



On Writing Well . . . and Not So Well

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 55

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

Books on good writing are virtually ubiquitous. They number in the hundreds if not the thousands. Occasionally one comes along that seems to stand head and shoulders above all the rest. But the question is, why?

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I am about to take my life into my hands because I am about to commit what some people, in fact many people, will consider heresy.

Anyone who is serious about writing well is probably familiar with the book *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinser. This has probably been the single most read book on the subject for nearly a half century (it was first published in 1976). It is very entertaining to read, which is probably the principal reason it has sold some 2 million copies. It is also the reason that it is not an exceptionally good primer on writing well. It is more of a diatribe against bad writing. It is liberally sprinkled with good ideas and approaches for improving one's writing; however, they appear as occasional atolls of wisdom in a vast sea of invective. That is, you have to read everything in order to find them.

I come out of the school of journalism, which preaches exactly the opposite about clear, compelling writing.

I remember my first class in basic journalism. The professor asked the class, "What is your objective when you write a news article?" The overwhelming answer was, "So that people will read it." "Wrong," he said. "It is so people will not read it. Or more specifically, so people will read only as much as they really need to read, and then move on to something else."

We were shocked.

"Remember," he said, "you are generally dealing with busy people. They don't have time to read everything in a newspaper, so they need to select what is likely to be useful to them and what is not. This is why newspapers are divided into sections, e.g., world news, national news, local news, business, editorials, entertainment, sports, etc. The same thing applies to individual news stories. The headline first helps readers decide if they want or need to read the story at all. The structure then helps them decide how much of the story they want or need to read, which in most cases is certainly not the whole thing." As I recall, he said only 10–15 percent of people read a news story all the way through. This structure of a news story is known as the "inverted pyramid."

Many years later I was reading a book on good writing (not Mr. Zinser's) where the author briefly mentioned the inverted pyramid with the warning that using this technique runs the risk of people not reading the whole text. I grimaced. Not reading the entire text is not a risk of the inverted pyramid. It is the objective.

Lest we consider the inverted pyramid to be the holy grail, note we are talking about a news story, or any other kind of text which is largely informational.

In journalism, the inverted pyramid does not apply to background features, news analysis, position statements, editorials, etc. Here, you are seeking to challenge or modify an opinion of the reader, in which case you do want them to read the whole thing. However, this does not give you license for sloppy writing. Indeed, if you want readers to read the whole thing, your writing must be even more engaging and well structured.

I strongly urge you to read Mr. Zinser's book. However, for a quick, compact view of its major points, I equally urge you to read at least the first three essays in this "Communication Corner" series:

- [How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)
- [The Three Acid Tests of Persuasive Writing](#)
- [How to Improve Your Writing by Standing on Your Head.](#)

Wow, what am I saying? Why not read all of them? You could do worse.

Quotes from *On Writing Well*

- "(But) the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every 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."
- "Every long word that could be a short word."

Don't take this bit of advice literally. Mr. Zinser is not saying that short words are always better than long words. What he should have said was "every long word that ***could be as well served by*** a short word." Elsewhere in the book, he makes this clear.

- "If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer has not been careful enough to keep him on the path."

- "I have heard some writers say that if readers become lost, it's because they aren't trying hard enough to understand. They need to make a greater effort."

The **readers** need to make a greater effort! It's true writers must make certain assumptions about the capacity of readers to understand; you don't try to teach quantum physics to children. However, assuming readers have the necessary background to understand but still don't, then it is the writer's fault—and only the writer's fault. Never the other way around.

- "The game is won or lost on hundreds of small details."
- "Examine every word you put on paper. You'll find a surprising number that don't serve any purpose."
- "Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there."
- "Don't try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person."
- "Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other."
- "Rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost."

As nonpareil author James Michener (*Tales of the South Pacific, The Covenant, The Source, Chesapeake, The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, etc.) once remarked, "I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter." True, Michener was a fiction writer, but the same basic principles apply.

- "Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force on themselves."
- "All writing is ultimately a question of solving a problem."
- "Keep your paragraphs short. Writing is visual—it catches the eye before it has a chance to catch the brain."
- "Probably every subject is interesting if an avenue into it can be found that has humanity and that an ordinary person can follow."

My version of this quote: "There are no dull subjects, only dull writers."

- "Most first drafts can be cut by 50 percent without losing any information or losing the author's voice."
- "Writing is thinking on paper. Anyone who thinks clearly can write clearly, about anything at all."
- "A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard. It's one of the hardest things that people do."

This truism was probably never better illustrated than when Snoopy, the dog in the Peanuts cartoon strip, first started writing his "world famous novel."

The first panel shows him sitting on the roof of his doghouse together with a typewriter. He writes the first word of the opening sentence of his novel, then paces back and forth, writes the second word, again paces back and forth, and keeps doing so until the first sentence is completed. In the 12th and final panel, he wistfully looks out to the reader and says, as if it were a great discovery, "Good writing is hard work." You may appreciate this description more by knowing that this extremely challenging first sentence is, "It . . . was . . . a dark . . . and stormy night."

I saw the strip in a Sunday newspaper decades ago when it was [first published](#), and it really struck me. Oh, how I wish I had saved it!

Conclusion

Perhaps the best way to close this essay would be with a trio of Zinser quotes that seem to summarize everything that has gone before. They are not particularly quotable quotes. However, they have the virtue of providing a quick, compact summary of Mr. Zinser's key ideas.

"But 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."

"It won't do to say that the snoozing reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. My sympathies are with him. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer has not been careful enough to keep him on the path."

"This carelessness can take any number of forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively cluttered that the reader, hacking his way through the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in several ways. Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in mid-sentence, or has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking or when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A. The writer, in whose head the connection is clear, has not bothered to provide the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used an important word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up. He may think that 'sanguine' and 'sanguinary' mean the same thing, but the difference is a bloody big one. The reader can only infer (speaking of big differences) what the writer is trying to imply."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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