

“Writing is thinking on paper.”

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# On Writing Well

*The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*

30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EDITION

William Zinsser

**Summary:** what struck me about *On Writing Well* was how enjoyable it was to read. I had expected stiff rules, grammar, and *syntax*. How delighted I was, instead, to receive warm, entertaining guidance from a master.

“What’s so funny?” my wife would badger as I lay in bed chuckling with this book. “Zinsser got me again. He’s just so *good* at writing—and hilarious.”

This book is like painting with Picasso—we see the work behind the work while learning key principles (7), methods (3), forms (9), and attitudes (6). The principles lay the foundation:

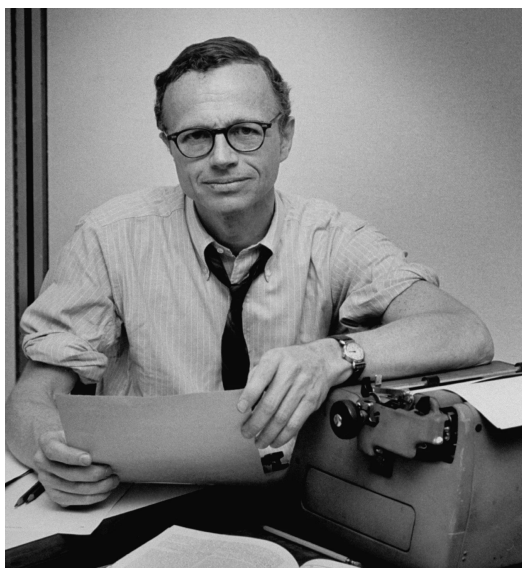
1. **The transaction:** authenticity, humanity, warmth
2. **Simplicity:** cut 50%, then another 25%
3. **Clutter:** the enemy of all writers; see above
4. **Style:** it takes time, don’t force it
5. **The audience:** write for yourself, not others
6. **Words:** obsess over them; learn the gradients
7. **Usage:** excise all jargon

Good writing is clear, simple and brief. And *rewriting* is the essence of writing well: “where the game is won or lost” says Coach Zinsser.

Don’t reach for bland clichés or redundant adverbs—throw in some fresh zest with a unique word.

“Few people realize how badly they write.”

**William Zinsser**



**Author bio:** Bill Zinsser was an American writer, editor, literary critic, and teacher. He began his career as a journalist for the *New York Herald Tribune*, where he worked as a feature writer, drama editor, film critic and editorial writer. He was a longtime contributor to leading magazines.

I nearly teared up when I learned Bill Zinsser had [passed away in May 2015](#) at the age of 92. *On Writing Well* leaves you with such aliveness I had trouble reconciling his death, and had not heard of his passing.

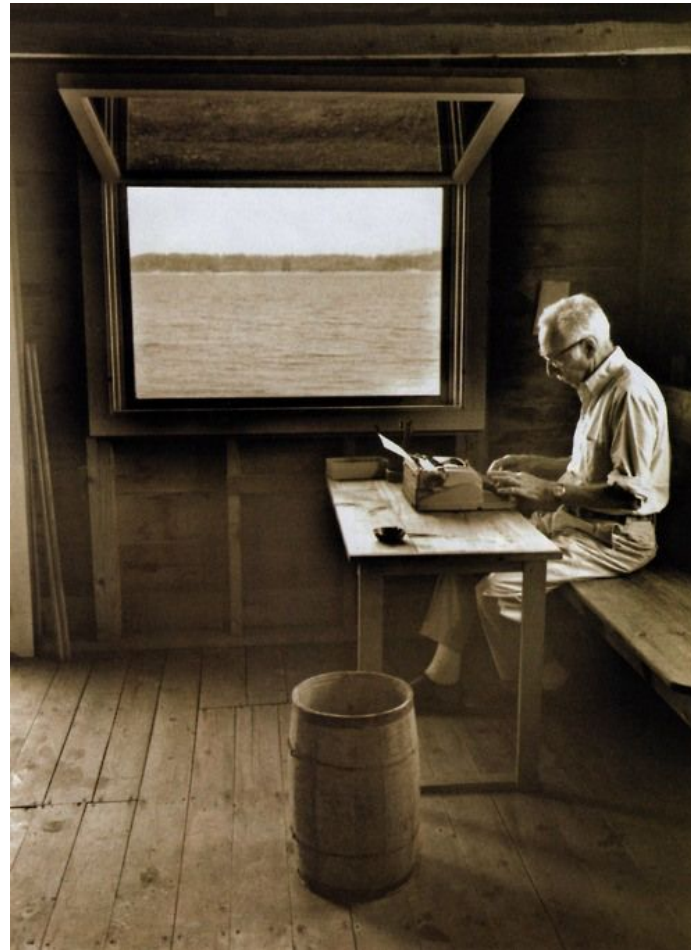
Zinsser taught writing at Yale University. He served as executive editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club from 1979 to 1987. He retired from teaching at The New School and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism because of advancing glaucoma.

He leaves us 18 books. His seemingly insatiable curiosity produced myriad articles of impressive variety: baseball, birds, jazz, and of course, writing.

## Principles

1. **The Transaction:** *“Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not the subject being written about, but who he or she is.”* What captivates the reader is the writer’s enthusiasm, emotional baggage, and how it changed his or her life. This is the personal transaction that’s at the heart of good nonfiction writing. Out of it come two of the most important qualities: **humanity** and **warmth**, expressed with **clarity** and **strength**.

2. **Simplicity:** *“Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. . . . But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence down to its cleanest components.* Remove: 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.



E.B. White writing in his boathouse, New Brooklin, Maine (1976)

3. **Clutter:** *“Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn’t be there.”* Words like “experiencing” and “personal” clutter clean writing. Look for long words that could be short words: assistance (help), numerous (many), remainder (rest), implement (do), sufficient (enough). *“Don’t dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don’t interface with anybody.”* Zinsser recommends bracketing your clutter [while editing to preserve the original intent while also denoting the unnecessary].

4. **Style:** this principle is about finding your voice as a writer, and it will take considerable time: *“. . . you will be impatient to find a “style”—to embellish the plain words so that readers will recognize you as someone special.”* Often the first few paragraphs a writer writes are a “self-conscious attempt at a fancy prologue.” Style is tied to the psyche, and writing has deep psychological roots. *“Writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going.”*

5. **The Audience:** *“Editors and readers don’t know what they want to read until they read it.”* Zinsser adroitly distinguishes between **craft**—mastering the mechanics of lean, confident writing, and **attitude**—creatively expressing who you are. The former you do for the audience, the latter, yourself.
6. **Words:** *“You’ll never make your mark as a writer unless you develop a respect for words and a curiosity about their shades of meaning that is almost obsessive.”* Avoid using cheap words, made-up words, and clichés (a style Zinsser refers to as *journalese*). Seek freshness. He recommends [Webster’s New World Dictionary](#) and [Roget’s Thesaurus](#) to zest things up. *“Writing is learned through imitation,”* so read the writers you admire. Zinsser also calls to our attention the **sound** and **rhythm** created by your word choice: readers not only see your words, they *hear* them. Therefore, Zinsser reads everything he writes aloud to ensure he has enough variety: alliteration, sentence structure, word choice, sentence length. He cites E.B. White as a master stylist of arrangement: *“good writers of prose must be part poet.”*
7. **Usage:** *“The laws of usage are relative, bending with the taste of the lawmaker.”* Zinsser is one such “lawmaker” who’s sat on dictionary usage panels, so we get a front row seat to how new words and their usage are adopted to the growing family of ~171,000 English words. The challenge: jargon is flooding our consciousness. Words like: prioritize, impact, definitize, disincentive, ongoing, input, feedback. *“I don’t want to give somebody my input and get his feedback, but I’d be glad to offer my ideas and hear what he thinks of them. Good usage, to me, consists of using good words if they already exist—and they almost always do—to express myself clearly and simply to someone else.”*

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## Methods

*“Every writing project must be reduced before you start to write.”*

### Method

# 1

## Unity

*“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.”*

### Unity choices writers need to make:

1. Pronoun: first person participant, second person sportswriter, third person observer?



2. Tense: past or present? Pick a tense to be your primary.
3. Mood: casual, reflective, formal? Pick one, but don't mix two or three.



*“All writing is ultimately a question of solving a problem. It may be a problem of where to obtain the facts or how to organize the material. It may be a problem of approach or attitude, tone or style. Whatever it is, it has to be confronted and solved.”*

### Questions to get you started:

- In what capacity am I going to address the reader?
  - Reporter? Provider of information? Average man or woman?
- What pronoun and tense am I going to use?
- What style?
  - Impersonal reportorial? Personal but formal? Personal and casual?
- What attitude am I going to take toward the material?
  - Involved? Detached? Judgmental? Ironic? Amused?
- How much do I want to cover?
- What **one point** do I want to make?

# 1

~~2~~ ~~5~~

## Make one point.

*“As for what point you want to make, every successful piece of nonfiction should leave the reader with one provocative thought that he or she didn't have before. Not two thoughts, or five—just one.”*

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### The Lead and the Ending

*“Your lead must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with freshness, or novelty, a 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.”*



**Does Zinsser eat his own cooking?** After reading this chapter on the importance of a good lead, I tried to recall how Zinsser opened this book. What I could summon was a vague sense of intrigue about a *picture*. . . so I re-read the lead:

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 Kremetz 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.

So opens *On Writing Well*—the author describing one of his favorite photographs of one of his favorite writers, the inimitable [E. B. White](#). Zinsser adeptly connects the photograph to a quality he admires (simplicity) and the purpose of the book: while writing tools have been replaced, nothing has replaced the writer. *“He or she is still stuck with the same old job of saying something that other people will want to read.”*

**This chapter is about how to pull the reader in.** Zinsser shares many of his favorite leads, including some of his own. How to write a good lead?

- *“Another fact and another smile.”*
- *“. . . salvation often lies not in the writer's style but in some odd fact he or she was able to discover.”* [read: do more research and collect more facts than you think you'll need]
- Tell a story: *“Narrative is the oldest and most compelling method of holding someone's attention; everybody wants to be told a story. Always look for ways to convey your information in narrative form.”*



## **The Ending:**

How should a writer end their article, their short story, their book?

*“The perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right.”*

*“When you're ready to stop, stop. If you have presented all the facts and made the point you want to make, look for the nearest exit. Often it takes just a few sentences to wrap things up.”*

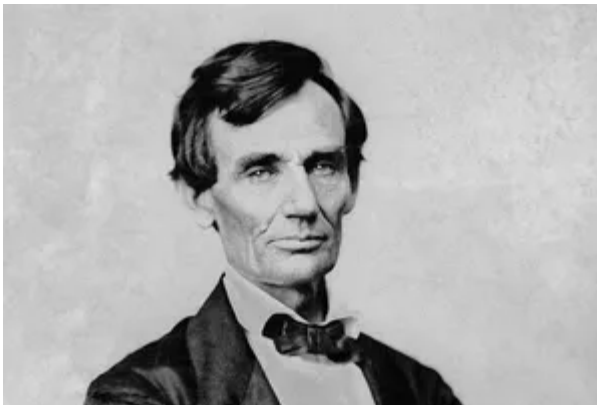
*“But what usually works best is a quotation.”* [Zinsser ends this book with a quotation]

*“Surprise is the most refreshing element in nonfiction. If something surprises you, it will also surprise—and delight—the people you are writing for, especially as you conclude your story and send them on their way.”*



**Bits & Pieces:** a chapter of snappy pointers to avoid shoddy writing.

- Short is better than long (words, sentences, paragraphs)
- Choose active verbs over passive verbs
- Careless writers will weaken strong verbs with redundant adverbs
- Avoid decorative adjectives: they are self-indulgent for the writer; a burden for the reader
- Remove qualifiers which weaken your writing: a bit, a little, sort of, rather, quite, very, too
- Good writing is lean and confident
- “Among good writers it is the short sentence that predominates.”



Lincoln’s [Second Inaugural Address](#) used 701 words.

505 are one syllable (72%),  
and 122 have two syllables  
(17%).

Pithy. Simplicity.

- Keep your paragraphs short—nothing fatigues the reader more than endless text
- *“Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it’s where the game is won or lost.”*
- Trust your material: *“The longer I work at the craft of writing, the more I realize that there’s nothing more interesting than the truth.”*
- Try not to use words like “of course,” “surprisingly” and “predictably” - they tell the reader something they already know or can figure out. Given them room to play.

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**Forms:** each chapter in this section covers a different form of non-fiction writing, e.g. interviews, travel, memoir, science & technology, business, sports, art, humor, etc. I’ve excerpted a few passages that resonated with me, but largely left this section unsummarized given the narrow focus of each form.

## On interviewing people

*“Most men and women lead lives, if not of quiet desperation, at least of desperate quietness, and they jump at a chance to talk about their work to an outsider who seems eager to listen.”*

**Takeaway:** almost ANYONE will talk to you if you show genuine interest. It’s human nature. Don’t be scared that you’re imposing on them or invading their privacy.



## On Business Writing

*“. . . anxiety is a big part of the problem and **humanity** and **clear thinking** are a big part of the solution.”*

*“You only have to remember that readers identify with people, not with abstractions like “profitability,” or with Latinate nouns like “utilization” and “implementation,” or with inert constructions in which nobody can be visualized doing something: “pre-feasibility studies are in the paperwork stage.”*

*“I recited my four articles of faith: **clarity**, **simplicity**, **brevity**, and **humanity**.”*

*“Managers at every level are prisoners of the notion that a simple style reflects a simple mind.”*

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## Attitudes

What turns readers off? Breeziness, condescension and clichés. Avoid, avoid, avoid.

*“That’s the effortless style at its best: a methodical act of composition that disarms us with its generated warmth. The writer sounds confident; he’s not trying to ingratiate himself with the reader.” [referring to E. B. White]*

*“Clichés are the enemy of taste.”*



*“The hack will reach for those very clichés, thinking he will enrich his thoughts with currency that is, as he would put it, tried and true.”*

*“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.”*

**People & Places:** what anchors all writing.

*“As an editor and a teacher I’ve found that the most untaught and underestimated skill in nonfiction writing is how to organize a long article: how to put the jigsaw puzzle together.”*

*“Moral: any time you can tell a story in the form of a quest or a pilgrimage you’ll be ahead of the game.”*

**A Writer’s Decisions**

*“Much of the trouble that writers get into comes from **trying to make one sentence do too much work**. Never be afraid to break a long sentence into two short ones, or even three.”*

*“Now, **what do you readers want to know next?** Ask yourself that question after every sentence.”*

[There is a symbol that’s used to break longer-form articles into logical sections. It is used intentionally, and typically you’ll see the first one at the end of the lead:]



*“Banality is the enemy of good writing; the challenge is to not write like everybody else.”*

*“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.”*



*“Get on the plane.”*

[a personal mantra of Zinsser—a reminder that some of his best work started with a decision to take action, e.g. fly to New Orleans to research a story.]

*“Be yourself and your readers will follow you anywhere. Try to commit an act of writing and your readers will jump overboard to get away. Your product is you.”*

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## Write as Well as You Can

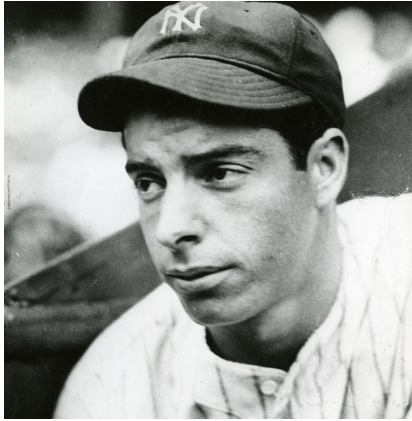
We approach the end of this enjoyable trek. Zinsser, our skillful sherpa, leaves us with a few parting thoughts—part memoir, part things to keep in mind as your writing.

- Good writing can appear anywhere: books, newspapers, magazines, blogs. **Don’t discriminate by medium.** He learned this from Mama Zinsser.
- **Humor** and **optimism** are “lubricants in writing, as they are in life” and if you’re lucky enough to possess them—or work to embody them—you’ll have an advantage, confidence.
- **“Quality is it’s own reward”**—a belief in craftsmanship he learned from Papa Zinsser who had developed a premium, proprietary recipe for making shellac.
- Writers should think of themselves as **part entertainers**: make your writing jump off the page. Give them “an enjoyable surprise” via:

humor	anecdote
paradox	an unexpected quotation
a powerful fact	an outlandish detail
a circuitous approach	an elegant arrangement of words

- Desire: “If you would like to write better than everybody else, you have to *want* to write better than everybody else. You must take an **obsessive pride in the smallest details** of your craft.”
- Editors: defend your writing style and personality vigorously, but also respect how editors add value, e.g. pruning, shaping, clarifying, tidying inconsistencies of tense, pronoun, location and tone, interpretive crossroads, retrieving strayed writers, judgment, taste.
  - **“Clarity is what every editor owes the reader.”**
  - Editor harm comes in two forms: 1) altering style, 2) altering content

*“Take your talent as far as you can and guard it with your life. . . Writing well means believing in yourself, taking risks, daring to be different, pushing yourself to excel. You will write only as well as you make yourself write.”*



Zinsser ends the book with a quote from Joe DiMaggio when asked by a reporter how he managed to play so well so consistently:

*"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."*

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## Notable writers and writings referenced in this book

E. B. White	Truman Capote	Frank Sullivan
Tom Wolfe	H. L. Mencken	S. J. Perelman
Norman Mailer	Ring Lardner	Wilbur Cross
James Reston	Joseph Mitchell	Toni Morrison
James Herndon	Edmund Wilson	William F. Buckley, Jr.
Lewis Thomas	V. S. Pritchett	Hunter Thompson
Joan Didion	Mark Twain	David Foster Wallace
Gary Wills	Russell Baker	Dave Eggers
James Thurber	Donald Ogden Stewart	Red Smith
Rachel Carlson	Robert Benchley	

## Selected articles

- Rachel Carson, [Silent Spring](#)
- Truman Capote, [In Cold Blood](#)
- Joseph Mitchell, [Mr. Hunter's Grave](#)
- John Updike, [Hub Kids Bid Kid Adieu](#)
- Woody Allen, [A Look at Organized Crime \(here too\)](#)
- Wilbur Cross, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#)
- T.S. Elliot [Top 10 Poems](#), e.g. [The Waste Land](#)

## Selected books

- Norman Mailer, [The Armies of the Night](#)
- Tom Wolfe, [The Right Stuff](#)
- Vladimir Nabokov, [Speak, Memory](#)
- Primo Levi, [The Periodic Table](#)
- Peter Medawar, [Pluto's Republic](#)
- Oliver Sacks, [The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat](#)
- Stephen Jay Gould, [The Panda's Thumb](#)
- S. M. Ulam, [Adventures of a Mathematician](#)
- Paul Davies, [God and the New Physics](#)
- Freeman Dyson, [Weapons and Hope](#)