

On Writing Well

William Zinsser wrote *On Writing Well* in the summer of '75. He'd been teaching writing at Yale University for five years and wanted to turn the course into a book. The first thing he did every day before he began work was to read a few pages of E. B. White's writing, not for the ideas but to get White's cadences into his ear.

White was 'the champ' for Zinsser. (PESAs persons paying attention will recall from February 2013 Words that White had updated *Elements of Style* in 1935, from the 1919 guidebook by his Cornell English professor, William Strunk.) White had a 'seemingly effortless style' that Zinsser wanted to emulate but he knew that such clear and simple writing was achieved only with great effort. By reading some of the champ's writing, Zinsser got himself ready for that effort.

So there's a lesson to start with. What do you do if you are about to play hockey? Or football of whatever persuasion you fancy? You get a ball and have a few hits or kicks. A few passes back and forth to limber up. A few standing shots on goal. Then some running shots. And so on. You're ready.

Writing is no different. You need to get ready. There's no uniform to wear but you need the right equipment: your notes, some reference books, a computer. That's all. A little music might help some writers; distract others. But the cricket streaming live or email alerts are distractions. Turn them off.

Then warm-up. Read a page or two of good writing from anywhere, even something of your own. (If I have to deal with a lot of data I read the Intro I wrote to WABS I.) Make a collection of papers that contain very clear explanations, or pull together a lot of facts in a logical way. Or papers written in a style you enjoy reading.

Now you are ready. Bum on seat. Write.

Zinsser has said that his book is not a guide to grammar or punctuation or the basic principles of writing, in the way of *Elements of Style*; it is about the application of those principles to various forms of writing: non-fiction, scientific, travel, memoirs and such. The first part of the book has chapters on Simplicity, Clutter, Style, Words and the Audience. Here is a sample of the advice.

'Simplify, simplify.' (p. 7)

'Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other. It's impossible for a muddy thinker to write good English.' (p. 8)

'Writers must constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they've written and ask: have I said it?' (p. 9)

I could quote from every page. How about this, from page 147? 'Writing is thinking on paper. Anyone who thinks clearly can write clearly, about anything at all. Science, demystified, is just another non-fiction subject. Writing, demystified, is just another way for scientists to transmit what they know.'

The main problem with papers sent to me for editing is a lack of clarity and linearity. These are connected, of course. If you're not writing clearly, it is not going to be linear. If your structure is not linear, your writing won't be clear.

By linear, I mean the paper should flow from opening paragraph to closing sentence. Each section should follow logically the section before – which, ideally, should end with a bridge to that next section. Each paragraph should build on the preceding paragraph; each sentence, on the previous sentence.

Here is Zinsser. 'Imagine writing as an upside-down pyramid. Start at the bottom with one fact a reader must know before he can learn any more. The second sentence broadens what was stated before, making the pyramid wider, and the third sentence broadens the second, so that you gradually move beyond fact into significance and speculation.' (p. 149)

Consider this example he gives from a New York Times article by Harold Schmeck. *There was a chimpanzee in California with a talent for playing tictacktoe. Its trainers were delighted with this evidence of learning but they were even more impressed by something else. They found they could tell from the animal's brain whether any particular move would be right or wrong. It depended on the chimpanzee's state of attention. When the trained animal was properly attentive, he made the right move.*

The next paragraph begins *The significant fact was that the scientists were able to recognise that state. By elaborate computer analysis of brain wave state...* And so it builds.

We are being told what we need to know, clearly and linearly. Every sentence follows and builds on what has gone before. That is the critical point. Writing scientific material is 'just a matter of putting one sentence after another', Zinsser says (p. 184). 'The "after", however, is crucial. Nowhere else must you work so hard to write sentences that form a linear sequence.'

Zinsser has an assignment to help his students learn this. He swears by it. I do too. I recommend it to young aspiring authors as a sort of limbering up exercise.

Take some process you know well. It might be how a car engine works. Or how to make a really good hamburger. Or how to make a glider from an A4 sheet of paper. Now describe that process simply and logically, so that the reader, who knows nothing of cars or hamburgers or paper gliders, understands each element that is involved, and each process that occurs, and why each is essential and how they come together and work.

Do this exercise. Think of it as training for a lifetime of writing. Don't start with a car engine if, like me, your ability barely runs to checking the oil. You must know what you are writing about – and so it should be with the geological concept you want to describe. If you can't describe it clearly, you will not convince the reader to stay with you. He's busy, with other things to do. Why fight unclear writing?

Sure, some people can put words together better than others. But style isn't the first issue for the young writer. Simplicity, clarity and linearity are way ahead of style. And if you have your ideas down clearly and logically, odds are the style is fine.

I could discuss other points of good advice in *On Writing Well* but I'd rather you went out and bought a copy, and read it with a yellow marker pen in hand. The book will be a mess of yellow – and you'll be a lot more prepared the next time you stare at that blank page.

'Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard.' (p. 9)

Peter Purcell ■