographies Zinsser mentioned above—than they do in ordinary newspaper columns. Second, fluff isn't the same as interesting personal stories. Celebrity scandal, pointless anecdotes, and scathing criticism are useless because, even if they grab the reader's attention, they don't make any lasting connection with them or speak to the underlying reasons for their interest in sports.

In fact, many sportswriters focus on what it feels like to be a top athlete. For instance, Lesley Hazleton writes about the extraordinary physical pressures that Formula One drivers confront during a race. Other writers use advancement in sports to illustrate social progress. For example, Janice Kaplan writes about how women's marathon times improved much faster than men's in the 1970s, which reflected (and helped overturn) cultural biases. In another article about the "Battle of the Sexes" between tennis players Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, Kaplan shows how sports help determine what gender equality really means in the contemporary U.S.

Hazelton connects with her readers by helping them imagine driving a Formula One racecar, while Kaplan connects with hers by showing them how women's sports connect to equity issues that affect them. But both of them make sports relevant to life without distorting either. In contrast, shabbier sportswriters tend to focus entirely on the game—without making it relevant to readers' lives—or pander to their readers with stories that don't actually capture what's meaningful about sports.

In general, the best sportswriters connect sports to the culture at large. For instance, in *Life on the Run*, Bill Bradley writes about how star athletes struggle after passing their prime because of greedy managers and a cultural obsession with winning. Like any other topic, sport is primarily interesting because of the people, places, and cultural changes associated with it. Great sports writing focuses on those themes.

Bradley uses sports to illuminate culture and culture to illuminate sports. For Zinsser, this balancing act is the key to writing well: writers have to explain some topic's personal, social, or cultural significance to readers in a way that enriches the reader's knowledge of both the topic and the people, places, and cultures it connects to.

CHAPTER 18: WRITING ABOUT THE ARTS: CRITICS AND COLUMNISTS

Unlike most writers, critics—or writers who evaluate art—are actually supposed to flaunt their opinions, sophistication, and wit. That said, most of their attempts at wit fall flat. It's also much easier to insult poor work than praise good work, and critics don't have nearly as much power as they think they do.

In the genres that Zinsser has explored so far, writers are mainly supposed to tell compelling stories. While they have to find their own voice, they shouldn't necessarily tell the reader what to think. But art critics have to make and defend specific, often controversial, judgments.

Good critics have to love the genre of art they write about. They shouldn't spoil the plot of a work they're critiquing, and they should cite specific details from it rather than just describing it with general adjectives. Unlike reviewers, who mostly report on new output in a specific industry, critics have an important intellectual job: evaluating art and putting it in the context of its field. Therefore, they have to know the field inside and out, but they can also assume that their readers have some knowledge of it. They also have to make interesting, nuanced arguments about the work they're critiquing.

Even if they sometimes overestimate their own power, critics still perform an important service to the public by helping evaluate and contextualize new art. While most writers have to learn from specialists when they deal with technical subjects, art critics are the specialists in the fields they write about. But otherwise, they still have to follow many of the same basic principles as writers in other disciplines. They should be clear, precise, and careful with structure.

Film critics are probably the most prominent arts writers today. They have to help the reader understand why a movie and its actors are important. For example, in her review of the film *A Cry in the Dark*, Molly Haskell evaluates Meryl Streep's range as an actress by comparing her to Bette Davis, a famously versatile actress from the past. Television critics perform a similar role. For instance, Michael J. Arlen writes about how the television shaped the American experience of the Vietnam War by giving Americans a narrow, biased view of events. Arlen's piece is excellent criticism because it forces people to reexamine their beliefs about familiar works of art.

Since the mid-20th century, film and television critics have taken on a relatively prominent role in American public life. By evaluating the most popular works of American art, they shape the nation's self-understanding and touch on the most important cultural debates of their time. Haskell's criticism is effective because she explains the historical context that leads her to a certain conclusion about Streep's performance. Although Arlen's criticism is completely different in tone, scope, and intention, it's also successful because it gives readers the context they need to understand what American television culture reflects about the U.S.'s place in the world.

Since dance and music deal with motion and sound, they're particularly difficult to critique through writing. The music critic Virgil Thomson did an amazing job of making classical music accessible and human.

It's possible to pause, rewatch, and reevaluate movies and television—but not most live musical or dance performances. Moreover, audiences can watch the same movies and television shows that critics write about, but it's rarer that they can attend the same live performance. Therefore, music and dance critics deal with two extra layers of complexity: capturing non-verbal forms through language and explaining a performance for a reader who may not ever be able to see it.

Critics can use humor to give fresh perspectives on a work of art. For instance, John Leonard negatively reviews James Michener's *The Covenant* by joking about its length and earnestness.

Zinsser foreshadows his chapter on humor by showing how jokes can actually carry a serious message. Leonard uses humor to pan Michener's book while still praising Michener's remarkably thorough research. In other words, this lets him soften his criticism by showing that his negative opinion of Michener's book is really a matter of personal taste.

Criticism also has to give audiences the context they need to understand a work; this is especially important in literary criticism. For instance, in an essay commemorating T.S. Eliot, Cynthia Ozick pointed out how influential he was in universities in the 1940s and 50s, before he quickly faded from the spotlight.

In addition to helping audiences understand what a work says about the culture, critics also help them understand what the culture says about a work. In literature, a work's meaning and significance are always connected to its public reception, so this context can be extremely valuable.

In similar forms—like columns, editorials, and essay-reviews—writers' personal opinions are the core of their pieces, so they have to take a stance with conviction. As one editor repeatedly told Zinsser and his colleagues back when he worked for the *New York Herald Tribune*, writers shouldn't "go peeing down both legs."

Even when they don't focus on specific works of art, opinion writers play an important role in shaping public opinion. Like all other writers, they should organize every piece around a single provocative idea. As Zinsser's editor pointed out, even if they see their proposals' downsides, opinion writers should find the best possible way to defend them.

CHAPTER 19: HUMOR

Through humor, writers can make points that they could never make seriously. For instance, satires like *Catch-22* and *Dr. Strangelove* often make for the strongest political critiques. By exaggerating "some crazy truth," humorists make its craziness obvious. For example, Zinsser noticed lots of women wearing hair-curlers in public in the 1960s, so he published a series of parody letters to the editor for a fake magazine called *Haircurl*. In other columns, he parodied more serious topics, like the peace negotiations after the Vietnam War. These columns closely parodied serious journalists' style, and Zinsser made a serious point through his humor. He's part of a long tradition of influential American political humorists. But humorists don't have to write about national events—they can also just write about everyday life.

Humor only works when the audience gets the joke. Therefore, more than most writers, humorists have to connect their work to matters of public interest—or at least common experience. This also means that they can influence popular opinion more than most writers. However, this gives them a serious responsibility to speak the honest truth. Humor writing is difficult because it requires extremely careful attention to form: for instance, Zinsser's Haircurl *letters were as much a parody of journalism as a hit piece on hair curlers. Humorists have to find personas that are somehow both absolutely serious and completely absurd. This is the only way they can speak in their own voices without being completely sincere and make serious points while continuing to entertain the reader.*

Zinsser has several rules for humorists. They must learn to write "good 'straight' English" before they switch to comedy, they have to joke about relatable topics, and they shouldn't try too hard to get laughs. Many attempts at humor fail because readers and editors simply have different tastes, but humor doesn't need to be funny to *everyone*.

Since humor is more stylistically complex than most ordinary writing, it makes sense that humorists should master the basics first. They must be able to write for anyone and everyone, even if they don't always choose to do so.

Zinsser teaches a whole course on the history of American humor writing. He starts with George Ade's clever "Fables in Slang," like the parable about a worker who tries to organize a union, then gets paid off by management and switches sides. Ring Lardner's plays parodied the conventions of American theater, Don Marquis wrote poems in the voice of a cockroach named Archy, and writers like Robert Benchley made humor more personal through free association and self-deprecation. S.J. Perelman mastered this free association style: he undermined conventional ideas and literary clichés by contrasting them with absurdities. Finally, Zinsser's class ends with Woody Allen's magazine pieces, like his memoirs in the voice of Hitler's loyal barber.

Whether they know it or not, American humorists are automatically part of a long tradition. At a minimum, Zinsser believes, they ought to understand and learn from this tradition. Although most humorists respond to the specific events of their era, their jokes and techniques are timeless. But where many standard writing techniques (like the interview) never get old, humorists can't keep making the same jokes, so they have to balance tried-and-true techniques with innovation in order to find a personal style. All of the humorists Zinsser cites managed to do this successfully: they're outrageously funny because they each found a hilarious individual voice.


Contemporary humor writers carry on this tradition. Zinsser cites Mark Singer's satirical reporting on the obnoxious New York businessman Donald Trump as an example. He also discusses Garrison Keillor's parody articles: Keillor writes about the police arresting the U.S.'s last smokers in a sting operation, which parodies changing national attitudes about cigarettes. In another article, he compares the George H.W. Bush administration bailing out the savings-and-loans industry to the government letting Huns sack Chicago.

All three of these examples show how humorists can criticize social and political trends while avoiding the soapbox and remaining fresh and entertaining. However, Mark Singer's article on Donald Trump probably stands out the most to readers who have lived through the Trump presidency. Singer's reporting shows how writers can serve the public—often without fully realizing how—by portraying the people, policies, and trends that most powerfully shape society.


Finally, humorists don't always have to make a specific point. For instance, Ian Frazier's "Dating Your Mom" is hilarious because it defends an absurd idea, and John Updike's "Glad Rags" mocks major political figures by commenting on their fashion sense.

Humorists don't always have to advocate for *some specific idea, but like all nonfiction, their work still has to be* organized around *one unifying idea. Frazier and Updike's articles are hilarious because they're each based around a single, totally absurd premise: that people would seriously consider dating their mothers, and that political figures should be judged by their fashion choices.*

Most importantly, humorists have to show the reader that they're enjoying themselves. This means that they have to find the humor in their own voices, not just make a bunch of jokes. For instance, Zinsser's students learned a lot by imitating other humor writers, but they quickly got tired—until they found their own voices. Writers like E.B. White, Stephen Leacock, and James Thurber manage to incorporate humor throughout their work. Zinsser concludes that aspiring writers should focus on writing the truth and figure out how to make it humorous, rather than focusing entirely on how to be funny.

Humor doesn't require earnestness or sincerity, so humorists can try on other people's styles more easily than writers in other genres. However, Zinsser emphasizes that they will never truly succeed until they find their own distinctive voice. Ultimately, then, humor is just one among many kinds of nonfiction—and they all follow the same rules. In fact, Zinsser uses these comments to set the reader up for the last section of his book, in which he goes on to argue that all *writers have to be enthusiastic about their work and find their own authentic voice in order to be successful. Still, these two factors are especially important to humor, which is first and foremost about entertaining the reader.*

CHAPTER 20: THE SOUND OF YOUR VOICE

Even though Zinsser covers diverse subjects, ranging from jazz to baseball, he always writes in the same style. All writers should do this, because their main commodity is always their own voice.

Developing a distinctive style (or voice) is a writer's best chance to enrich their work and make a personal connection with the reader. Of course, Zinsser has repeatedly argued that developing a voice isn't easy: it often takes writers years, and they always have to learn to write clearly first.

Zinsser loves breezy, effortless writing, but not everyone can do it well. For instance, E.B. White comes across as folksy and informal, but his style actually requires painstaking effort and discipline. When inexperienced writers try to replicate this style, they often come across as insincere, corny, and condescending. Writers should respect their readers, which means that they shouldn't use the breezy style unless it really fits their voice.

Style has to be authentic and organic: writers have to write in their own voice, and they have to find this voice naturally over the course of their careers. As Zinsser's example shows, there are no shortcuts to good style. It's easy to confuse the breezy style with clear writing, but they're completely different. Clarity is about mechanics, but style is about attitude. All good style is clear, but E.B. White's informal, direct, breezy style is just one example. Clear writing is anything that says what it means, without too much complication. It's possible to be clear but also formal, scientific, flowery, elaborate, or dramatic—and not breezy.

Finding a voice as a writer requires *taste*, or a sense of what fits and what doesn't. It's true that taste is subjective, changes over time, and can't be easily measured. But there are still clear signs of good and bad taste. In particular, bad taste loves clichés, jargon, and imprecise words (like "zillions"). While taste depends on intuition, it's still possible to learn. The best way to learn good taste is by imitating other writers. In fact, imitation is the best way for writers to improve—it helps them find their own voice and place themselves in a broader history and tradition.

Taste has no clear rules, but Zinsser's usual priorities—clarity, unity, and precision—are a good place to start. For instance, "zillions" is bad taste because it's purely ornamental. It attracts attention, but it doesn't refer to any specific quantity, so it's more likely to distract the reader than advance the author's actual point. Readers might be surprised that Zinsser favors imitating other writers, even though he also argues that every writer has to find their own voice, style, and taste. However, he's not saying that aspiring writers will find success by simply copying what other writers have done. Instead, he thinks that writers can figure out what does and doesn't work for them by trying on different styles. This imitation is part of a process of experimentation. Eventually, he thinks, writers can find a voice by combining bits and pieces they have learned from other writers and traditions.

To show how a sense of tradition enriches writing, Zinsser quotes Connecticut Governor Wilbur Cross's eloquent Thanksgiving Proclamation, which describes his state's natural beauty and Pilgrim history. (Zinsser's students didn't find Cross's proclamation impressive, but Zinsser blames television, which has made speechcraft less important in politics.) Governor Cross's writing is flowery, but it's still eloquent because of Cross's good taste. Cross uses simple words and avoids clichés. He also knows what *not* to say. Just like Abraham Lincoln emphasized the evil of slavery by invoking the Bible in his Second Inaugural Address, Cross subtly references the long American struggle for human rights without condescending to the reader. The richest works of literature, like Toni Morrison's novels, understand where they fit into a broader tradition.

Cross's style is nothing like breezy E.B. White's, but it's still clear, inspiring, and suited to his speech's subject matter. Zinsser shows that Cross is aware of tradition in two ways. First, his speech fits into a longer tradition of American speechcraft, and second, he references shared Connecticut traditions in order to connect with his constituents. His distinctive voice isn't purely the product of his individual identity—it also depends on the traditions and communities that he belongs to. Thus, Zinsser returns to his belief in imitation: by trying on others' voices, styles, and tastes, aspiring writers can learn about the influences that have shaped their own identities and decide which of these influences to accept and reject.

CHAPTER 21: ENJOYMENT, FEAR AND CONFIDENCE

Growing up, Zinsser dreamed of writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and after World War II, he was lucky enough to get a job there. He loved its writers' enthusiasm: they always seemed to be enjoying their work. In fact, Zinsser's guiding credo as a writer is to enjoy himself. As S.J. Perelman once told Zinsser's Yale class, in order to enjoy a piece of writing, "the reader has to feel that the writer is feeling good [...] even if he isn't."

The Tribune *journalists' enthusiasm inspired Zinsser to become a writer. There's no better proof that a writer who is "feeling good" helps the reader feel good, too. This kind of enthusiasm is a powerful tool in nonfiction writing: it enriches the personal transaction between the writer and the reader. It motivates writers to do their best possible work, helps them find their voice, and adds energy and warmth to their prose.*

Like any other kind of artist, writers have to work hard to motivate themselves to work every day. In the process, they have to conquer their fears: of the blank page, of betraying the facts, and of losing the reader. The best way for a writer to beat these fears and stoke the reader's enthusiasm is by writing about subjects that interest them. As the sportswriter Red Smith once put it, "living is the trick." People generally become writers because they want to spend their lives learning about interesting topics. So, to write well, they should stick to what interests them.

Zinsser returns to the principle that good writing depends on habit, not inherent talent or genius. Enthusiasm is energizing, while fear is paralyzing, so writers are likely to develop better habits if they get to focus on topics that interest them. Just like interviewing people with a personal connection to a story is often the best way to add detail to it, writers with some personal interest in a story tend to better communicate why it's so compelling.

Still, even interesting work can terrify writers. For instance, nonfiction writers might worry that they're not prepared enough to write about specialized fields (like Zinsser when he wrote his book about baseball). One solution is that they can connect their work to things they already *do* know about. For instance, when *Audubon* magazine offered Zinsser the chance to profile the influential birdwatcher Roger Tory Peterson, Zinsser initially refused because he wasn't interested in birds. But then, Zinsser watched a documentary about Peterson and learned two interesting facts: Peterson is a painter, and he's still working in his 80s. Intrigued, Zinsser decided to take on the assignment and base his article around these two interesting facts.

Since enthusiasm is the best antidote to fear, writers should find interesting angles on difficult or unfamiliar projects. As always, they should also look for the human element. Since good writers specialize in identifying this, they will never need technical knowledge to write effectively about specialists. In fact, writers can even benefit from their lack of specialist knowledge, since their job is to understand and lead inexperienced readers through complicated new material. In this case, Zinsser finds a compelling new angle on Peterson's story precisely because he's not interested in birdwatching. This is similar to how he uses his knack for interviewing and understanding people to turn boring projects about institutions into vibrant stories about the people who run them.

Writers have to be creative in order to connect their subjects to their own interests. But they can get confident with any topic by mastering the basics, learning interview skills, and accepting that they'll always know less than the experts. For instance, in order to show his readers Roger Tory Peterson's attention to detail, Zinsser had to clarify basic photography concepts in their interview. And the interview's most unexpected moments gave Zinsser his best material. For instance, Peterson offhandedly commented that birds are getting more comfortable with people, and he showed Zinsser his collection of taxidermized birds. Zinsser is glad that he took the Peterson assignment just because it was so interesting.

Since the human element is the basis of any good story, curiosity and interview skills are writers' most effective and versatile tools for finding a compelling angle on any topic. Zinsser's interview with Peterson again shows why over-researching is an excellent way to find the interesting, vibrant details that bring a story to life. And he also repeats why he's so grateful to be a writer: it lets him pursue interesting stories and interview extraordinary people all day long.

CHAPTER 22: THE TYRANNY OF THE FINAL PRODUCT

When students have an idea, they often jump to imagining their finished articles in print. But Zinsser thinks that this is dangerous: by fixating on the finished product, writers jump past all the key decisions they have to make about structuring their work. American culture is obsessed with results, and this leads writers to worry more about finishing and selling their work than actually writing it.

Planning is extremely important, but students don't generally value it. By deciding what they want to write before figuring out what they want to write about, *Zinsser's students do themselves a disservice. They set themselves up for false starts and frustrations. Instead, they should figure out their material before deciding how to structure their work. For Zinsser, focusing on quality is actually a better path to success than focusing on success.*

To fight this obsession with results, Zinsser tried a radical experiment in one of his writing classes for adults. Learning to structure long pieces is the most underrated nonfiction writing skill, so Zinsser decided to spend an entire semester on organization. His students wouldn't have to submit any writing: they'd just have to pick a place that matters to them and figure out what, how, and why they wanted to write about it. One woman chose her church, which recently caught fire, and said that she planned to interview the people who ran it. But Zinsser encouraged her to choose a more personal angle. Many students struggled to compress their topics enough to make them manageable, and others stumbled into their topics when they least expected it, like when they uncovered a long-lost memory in class.

Zinsser's approach probably feels as foreign to his readers as it did to his students. Most people learn to write by meeting other people's demands—they have to complete specific assignments for specific deadlines. They often have power over the content of their writing, but they almost never control the form. This is the opposite of what nonfiction writers should do: follow their material. Therefore, by focusing on planning and research instead of getting words on paper to meet a deadline, Zinsser's students completely transformed their approach to writing. They learned to look for the most compelling story, rather than simply finding something good enough to submit. In turn, they took the time to truly understand their material and make the personal connection that they need to present it convincingly.

Zinsser's class succeeded because his students didn't have a deadline: they had to focus on the process, not the product. This is the best way for writers to approach a project. For example, one of Zinsser's students chose to write about his hometown but couldn't figure out whether he wanted to write a memoir, a personal essay, or an investigative reporting. Instead, he wrote a 350-page book combining all three. He learned to appreciate the writing process and care less about getting published.

Zinsser knows that not all writers are lucky enough to avoid deadlines, but his principle still holds: writers can better explore and connect to their material when they set their own schedule. They should plan, but they should also be flexible enough to change their plans when the material calls for it. They should let content determine form, rather than trying to impose form on content. Zinsser's student gained much more from his project by letting it become a book, but he wouldn't have been able to do this if he had to fulfill someone else's deadline.

In conclusion, Zinsser explains that good writers need a *quest* and an *intention*. Their job is to look for deeper meaning in the world, then tell the story of this quest through their work. And they can always choose whether they intend to "affirm and celebrate" something in their writing, or else to "debunk and destroy" it.

Quest and intention give a piece of writing unity by defining its narrative arc. Therefore, Zinsser suggests that writers should define their quests and intentions when they plan their work, just like they should define their tone, pronouns, and tense. Zinsser also reminds his readers that writing itself is a valuable tool. It's a tool for writers' self-discovery and reflection, and it's a tool for them to uplift or shoot down certain ideas for the public. Zinsser's implication is clear: writing has real power to change the world for better or worse, and writers should be careful to use that power to good.

CHAPTER 23: A WRITER'S DECISIONS

Whereas the previous chapter focused on writers' "big decisions" about the scope and direction of their work, this chapter focuses on the hundreds of "little decisions" that make an article logical and compelling. To illustrate how these decisions work, Zinsser will walk the reader through his article "The News From Timbuktu."

Writers have to make the "big decisions" about voice, unity, and intention before they sit down to write. However, they face the "little decisions" during the actual writing process. For instance, they have to choose the right words, present details in the right order, and pick the right lead and conclusion. Since these decisions are so varied, writers have to make them by instinct, not by any hard-and-fast rules. Still, by using his own writing as a model, Zinsser shows the reader what kinds of concerns should go into these decisions.

An article's lead has to grab and hold the reader's attention while giving context about the story. Zinsser opens his article by explaining that Timbuktu's streets are made of sand, which represents the city's defeat by the desert—and by history. He uses simple, linear sentences to convey a single, powerful idea. In his second paragraph, Zinsser addresses his readers' expectations by explaining how Timbuktu represents an unreachable, mystical place in Western culture. To keep the reader's attention, he characterizes Timbuktu as an "edge" city at the end of the first paragraph and then again at the beginning of the second.

Zinsser's lead combines an interesting fact, which grabs the reader's attention, with a metaphor, which represents his main provocative idea about Timbuktu. The fact is that Timbuktu's streets are made of sand, and the metaphor is that these sand streets represent Timbuktu's place at the edge between humanity and nature and the frontier of the Western imagination. But he prefers to let his material speak for itself. Instead of directly explaining this metaphor, he sets it up implicitly and lets the reader draw their own conclusions.

In his next two paragraphs, Zinsser quickly summarizes Timbuktu's history, then explains how he ended up going there after seeing a travel agency's ad. He sprinkles in some humor to show his personality. In his fifth paragraph, Zinsser quotes the travel agency's brochure, which promises travelers a chance to see the famous Azalai Salt Caravan. The funny brochure shows how quotes are usually more interesting than paraphrase.

Leads serve two purposes: grabbing the reader's attention and easing them into the rest of the piece. But the balance between these purposes has to shift over time. Namely, while attracting the reader is more important at the very beginning of an article, introducing the piece's style and main ideas becomes more important as the article progresses. This is why Zinsser starts making jokes and introducing his writerly persona halfway through the lead. If people are still reading, then they clearly find Timbuktu interesting enough to read about. The natural next step is to establish who will be leading them there.

Finally, in his sixth paragraph, Zinsser introduces the other travelers. He chooses his words carefully to make his prose more entertaining. For example, instead of saying, "we were in our fifties and sixties," he says, "we ranged from late middle age to Medicare." Some sentences took him upwards of an hour, but the time investment was worth it. Zinsser ends his six-paragraph lead with an asterisk, which shows the reader that he's starting a new section.

Zinsser shows how the right word choice can make even dry facts, like his travel companions' ages, vibrant and entertaining to read. His meticulous effort reflects his belief that rewriting never ends: writers can always further improve their work, no matter how much they've already tried. Their main responsibility is to give their readers a quality product.

In the next four paragraphs, Zinsser covers his group's route to Timbuktu. He briefly introduces Mali's geography and describes its colorful capital of Bamako. He also mentions the group's long van ride to the town of Djenné and two-day excursion in Dogon country. These experiences were very interesting, but Zinsser had to cover them as briefly as possible, because he didn't want to distract his readers—his article is really about Timbuktu.

In this section, Zinsser has to give necessary background information without losing the reader's attention. He does this by returning to two of his main principles: brevity and humanity. He keeps the description of his other trips as short as possible, and he focuses on interesting specific details from those trips. Since he figured out his unities beforehand, he knows that his article's single provocative idea is really about Timbuktu. Therefore, he cuts anything that doesn't contribute to this main idea and saves it for another time.

Zinsser uses humor to describe his group flying to Timbuktu as the salt caravan marches there from the opposite direction. To build rapport with his readers, he references the classic Hollywood movies that shaped Western perceptions of this part of North Africa, like *Beau Geste* and *The Four Feathers*. His group takes a brief tour through the city, and then he uses an asterisk to mark another section break.

Zinsser's humor and movie references strengthen his distinctive voice and add humanity to his writing. He references movies to show how a specific cultural tradition has enriched his writing, including by giving his readers certain expectations for his piece. Zinsser embodies these expectations in his journey into the desert, but he also makes fun of them by consciously playing the part of a lost, confused American tourist.

In the next section of his Timbuktu article, Zinsser quotes his tour guide, who explains that the specific salt caravan they're looking for doesn't exist anymore. Instead, they're just going out into the desert to look for any caravan they can find. Zinsser chooses to let these facts speak for themselves, instead of commenting on them too much. He also explains that he tries to use words that are "vivid and precise, but not long or fancy," and he tries to keep the reader going by ending every paragraph with either a joke or a tie-in to the next paragraph.

Zinsser constantly thinks about how the reader will approach his writing and bases his "little decisions" on what will most enrich their experience. In particular, he applies his rules for good writing—simplicity, brevity, and precision. After several paragraphs of general explanation about his travels, he recounts his conversation with the tour guide in order to surprise the reader and shift into the main portion of his story—the part about Timbuktu. Still, he carefully maintains the same tone and persona when he presents this conversation: he emphasizes his own ignorance and powerlessness as a bumbling American tourist.

The rest of Zinsser's article focuses on his group's trip into the Sahara. He remembers the British explorers who inspired him to dream about the desert and thinks about its total emptiness. The group runs into a beautiful camel caravan, and then they go into the desert and spend the night with some local Bedouin nomads, who offer to share their meager dinner. At the very end of the article, Zinsser goes to sleep and dreams about being Lawrence of Arabia.

At the end of his article, Zinsser ties together a number of key threads: the Western view of Timbuktu, the draw of adventure, the relationship between humans and the environment, and the beauty of connection across cultures. However, he doesn't waste time explaining this—or even pointing it out to the reader. Instead, he takes a literary approach to the truth: he lets his readers make the connections and draw their own conclusions.

Zinsser explains that this isn't how he originally planned to end his article, but it turned out to be the right place to stop. The story's climax wasn't seeing the caravan, but rather meeting the nomads and learning about "the nobility of living on the edge." By ending here, Zinsser stayed loyal to his material.

As Zinsser explained in his chapter on leads and endings, nonfiction writers shouldn't try to end their articles by summarizing their main arguments. Instead, they should close with compelling details that will engage the reader while also gesturing back to the main idea of their article.

Zinsser has one last piece of advice for writers: "Get on the plane." In his own experience, the uncertain and unexpected stories are often the best ones, so writers should make a habit of pursuing them.

Zinsser's advice isn't practical for everyone—most writers can't afford to just fly out and pursue any story they wish. But his principle still applies: writing is a process, and the unexpected twists and turns in that process often lead to the most interesting work. Therefore, writers should pursue stories and contacts wherever they lead, rather than waiting for the perfect story to write itself. Of course, Zinsser is also pointing out how pursuing interesting leads and going on adventures is one of the most rewarding part of a writer's career.

CHAPTER 24: WRITING FAMILY HISTORY AND MEMOIR

Many people regret not learning more from their parents and grandparents. But through writing, people can create a record of their family lives for the sake of future generations. Zinsser explains that this can take the form of a formal memoir, an informal family history, or even oral storytelling. All are ways to preserve people's memories before they die.

Family memoir shows how writing is a powerful tool for connecting families across generations. It can preserve the voices of the deceased for their descendants, whether or not they exist yet and whether or not they recognize the value of the gift they're receiving.

Zinsser remembers his father scribbling out his memoirs on a legal pad, then printing them and distributing them to his family. Even though he never revised or cared about his writing style, this is a valid approach to family history—in fact, it allowed his distinctive voice to stand out even more.

Family history is the only genre in which most of the ordinary rules of good writing—revision, clarity, limited scope, and so on—don't fully apply. In family history, personality is much more important than clarity. Good family history is anything that accurately depicts the writer and their relationships.

Zinsser uses his father's experience to address some important questions about writing family memoirs. Memoirists sometimes wonder if they should write in their present-day voice or the voice they would have used in the past. Zinsser says that both these approaches can work, as long as the writer commits to one of them. He argues that memoirists should also record as much information as possible, including details that seem irrelevant but might be important to their descendants.

Throughout his book, Zinsser recommends adding a personal touch to make stories more relatable, so it's no surprise that he uses his own father's memoirs as a model. Meanwhile, while many of Zinsser's basic rules for nonfiction don't *apply to memoirs, many also* do. *Unity is essential, and writers should always over-research (or amass more information than they could possibly end up using).*

Next, many family memoirists worry about hurting other people's feelings. Zinsser suggests writing everything down first and sorting through it later. It's usually courteous to show people any sections written about them before publication, but ultimately, the memoirist gets to make the final decision about what to include. In the 1990s, many memoirists started using their books as an excuse to wallow in self-pity and whine about other people—Zinsser cautions against doing this, since these books weren't interesting and caused plenty of problems for their writers. Plenty of successful memoirists write about their difficult childhoods and resentment, but they focus on healing and growth, not settling scores and portraying themselves as victims. In fact, the very act of writing a memoir can be a way for people to heal.

Like all writers, memoirists have an ethical responsibility towards the people their work will affect. But they also have the sole right to decide what and whether to publish. Still, writers should avoid starting feuds in their memoirs, which may outlive them. Beyond causing ill will, people hurt their own reputations when they immortalize their petty resentments in their memoirs. In contrast, he shows that writing memoirs can actually help people solve *these problems, if they're willing to do enough serious self-reflection during the process. After all, memoirs aren't just records of people's lives: they're also records of how people* thought about *their lives in retrospect. A memoirist's attitude towards their past conflicts, problems, and traumas speaks volumes about how they developed over the course of their life.*

The hardest and most stressful part about writing a memoir is organizing it. Zinsser recommends first cutting down the scope—there's no need to mention everyone in the family or cover an entire lifetime. For instance, one of Zinsser's students was planning on interviewing all of her siblings for her memoir, but Zinsser advised her to skip the interviews and focus on telling *her* story. Another student gave herself the impossible task of visiting her father's native village in Poland and reconstructing his experience during the Holocaust. Instead, Zinsser advised her to write about her own quest to understand her heritage, and the book ended up being far more powerful.

Family historians have a legitimate reason to include as much detail as they possibly can—to leave a record for their descendants. But Zinsser still recommends that they "think small," in order to give themselves manageable projects. In contrast, memoirists *absolutely have to "think small" in order to tell a compelling story. When they include too many voices in a book, writers lose track of their own distinctive voices. Both of Zinsser's students set themselves impossible research tasks that wouldn't have yielded a single, robust story. But their quests for knowledge about the past turn out to be just as compelling as the past itself.*

Memoirists should start with specific, vivid memories, because the fact that they remember them means they're probably significant. For instance, Zinsser wrote a *New York Times* article about a mechanical baseball game he played with his childhood friends. Then, an executive at the company that made the game contacted Zinsser and invited him to play on one of the last existing machines. While this story is incredibly specific, it's powerful because it represents a universal truth: "everyone had a favorite toy or game or doll."

Memoirists best connect with their readers when they present their own lives as unique takes on universal experiences. Narrow details and specific anecdotes are more vivid, memorable, and relatable than blanket statements about the past. Zinsser's story is compelling because of his emotional attachment to the mechanical baseball game and delight at rediscovering it.

Similarly, in *Writing About Your Life*, his memoir and guide to memoir writing, Zinsser decided not to tell the full story of his service in World War II. Instead, he wrote about one significant moment from the war: traveling across North Africa in a boxcar. The most important stories aren't about what someone did, but about how a situation made them who they are. One great way to start writing a memoir is to sit down for a few minutes every day and write about a different important event from the past. After a few months, a memoirist can lay out all their material and arrange it into an overall story.

Even though the war was clearly a transformative experience in Zinsser's life, he would probably lose his readers if he tried to explain every single way that it changed him. Instead, it's more powerful and memorable for him to condense his experience into a single episode. The boxcar trip represents the most important way he changed during the war: it brought him out of his sheltered upbringing, showed him the world, and inspired the lifelong love for adventure that he got to fulfill by writing. Finally, his recommendation to memoirists shows how over-researching and "thinking small" can actually work together to help produce great writing. It's also an illustration of how writers can find their voice authentically, by writing what they care about and finding the common threads within it.

CHAPTER 25: WRITE AS WELL AS YOU CAN

Zinsser can't point to any single moment when he decided to become a writer, but he can see how certain influences led him there. For instance, Zinsser's mother appreciated good writing in any genre, and his businessman father always taught him "that quality is its own reward." In addition to quality, Zinsser also cares about being entertaining, because he knows that humor, surprise, and personality are the best ways to win over readers.

In this last chapter, Zinsser asks about writers' duties to themselves and others. First, he argues that they ought to always do their best work and give the reader something to enjoy. But as usual, instead of writing an abstract philosophical essay on the subject, he starts by explaining how his own values are rooted in his upbringing. He knows that his readers can relate: when growing up, they likely learned similar values from their parents.

The basic rules of writing never change, so most writers should stick to clear and simple English. They should practice obsessively and hold themselves to high standards. They shouldn't publish anything less than their best work, and they shouldn't let editors violate their style. Zinsser is famous for his cranky arguments with editors, but his obsessiveness has also earned him a reputation for reliability and accuracy.

Zinsser repeats his basic theory of good writing: it's a habit, it can be learned, and its essence is clarity and simplicity. He also continues laying out his vision of writers' responsibility to themselves and their craft. Namely, they must defend their integrity and hold themselves to higher professional standards than their editors do. Writing fundamentally depends on trust: audiences and editors trust writers to tell the sincere truth, while writers trust editors and audiences to honor their intentions. If this trust breaks down, then readers stop taking writers' ideas seriously, and they lose their power to influence the broader culture. Therefore, writers should defend their honesty and integrity at all costs.

Good editors are generous, helpful, and enthusiastic. They use their objective perspective to make useful changes that help writers achieve their goals. But bad editors ignore writers' style, content, and intentions. Successful writers build trust with their editors so that they can negotiate. Writers have a right to make their points, but editors have an obligation to make the final product clear and coherent. Many editors see professional courtesies as unimportant, but Zinsser thinks they're like an honor code holding together the profession. Worst of all, some editors distort a writer's content or misrepresent their views. To prevent this from happening, writers have to defend themselves and their integrity. They have to fundamentally believe in themselves and their abilities. Most importantly, they have to push themselves to excel.

The difference between good and bad editors is whether they interfere with the writer's intentions. Good editors help writers rewrite and achieve their objectives, while bad editors hijack the rewriting process and usurp creative control over a writer's work. But even when they're working with the best editors, writers have to advocate for themselves: they can't assume that others will push them to learn or reward them for their good work. In closing, Zinsser returns to the idea that writing is based on honor. This explains why nonfiction writers have the privilege to inform the public and shape national culture: they have pledged to tell the truth, and their honor depends on it. Zinsser believes that integrity—or honesty to oneself—is the true foundation of this honor. If they let others distort their views, writers lose their honor, integrity, and credibility because they violate their pledge to honestly inform the public of the truth.

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