Several short sentences about writing

Verlyn Klinkenborg

SEVERAL SHORT SENTENCES ABOUT WRITING

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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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To John, Jill, and Jake

The subject is *there* only by the grace of the author's language.

—Joyce Carol Oates

PROLOGUE

This is a book of first steps. Their meaning will change as your experience changes. This book contains the bones of many arguments and observations—a vertebra here, a mandible there—but the whole skeleton is what you make of it. You'll find as much about thought and perception here as you will about language. There are no rules, only experiments.

The premise of this book is that most of the received wisdom about how writing works is not only wrong but harmful. This is not an assumption. It's a conclusion.

Like most received wisdom, what people think they know about writing works in subtle, subterranean ways. For some reason, we seem to believe most strongly in the stuff that gets into our heads without our knowing or remembering how it got there. What we think we know about writing sounds plausible. It confirms our generally false ideas about creativity and genius. But none of this means it's true.

What I've learned about writing I've learned by trial and error, which is how most writers have learned. I had to overcome my academic training, which taught me to write in a way that was useless to me (and almost everyone else). Unlearning what I learned in college—teaching myself to write well—is the basis of what I know. So is a lifetime of reading and a love of language. The rest comes from years of writing and teaching writing. The ideas and suggestions in this book have been tested again and again, by me, by my students, and by writers who have figured these things out for themselves.

A couple of cautions before you begin. This book isn't meant to replace the received wisdom. "Received" means untested, untried, repeated out of habit. Everything in this book is meant to be tested all over again, by you. You decide what works for you. This is perhaps the most important thing I have to say. There's no gospel here, no orthodoxy, no dogma. Part of the struggle in learning to write is learning to ignore what isn't useful to you and pay attention to what is. If that means arguing with me as you read this book, so be it.

This is a book full of starting points. Perhaps they'll help you find enough clarity in your own mind and your own writing to discover what it means to write. I don't mean "write the way I do" or "write the way they do." I mean "write the way you do."

Here's a starting point. You may have no idea what way you write. I hope this book will help you find out.

Note: I use the word "piece" a lot. It means whatever you're writing, whatever the genre, whatever the length.

Contents

ere, in short, is what I want to tell you.
ıow what each sentence says,
hat it doesn't say,
ıd what it implies.
these, the hardest is knowing what each sentence actually says.

first, it will help to make short sentences,
ort enough to feel the variations in length.
ave space between them for the things that words can't really say.

y attention to rhythm, first and last.

ıagine it this way:
ıe by one, each sentence takes the stage.
says the very thing it comes into existence to say.
ıen it leaves the stage.
doesn't help the next one up or the previous one down.
doesn't wave to its friends in the audience
pause to be acknowledged or applauded.
doesn't talk about what it's saying.
simply says its piece and leaves the stage.

ıis isn't the whole art of writing well.
isn't even most of it.
ıt it's a place to begin, and to begin from again and again.

. . .

ort sentences aren't hard to make.
ıe difficulty is forcing yourself to keep them short.

ıere are innumerable ways to write badly.
ıe usual way is making sentences that don't say what you think they do.
hich can the reader possibly believe? Your sentences or you?

ıe only link between you and the reader is the sentence you're making.
ıere's no sign of your intention apart from the sentences themselves,
ıd every sentence has its own motives, its own commitments,
ıite apart from yours.
adheres to a set of rules—grammar, syntax, the history and customs of the language, a world of echoes and allusions and social cues—that pay no heed to your intentions,
you don't heed those rules.

s hard to pay attention to what your words are actually saying.
opposed to what you mean to say or what you think they're saying.
ıowing what you're trying to say is always important.
ıt knowing what you've actually said is crucial.

s easier to tell what you're saying in a short sentence.

. . .

ou've been taught to believe that short sentences are childish,
erely a first step toward writing longer sentences.
ou'd like to think your education has carried you well past short sentences.
ıt you've been delivered into a wilderness of false assumptions and bad habits,
desert of jargon and weak constructions, a land of linguistic barbarism,
place where it's nearly impossible to write with clarity or directness,
ithout clichés or meaningless phrases.
ue, you can sound quite grown-up, quite authoritative, in the manner of college professors and journalists and experts in every field.

(You may *be* a college professor, a journalist, or an expert in some field.)

ow well do they write?
ow much do you enjoy reading them?

ou'll make long sentences again, but they'll be short sentences at heart.
ntences listening for the silence around them.
stening for their own pulse.

ere's an experiment:
y attention to all the noise in your head as you go about writing.

. . .

uch of it is what you already know about writing, which includes:
ıe voices of former teachers, usually uttering rules.
ıles like, "Don't begin sentences with 'and.' "

(It's okay. You can begin sentences with "and.")

ıe things everybody knows or assumes about writers and how they work,
hether they're true or not.
ıe things you feel you must or mustn't do, without really knowing why.
ıe things that make you wonder, "Am I allowed to …?"

(Yes, you're allowed to. Not forever and always, but until you decide for yourself what works and what doesn't.)

rite these things down—the contents of the noise in your head as you write.
ou can't revise or discard what you don't consciously recognize.

ıese assumptions and prohibitions and obligations are the imprint of your education and the culture you live in.
strust them.

hat you don't know about writing is also a form of knowledge, though much harder to grasp.
y to discern the shape of what you don't know and why you don't know it,
henever you get a glimpse of your ignorance.
on't fear it or be embarrassed by it.
cknowledge it.
hat you don't know and why you don't know it are information too.

t's make a simple list from the preceding lines:

What you've been taught.

What you assume is true because you've heard it repeated by others.

What you feel, no matter how subtle.

What you don't know.

What you learn from your own experience.

ıese are the ways we know nearly everything about the world around us.

ep them in mind, especially when you begin to think about *what* to write and *how* to write about it.

---

t's think about what you already know.

your head, you'll probably find two models for writing.

ıe is the familiar model taught in high school and college—a matter of outlines and drafts and transitions and topic sentences and argument.

. . .

ıe other model is its antithesis—the way poets and novelists are often thought to write.

ords used to describe this second model include "genius," "inspiration," "flow," and "natural," sometimes even "organic."

th models are useless.

hould qualify that sentence.

th models are completely useless.

osely linked to these models are two assumptions:

1. Many people assume there's a correlation between sentence length and the sophistication or complexity of an idea or thought—even intelligence generally.
There isn't.

2. Many people assume there's a correlation between the reader's experience while reading and the writer's experience while writing—her state of mind, her ease or difficulty in putting words together.
There isn't.

ıu can say smart, interesting, complicated things using short sentences.

ow long is a good idea?

es it become less good if it's expressed in two sentences instead of one?

arn to distrust words like "genius," "inspiration," "flow," "natural," and "organic" when you think about your work.

(Don't use them when you talk about it either.)

ıey have nothing to do with writing

ıd everything to do with venerating writers.

hy short sentences?

ıey'll sound strange for a while until you can hear what they're capable of.

ıt they carry you back to a prose you can control,

a stage in your education when your diction—your vocabulary—was under control too.

ort sentences make it easier to examine the properties of the sentence.

(Learn to diagram sentences. It's easy.)

ıey help eliminate transitions.

ıey make ambiguity less likely and easier to detect.

ıere's nothing wrong with well-made, strongly constructed, purposeful long sentences.
ıt long sentences often tend to collapse or break down or become opaque or trip over their awkwardness.
ıey're pasted together with false syntax
ıd rely on words like "with" and "as" to lengthen the sentence.
ıey're short on verbs, weak in syntactic vigor,
ll of floating, unattached phrases, often out of position.
ıd worse—the end of the sentence commonly forgets its beginning,
if the sentence were a long, weary road to the wrong place.

riting short sentences restores clarity, the directness of subject and verb.
forces you to discard the strong elements of long sentences,
ke relative pronouns and subordinate clauses,
ıd the weak ones as well:
epositional chains, passive constructions, and dependent phrases.

riting short sentences will help you write strong, balanced sentences of any length.
rong, lengthy sentences are really just strong, short sentences joined in various ways.

ɔu don't have to write short sentences forever.
ıly until you find a compelling reason for a long sentence
ıat's as clear and direct as a short sentence.
ɔu'll be tempted to say, "But short sentences sound so choppy."
ıly a string of choppy sentences sounds choppy.
ıink about variation and rhythm,
ıe rhythm created by two or three sentences working together,
ıythm as sound and echo but also rhythm as placement.
arn to use the position of a sentence, the position of a word—
rst? last?—as an intensifier, an accent in itself.
ın a short sentence sound like a harbinger? An adumbration?
ın it sound like a reprise or a coda?
sten.

ɔw short is short?
ıat depends on the length of the sentences you're used to writing.
ıe way to keep sentences short is to keep the space between them as empty as possible.
lon't mean the space between the period at the end of one sentence and the first word of the next.
nean the space between the period and the *subject* of the next sentence.
ıat space often gets filled with unnecessary words.
ɔst sentences need no preamble—or postlude.

s perfectly possible to make wretched short sentences.
ıt it's hard to go on making them for long because they sound so wretched
ıd because it's easy to fix them.
aking them longer is *not* the way to fix them.

. . .

› make short sentences, you need to remove every unnecessary word.
›ur idea of *necessary* will change as your experience changes.
ıe fact that you've included a word in the sentence you're making
ys nothing about its necessity.
e which words the sentence can live without,
› matter how inconspicuous they are.
ery word is optional until it proves to be essential,
mething you can only determine by removing words one by one
ıd seeing what's lost or gained.
sten for the sentence that's revealed as you remove one word after another.
›u'll hear the improvement when you find it.
y, for instance, removing the word "the."
e when the sentence can do without it and when it can't.

ithout extraneous words or phrases or clauses, there will be room for implication.

ıe longer the sentence, the less it's able to imply,
ıd writing by implication should be one of your goals.
ıplication is almost nonexistent in the prose that surrounds you,
ıe prose of law, science, business, journalism, and most academic fields.
was nonexistent in the way you were taught to write.
ıat means you don't know how to use one of a writer's most important tools:
ıe ability to suggest more than the words seem to allow,
ıe ability to speak to the reader in silence.

---

hy are we talking about sentences?
hy not talk about the work as a whole, about shape, form, genre, the book, the feature story, the profile, even the paragraph?

ıe answer is simple.
›ur job as a writer is making sentences.
›st of your time will be spent making sentences in your head.
your head.
d no one ever tell you this?
ıat is the writer's life.
ever imagine you've left the level of the sentence behind.

›st of the sentences you make will need to be killed.
ıe rest will need to be fixed.
ıis will be true for a long time.
ıe hard part now is deciding which to kill and which to fix and how to fix them.
ıis will get much, much easier, but the decision making will never end.

writer's real work is the endless winnowing of sentences,
ıe relentless exploration of possibilities,
ıe effort, over and over again, to see in what you started out to say
ıe possibility of saying something you didn't know you could.

ıape, form, structure, genre, the whole—these have a way of clarifying themselves when sentences become clear.
ıce you can actually see your thoughts and perceptions,
s surprising how easy it is to arrange them or discover their arrangement.
ıis always comes as a revelation.

---

hat we're working on precedes genre.
r our purposes, genre is meaningless.
s a method of shelving books and awarding prizes.

ery form of writing turns the world into language.
ction and nonfiction resemble each other far more closely than they do any actual event.
ıeir techniques are essentially the same, apart from sheer invention.
ıis is not to disparage accuracy, sound research, and impartiality.
ıose are wonderful tools for novelists.

ı interested in the genre of the sentence,
ıe genre that's always overlooked.
any writers seem to believe we live in a universe of well-defined literary forms:
ıe memoir, the profile, the feature, the first novel, the book proposal,
list of predetermined, prescriptive linguistic shapes
eaped on a wagon and headed to market.

riters worry about these shapes and their dictates
ng before they're able to make sentences worth reading.
ıey aspire to be nature writers,
rgetting that nature, as a subject, is only as valid as your writing makes it.
ıey feel the formal burden of the memoir pressing upon them,
ıough there's no such thing.
ıey believe that writing prose is as formulaic as writing a screenplay,
ruled as a sonnet.
ıey believe the genre they've chosen
termines the way they should write,
mplete with a road map, if only they could find it.

. . .

ıt genres are merely outlines by another name.
tter to be discovering what's worth discovering,
ticing what you notice,
ıd putting it into sentences that, from the very beginning,
en the reader's trust and curiosity,
eating a willingness in the reader to see what you've discovered,
matter what genre you call it.
, better yet, make the reader forget about genre completely.

you make strong, supple sentences,
ıprovise, understand and exploit your mistakes,

ep yourself open to the possibilities each sentence creates,
ep yourself open to thought itself,
ıd read like a writer,
ou can write in any form.

---

ou already possess some important assets.
ou know how to talk.
ow to read.
ıd, presumably, how to listen.
ou've grown up in language.
ou have the evidence of your senses.
ıe upwelling of your emotions.
ıe persistent flow of thoughts through your mind.
ıe habit of talking to yourself or staging conversations in your head.
ıagination and memory.
ith luck, you were read aloud to as a child.
you know how sentences sound when read aloud
ıd how stories are shaped and a great deal about rhythm,
most as much as you did when you were ten years old.
ou may even have the capacity of knowing what interests you—
, better yet, knowing how to detect what interests you.

ou're also two people, writer and reader.
ıis is a tremendous asset.

ou can only become a better writer by becoming a better reader.
ou have far more experience as a reader than you do as a writer.
ou've read millions of words arranged by other writers.
ow many sentences have you made so far?

ıt you've been taught to read in a way that tells you almost nothing about how to write
what's really to be found in the books you read.

. . .

ou were taught that reading is extraction.

ou learned to gather something called meaning from what you read,
if the words themselves were merely smoke signals
owing away in the breeze, leaving a trace of cognition in the brain.
ou've been taught, too, that writing is the business of depositing *meaning* to be extracted later,
ıat a sentence is the transcription of a thought, the husk of an idea,
ıluable only for what it transmits or contains, not for what it is.
ou've been taught to overlook the character of the prose in front of you in order to get at its *meaning*.
ou overlook the shape of the sentence itself for the *meaning* it contains,
hich means that while you were reading,
l those millions of words passed by
ithout teaching you how to make sentences.

e take for granted, as a premise barely worth examining, that changing the words in a sentence—even the order of words—must have an effect on its meaning.

ıd yet we think and read and write as if the fit between language and meaning were approximate,

though many different sentences were capable of meaning the same thing.

. . .

ır conventional idea of meaning is something like,

/hat can be restated."

means a summary.

means "in other words."

ɔu know how to theorize and summarize,

ɔw to identify ideologies in the texts you read.

ɔu do very well on the reading comprehension portion of the test.

ıt no one said a word about following a trail of common sense

ırough the underbrush of the sentences themselves.

ɔ one showed you the affinities at work among those thickets of ink

explained that the whole life of the language

ɛs in the solidity of the sentence and cannot be extracted.

riting well and reading well mean paying attention to *all* the subtleties embodied in a sentence

its exact form and no other.

ɔw many subtleties?

hat kinds?

ıat depends on how perceptive you become.

ɔ two sentences are the same unless they're exactly the same, word for word.

(And, in a lifetime of writing, it's unlikely you'll ever write the same sentence twice.)

ıy variation in wording changes the nuances that emanate from the sentence.

scovering those nuances, and using them, are parts of the writer's job.

e'll discover a few shortly.

ıt first, what if *meaning* isn't the sole purpose of the sentence?

hat if it's only the chief attribute among many, a tool, among others, that helps the writer shape or revise the sentence?

hat if the virtue, the value, of the sentence is the sentence itself and not its extractable meaning?

hat if you wrote as though sentences can't be summarized?

hat if you value every one of a sentence's attributes and not merely its *meaning*?

rangely enough, this is how you read when you were a child.

ıildren read repetitively and with incredible exactitude.

ıey demand the very sentence—word for word—and no other.

ıe *meaning* of the sentence is never a substitute for the sentence itself,

ɔt to a six-year-old.

. . .

ıis is still an excellent way to read.

ıe purpose of a sentence is to say what it has to say but also to be itself,
ɔt merely a substrate for the extraction of *meaning*.

ıe words in a sentence have a degree of specificity or concreteness.
ıey have complex histories.
ıey derive from dense contexts—literature, culture, the worlds of work.
ıey've been shaped by centuries of writing,
:nturies of utterance by living human beings.
ıey resonate with the ghosts of all their earlier forms.

ıe sentence itself has a rhythm.
has velocity.
uses metaphor and simile
· hyperbole or metonymy or alliteration or internal rhyme or one of hundreds of other rhetorical devices.
helps define the dramatic gesture that you—the writer—are making in the piece.
stirs or gratifies the reader's expectations, on many levels.
identifies the reader.
gives the reader pause.
names the world, using the actual names the world already contains.
:rhaps it renames the world.
ıd this is only the beginning.
ɔu're the curator of all these qualities in the sentences you make,
hich lie there almost unnoticed
you're interested only in extracting or depositing *meaning*.

ɔur task isn't merely to write with these qualities in mind.
s to read with them in mind too,
ɔu're learning to write, gathering materials to write
om everything you read as well as everything you write
ıd from everything you notice in the world around you.
arning to write begins anywhere, at any time in life.

ıere's another trouble with *meaning*.
e've been taught to believe it comes near the end.
: if the job of all those sentences were to ferry us along to the place where meaning is enacted—to "the point,"
.st before the conclusion,
hich restates "the point."

ıis is especially true in the school model of writing.
:member the papers you wrote?
ying to save that one good idea till the very end?
ɔping to create the illusion that it followed logically from the previous paragraphs?
ɔu were stalling until you had ten pages.

uch of what's taught under the name of expository writing could be called "The Anxiety of Sequence."
: premise is this:

› get where you're going, you have to begin in just the right place
ıd take the proper path,
hich depends on knowing where you plan to conclude.

ıis is like not knowing where to begin a journey
ıtil you decide where you want it to end.
:gin in the wrong place, make the wrong turn,
ıd there's no getting where you want to go.

hy not begin where you already are?
there only the one way to get where you're going?

›u were taught in school that each sentence
:sts on all the others like a single card in a house of cards,
carefully constructed house of logic,
agile and easily dislodged.

ıat's one reason school papers often begin with several false starts.
ıe piece proceeds after the third introductory paragraph
ıd usually has two conclusions.

. . .

›u were taught so much about outlining and transitions and the appearance of logic.

:rhaps you face the difficulties you do
:cause you were taught so much about outlining
ıd transitions and the appearance of logic.

›u were given a model of writing in which the sentences,
extricably overlapping, seamlessly transitioning,
›int forward toward the conclusion that justifies their existence.

---

school you learned to write as if the reader
ere in constant danger of getting lost,
problem you were taught to solve not by writing clearly
ıt by shackling your sentences and paragraphs together.

ıink about transitions.
:member how it goes?
te in the paragraph you prepare for the transition to the next paragraph—
ıe great leap over the void, across that yawning indentation.
›u were taught the art of the flying trapeze,
ıt not how to write.

. . .

hy were you taught to dwell on transitions?
was assumed that you can't write clearly
ıd that even if you could write clearly,
ıe reader needs a handrail through your prose.

hat does that say about the reader?
ıat the reader is essentially passive and in need of constant herding.

e *you* that kind of reader?
› you tumble, uncomprehending, through the gaps between paragraphs?
› you trip over ellipses?
› you require constant supervision while walking down corridors of prose?
› you lose the writer's train of thought unless you're reminded of it constantly?

› sentence can afford to be merely transitional.
you've written clearly—
ıd you know what you've said and implied
surely as you know what you haven't said—
ıe reader will never get lost reading your prose
have trouble following you *without* transitions.
reader is likelier to get lost cutting his way through
ıe jungle of transitions than crossing the gap of a well-made ellipsis.

ıd what about topic sentences?
ıeir only purpose is to announce the subject of the paragraph you're about to read,
if you'd never figure it out otherwise.
journalism, the equivalent of the topic sentence is the notorious "nut graf,"
paragraph that tells you the content of the article you're about to read,
if you couldn't proceed without a précis.

ıe obsession with transition negates a basic truth about writing,
magical truth.
›u can get anywhere from anywhere,
ways and almost instantly.
ıe gap between sentences is sometimes a pause for breath
ıd sometimes an echoing void.
ıd if you can get anywhere from anywhere,
›u can start anywhere
ıd end anywhere.
ıere is no single necessary order.

ere's another basic truth.
ose isn't validated by a terminal *meaning*.
you love to read—as surely you must—you love being wherever you find yourself in the book you're reading,
ıppy to be in the presence of every sentence as it passes by,
›t biding your time until the *meaning* comes along.

. . .

riting isn't a conveyer belt bearing the reader to "the point" at the end of the piece, where the *meaning* will be revealed.
›od writing is significant everywhere,
elightful everywhere.

ıe transitions you use should exist for the love of transition,

› employ and honor our abiding affection
ır the *turn* that so often takes place in our reading,
ıe *turn* when the story changes or redirects itself.
ıey recall the moment, as children, when we came upon the phrase
ınd then one day."

›u know exactly how those four words feel.
›u know exactly what they do.
hen you get lost in your writing, remember them.
›n't use them: think about the possibilities they contain.
ıe ability to gather and redirect,
› rise above the level of the prose and look around,
: if you were standing in a crow's nest
›oking out over a sea of words,
:tecting a shift in the wind,
change in the current,
new impetus in your expectations,
ıd pointing it out to the reader.

. . .

:*at's* a transition.
›u knew how it worked and felt
hen you were barely old enough to read.

ıe transitions you were taught in school are merely
ıe nervous stitching together of sentences and paragraphs,
cross-hatching of self-reference.

ıe syntactic result of all that connecting and transitioning—
ınking sentences and paragraphs to each other—
the very stuff you cut away in order to write
:ort sentences
ıd make yourself intelligible again.

ıe extra space you feel between short sentences is mostly
ıe missing apparatus of transition and connection.

ıe anxiety about transition isn't caused only by
ıe prospect of a reader losing her way between paragraphs.

s also caused by the period at the end of a sentence,
: if the period marks a boundary of comprehension.
ıis is one of the ways long sentences happen.

. . .

›st overcrowded sentences can be broken apart easily.
ıey became overcrowded because the words and phrases and thoughts they contain
›mehow seemed to belong together

the shelter found to the left of the period,
ıe writer huddling words and phrases together into a single long sentence.

lated ideas coexisting side by side in two or three short sentences
esn't seem to be good enough:
ıey must live together in the same ramshackle sentence.

crowded sentence betrays the writer's worry that the reader won't follow the prose
parted by a period.
also betrays the writer's lassitude,
ıe lazy shuffling of words together into a single sentence
stead of deciding what really matters
ıd finding the verbal energy to construct separate sentences.

single crowded sentence means giving up all the possible relations
nong shorter sentences—the friction, the tension,
ıe static electricity that builds up between them.
single crowded sentence has only itself to relate to,
ıly an enervated communion among its parts.

---

hat else were you learning?
ou were learning to dodge the "I" in your prose—
ıd yet to sound coy when indulging in it,
though you were writing in front of a mirror.

writing nonfiction, were you ever asked to *be* the narrator,
speak directly to the reader,
decide what dramatic gesture you were making and act upon it?
ere you asked to write in order to be heard, to be listened to?
ked to write a piece that mattered to you?
as there ever a satisfactory answer to the question,
Why am I telling you this?"
sides "It's due on Monday"?

ou were taught the perfect insincerity of the writing exercise,
ked to write pieces in which you didn't and couldn't believe.
ou learned a strange ventriloquism,
ying things you were implicitly being asked to say,
ıowing that no one was really listening.
ou were being taught to write as part of a transaction that had
most nothing to do with real communication,
arning to treat the making of sentences as busywork,
groping for words, an act of drudgery,
way of dressing up your meaning or your argument with almost no attention to the character of the words or sentences you were using,
ıless you were trying to imitate
ıe stiff and impersonal manner of "formal" prose.

ɔu were also learning to distrust the reader and yourself.

› you remember feeling, when you were writing a paper for school,
ıat your vocabulary was steadily shrinking?
' the end, the same few words seemed to be buzzing
'ound and around in your head, like flies weary of feeding.
ıat's a symptom of boredom.
ɔu were bored from the start and for good reason.
ɔu were repeatedly asked to persuade or demonstrate or argue,
› reiterate or prove or recite or exemplify,
› go through the motions of writing.
ɔu were almost never asked to notice or observe, witness or testify.
ɔu were being taught to manage the evidence gathered from other authorities
stead of cultivating your own—
› simulate logic
ıt not to write so clearly that
hat you were saying seemed self-evident.

. . .

ɔu were also learning to divorce your experience as a reader
om your inexperience as a writer.
hen what you needed most was to trust your experience as a reader.

---

school, we're taught—or we absorb the idea—that writing
ɔws out of the creative writer like lava down the slope of a volcano.
ı uninterruptible stream.
ıd yet we study the work itself as if its molten fire had hardened into rock.

ıt the work isn't an eruption from the author's brain.
doesn't merely flow.
ıd it remains more dynamic, as written—on the page—than we let ourselves imagine.

e forget something fundamental as we read:
'ery sentence could have been otherwise but isn't.
e can't see all the decisions that led to the final shape of the sentence.
ıt we can see the residue of those decisions.

you look at the manuscripts of writers—
ıandwritten drafts preserved in museums and libraries—
ɔu can often see the changes they made scribbled between the lines.
hat you can't see are the changes they made in their heads before those sentences were ever inscribed.

you could look through the spaces between the sentences,
ırough the door into the writing room, into that writer's head,
ɔu'd see that every word was different once
ıd that the writer was contemplating
ı incalculable number of differences,
eling her way among the alternatives that presented themselves,

ıtil settling upon words that were finally written down,
ıen revised over and over again—
:fore they were printed, published, reprinted in anthologies,
ıd treated as though they'd been carved in stone.

was all change until the very last second.

'ery work of literature is the result of thousands and thousands of decisions.
tricate, minute decisions—this word or that, here or where, now or later, again and again.
s the living tissue of a writer's choices,
ɔt the fossil record of an ancient, inspired race.
terrogate those choices.
ıagine the reason behind each sentence.
hy is it shaped just this way and not some other way?
hy that choice of words?
hy that phrasing?
hy that rhythm?

ıe purpose of these questions isn't to construct a theory,
hypothesis about how or why the writer writes.
ıe purpose is to help you notice the shape of what lies before you.
ıe answers to these questions may be nothing more than
ɔticing the effect of asking them.

ıagine reading Jane Austen or James Baldwin and wondering,
hy is the sentence this way and not another way?
ıat sounds like a trivial or unanswerable question.
ıtil you imagine revising the sentence, giving it a different rhythm,
bstituting a different word, a different structure.
:vise a sentence by Austen or Baldwin?
hy not? It's an experiment.
y it, and you begin to glimpse the inherent necessity binding the writer's choices together.
ɔu begin to see the invisible tensions that arc from line to line,
ragraph to paragraph, page to page.
ıese aren't constructions of logic or meaning.
ıey're echoes and responses, moments of candor and their aftereffects,
ats of resilience and attention, sound and impulsion.

Vhy is this sentence this way?"
ıds its answer in
Vhy is that sentence that way?"
hich sounds circular, until you begin to understand how
ch variation shapes and affirms others,
eating the restraint of good prose,
balance of forces and internal tensions
ıat make the minutest effects discernible.

ıis isn't a description of the writer's genius or inspiration or intention.

describes the way every sentence influences every other sentence.
describes the writer's alertness to her sentences.
ıe way her sentences listen to one another.

ose is the residue, the consequence, of the writer's choices,
ıoices about the shape of each sentence
ıd how each sentence shapes the others.

ıat's how we need to read, as writers—
ying attention to the decisions embedded in each sentence,
cisions visible in the structure of the sentence itself.
hat you write—what you send out into the world to be read—
the residue of the choices and decisions *you* make.
ıoices and decisions *you* are responsible for.

ıd what are the choices?
ıat's like asking, what are the nuances?
depends on how perceptive you become.

ıe central fact of your education is this:
ou've been taught to believe that what you discover by thinking,
examining your own thoughts and perceptions,
unimportant and unauthorized.
a result, you fear thinking,
ıd you don't believe your thoughts are interesting,
cause you haven't learned to be interested in them.

ıere's another possibility:
ou may be interested in your thoughts,
ıt they don't have much to do with anything you've ever been asked to write.

ıe same is true of what you notice.
ou don't even notice what you notice,
cause nothing in your education has taught you that what you notice is important.
ıd if you do notice something that interests you,
doesn't have much to do with anything you've ever been asked to write.

ıt everything you notice is important.
t me say that a different way:
you notice something, it's because it's important.
ıt what you notice depends on what you allow yourself to notice,
ıd that depends on what you feel authorized, permitted to notice
a world where we're trained to disregard our perceptions.

ho's going to give you the authority to feel that what *you* notice is important?
will have to be you.
ıe authority you feel has a great deal to do with how you write, and what you write,
ith your ability to pay attention to the shape and meaning of your own thoughts

ıd the value of your own perceptions.

ing a writer is an act of perpetual self-authorization.
› matter who you are.
ıly you can authorize yourself.
›u do that by writing well, by constant discovery.
› one else can authorize you.
› one.
ıis doesn't happen overnight.
s as gradual as the improvement in your writing.

. . .

art by learning to recognize what interests you.
ost people have been taught that what they notice doesn't matter,
they never learn how to notice,
›t even what interests them.
they assume that the world has been completely pre-noticed,
ready sifted and sorted and categorized
everyone else, by people with real authority.
ıd so they write about pre-authorized subjects in pre-authorized language.

hy do I say this?
hen students are free to write anything they want,
hat they write first are pieces they hope look like something they saw published somewhere
›out subjects they believe are pre-authorized
cause someone has already written about them
pieces they hoped looked like something they saw published somewhere.
first piece of that kind is a tacit way of taking shelter under the authority of someone else's perceptions.
s also a way of saying, "I know you're not really interested in what I think or notice."
ıt that's the very thing the reader *is* interested in
your sentences allow him to be.

---

it possible to practice noticing?
hink so.
ıt I also think it requires a suspension of yearning
ıd a pause in the desire to be pouring something out of yourself.
›ticing is about letting yourself out into the world,
ıther than siphoning the world into you
order to transmute it into words.

acticing noticing will also help you learn more about patience
ıd the nature of your mind.
›ticing means thinking with all your senses.
s also an exercise in not writing.

what is noticing?
pinpoint of awareness,

ıe detail that stands out amid all the details.
s catching your sleeve on the thorn of the thing you notice
ıd paying attention as you free yourself.

requires no gear, no special tools, no apparatus.
ɔu practice noticing as part of your ordinary life.

hat do you notice? Whatever you notice.
:havior, thought, overheard words, light, resemblance,
notion, totality, particularity,
hatever you find in the habitat of your perceptions,
ıything, no matter how minute,
hether you're working or reading or taking the subway.
ıe pattern is particular to you,
ı element in what gets construed as "style."

hat you notice has no meaning.
: sure to assign it none.
doesn't represent or symbolize
· belong to some world theory or allegory of perception.
ɔn't put words to it.
ıd don't collect it. Let it slip away.
: patient for the next thing you notice.

ıere's always an urge among writers
ɔ turn fleeting observations and momentary glimpses
to metaphors and "material" as quickly as possible,
: if every perception ended in a trope,
: if the writer were a dynamo
ırning the world into words.
ıe goal is the opposite:
ɔ get your words, your phrases,
: close as you can to the solidity,
ıe materiality of the world you're noticing.

ıshing to notice never works,
ɔr does trying to notice.
tention requires a cunning passivity.

. . .

t yourself wonder why this thing, this instant, this suddenness, caught your attention.
hat you're noticing isn't only what struck you.
s also how your mind, your attention, gets from place to place,
om the steady current of your thoughts to their sudden interruption.

ɔtice what you notice and let it go.

ɔu can also make sentences the way you go about practicing noticing.
ıtching a phrase in your head,

ploring the possibilities it occasions,
ıen releasing it,
aking nothing more than a vanishing sentence,
hich you do not transfix in some collection of sentences
· etherize in a jar.

ɔu'll never run out of noticings,
ıd there are more than enough sentences to let a few go.

ıe urge to write is so strong.
piring writers want so badly to be pouring something out of themselves.
ɔu need a place where you can practice noticing and making sentences—
ɔservations of genuine clarity,
ntences of vigor, invention, and self-perception.
ıat place would be your mind.

hat you get in return for this gathering and releasing
habit, ease, trust, and a sense of abundance that sustains your writing.
ıd your mind never relinquishes what really matters.

---

you practice noticing, notice how thickly particled
ith names the world around you is.
ıis will gradually become part of your noticing,
oking not for words to make us see the way you saw—
ıt for the names of what you've noticed,
ımes that announce the whatness of the world
) a single species.

s hard to grasp at first the density, the specificity
ith which the world has been named.
ıis is a planet of overlapping lexicons,
eneration after generation, trade after trade,
pedition after expedition sent out to bring home
ıme upon name, terms of identity in endless degrees of intricacy,
ıd all at hand, if you look for them.

. . .

ɔn't neglect such a rich linguistic inheritance.
s your business to know the names of things,
) recover them if necessary and use them.
ıis isn't merely a matter of expanding your vocabulary.
s a matter of understanding that everything you see and know
ɔout your presence in this moment of perception
overlaid by a parallel habitat of language,
ımes that lie tacit until you summon them.

ıd yet you've been taught to make sentences
which inert verbs act abstractly upon faceless nouns,

› write on a theoretical basis, which deprives the world of its content,
ıd to use passive constructions, which absolve everyone of responsibility.

hat's a metaphor in the prose you were taught to write?
stage prop, a paraphrase, a clarification, at best,
:arly always cumbersome, bordering on cliché,
most always timid, rarely serious, usually self-conscious,
ıd too often stretched out over three or four sentences
order to create an extended metaphor,
hich is a cruel analogical death.

true metaphor is a swift and violent twisting of language,
renaming of the already named.
s meant to expire in a sudden flash of light
ıd to reveal—in that burst of illumination—
correspondence that must be literally accurate.
ıy give in the metaphor, any indeterminacy,
ıd it becomes a cloud of smoke, not a flash of light.
ke any rhetorical device, the less you use it, the more effective it is.

y making prose with a poetic seriousness about its tools—
ıythm, twists of language, the capacity to show the reader
hat lies beyond expression,
ıt with the gaits of prose and a plainness in reserve
ıat poetry rarely possesses, an exalted plainness.

ıe of the hardest things about learning to read well is learning to believe that every sentence has been consciously, purposely shaped by the writer.
ıis is only credible in the presence of excellent writing.

›u may notice, as you write, that sentences often volunteer a shape of their own
ıd supply their own words as if they anticipated your thinking.
ıose sentences are nearly always unacceptable,
ıll and unvarying, yielding only a small number of possible structures
ıd only the most predictable phrases, the inevitable clichés.

cliché is dead matter.
causes gangrene in the prose around it, and sooner or later it eats your brain.
›u can't fix a cliché by using it ironically.
›u can't make it less gangrenous by appearing to
uote" it or invert it or joke about it.
cliché isn't just a familiar, overused saying.
s the debris of someone else's thinking,
ıy group of words that seem to cluster together "naturally"
ıd enlist in your sentence.
ıe only thing to do with a cliché is send it to the sports page
· the speechwriters, where it will live forever.

olunteer sentences occur because you're not considering the actual sentence you're making.
ou're looking past it toward your meaning somewhere down the road,
toward the intent of the whole piece.
mehow that seems more important than the sentence you're actually making,
ough your meaning and the intent of the whole piece
pend entirely on the sentence you're making.
fact, you're distracted from the sentence by your intention
d by wondering how soon you'll be done.
ou're distracted from the only thing of any value to the reader.

olunteer sentences are the relics of your education
d the desire to emulate the grown-up, workaday prose that surrounds you,
hich is made overwhelmingly of sentences that are banal and structurally thoughtless.

volunteer sentence is almost always a perfunctory sentence.
at can change.
t only after years of questioning the shapes of sentences you read,
d every sentence you write.
n't let the word "years" alarm you.
ink of it as months and months and months and months.

ou may think a volunteer sentence is an inspired one
mply because it volunteers.

is is one reason to abandon the idea of inspiration.
l the idea of inspiration will do
stop you from revising a volunteer sentence.
ly revision will tell you whether a sentence that offers itself is worth keeping.

. . .

e writer's job isn't accepting sentences.
e job is making them, word by word.

olunteer sentences,
olunteer subjects,
olunteer structures.
oid them all.

---

ost aspiring writers write too soon.
ey think writing is a transitive act instead of an intransitive one.
erything they know about writing—all those images of writers writing—
stens them to the desk,
here they sit perched over the keyboard or pen in hand,
ught in an anticipatory gesture,
es intent on the possibilities of the screen,
ised at the brink of thought, but not actually thinking,
though by leaning forward a sentence will tip out of their heads
d onto the page.

ıt writing isn't performed upon a device or in a state of anticipation.

. . .

›nsider the bad habit of typing, preliminarily, two or three words—
natural start to the sentence, you think—
ıd then waiting for the rest of the sentence to reveal itself.
ıt after two or three words the sentence is already foredoomed,
structure predetermined.
vo or three words, and you've already reduced the remaining choices
› a small, depressing handful.
s shocking to realize how quickly you become wedded to those two or three words,
›w hard it is to abandon them for an alternative.

ımetimes, going over your work, you discover
ıat you can't remember how every sentence came to take its shape.
›u come across vestiges of unconsciousness in your prose,
nnesiac stretches where sentences seem to have written themselves.
ıis is not a good thing.

hen the work is really complete, the writer knows how each sentence got that way,
hat choices were made.
›u become not only a living concordance of your work, able to say where almost any word appears.
›u also carry within you the memory of all the decisions you made while shaping your prose,
ecisions invisible to the reader except in the residue of your prose.

sounds impossible to know so much about what you've written.
ıd yet it's inevitable.
ımething you don't even have to think about
you've been thinking about your sentences.

ıis brings us back to the difficulty of knowing what your sentences actually say.
ıe problem most writers face isn't writing.
s consciousness.
tention.
›ticing.
ıat includes noticing language.

ıe fundamental act of revision is literally becoming conscious of the sentence,
eing it for what it is, word for word, as a shape, and in relation to all the other sentences in the piece.

ıis is surprisingly hard to do at first
ecause our reading habits are impatient and extractive.
ıd because we've been blinded to the actuality of prose—
physical substance—
the pursuit of *meaning*.

ıe very nature of reading encourages us to believe we're looking *through* the prose to worlds on the other side of the ink.

ıe familiarity with which we know our own lives is sometimes disabling.
riting is a special instance of that.
responding to your own prose, you're responding in some sense to yourself,
ıd no matter how hard you look, you're almost invisible to yourself,
ımouflaged by familiarity.
ıe basic strategy for revision is becoming a stranger to what you've written.

y reading your work aloud.
ıe ear is much smarter than the eye,
only because it's also slower
ıd because the eye can't see rhythm or hear unwanted repetition.

ıt how should you read aloud?
ıere's self-awareness even in this,
tendency to overdramatize or become self-conscious,
read as though the words weren't yours,
echanically, without listening,
though you were somehow hiding from their sound
merely fulfilling a rote obligation.

y reading the words on the page as though they were meant to be spoken plainly
a listener who is both you and not you—
ı imaginary listener seated not too far away.
ıat way your attention isn't only on the words you're reading.
s on the transmission of those words.
you read aloud, catch the rhythm of the sentences without overemphasizing it.
ad so the listener can hear the shape of the syntax.
ou be the listener, not another person.
ou'll be stopping often.

ading aloud forces you to choose *how* you'll read aloud,
hat character you'll play, what version of yourself you'll present,
hat dramatic gesture you're making as you read.
ıe act of writing requires exactly the same thing,
ıough we pretend it doesn't—
ıother good reason to read your work aloud.

you don't know what I mean by rhythm,
ıagine a singer's phrasing of the lyric in a song.
prose, it's subtler, the beat and the music quieter.
y reading aloud some of everything you read, no matter what it is,
couple of paragraphs from the newspaper or a textbook or a novel or a poem.
pecially a poem.
ıis is how you begin to understand rhythm and its absence.

will also improve your ability to read aloud,
hich will help you discern the underlying textures of your prose.
ow well you read aloud reveals how well you understand the syntax of a sentence.

› you remember, in school, going around the room,
ch student in turn reading a paragraph out loud?
member how well some students read and others, how badly?
was a difference in comprehension,
›t of the sentence's *meaning*,
ıt of its texture, pace, structure, actuality.

›n't read straight through without stopping.
ad until your ear detects a problem.
›p there.
›w will you know there's a problem?
mething will sound funny.
›u'll feel a subtle disturbance, a nameless, barely discernible tremor inside you.
›u won't say, "Aha! That pronoun has the wrong antecedent!"
(Though soon you will.)
›u'll simply feel that something's wrong, without knowing what.
(This also happens when you're reading silently, but less emphatically.)

y attention now:
› matter how much you know or learn about syntax, grammar, and rhetoric,
ıis small internal quaver, this inner disturbance,
the most useful evidence you'll ever get.
meday, you'll be able to articulate what causes it.
ıt for now, what's important is to notice it.
›ticing is always the goal.
tually, the goal right now is noticing that you're noticing.
ıe day merely noticing will be enough.

›u already experience these faint stirrings in the presence of sentences,
ıt you didn't know they mattered.
ıis turns out to be true of many things you notice.

› one taught you to disregard these inner sensations.
› one taught you to be aware of them either.
› one even acknowledged that they exist.
›u thought they weren't significant—
ainly because they were occurring within *you*.
ıd what do *you* know (you're always tempted to ask)?
›u know a lot, especially in a preconscious kind of way.

›tice those stirrings now, and keep noticing.
ver stop.
ıey're a sign of your skill and experience as a reader,
ıd they're immensely useful to you as a writer always.

riting requires a high degree of inner alertness,
pecially when things are going wrong.

on you'll know exactly how to find the things that are going wrong
well as the things that are going right.
ıt until then—and even long after—you'll find it easier to detect a problem by the disturbance it causes inside you.

ıis means paying attention not only to your writing but to your emotions.
lon't mean large-scale emotions—sad, mournful, depressed, suicidal, elated.
nean a pale and nameless unease,
if a poorly constructed sentence could make you slightly homesick.
ıe faint vertigo caused by an ambiguity you can't quite detect.
ıe malaise given off by an awkwardness in the syntax.
ɔu won't be able to name the feeling a syntactical problem causes.
doesn't have a name.
hat matters is what it points to.
ıd out what's causing it and fix it
'en if you're not sure how.

---

ere's another way to make your prose look less familiar.
ırn every sentence into its own paragraph.
(Hit Return after every period. If writing by hand, begin each new sentence at the left margin.)
hat happens?
sudden, graphic display of the length of your sentences
ıd, better yet, their relative length—how it varies, or doesn't vary, from one to the next.
ıriation is the life of prose, in length and in structure.

ıving all your sentences in a column, one above the other, makes them easier to examine.
ddenly you see similarities in shape.
ɔu notice, for instance, how your sentences cling to each other
stead of accepting their separateness.
ıd you can begin to ask questions—simple ones—that will help you understand how to revise
ıd make better sentences.

ɔw many sentences begin with the subject?
ɔw many begin with an opening phrase *before* the subject?
with a word like "When" or "Since" or "While" or "Because"?
ɔw many begin with "There" or "It"?
hat kinds of nouns do you see?
ɔstractions? Generalizations?
ultisyllabic Latinate nouns ending in "-ion"?
are they the solid names of actual things?
the subject of the sentence an actor capable of performing the action of the verb?
ın you adjust the sentence so it is?
does the subject of the sentence hide the action of entities that are able to act—humans, for instance?
ɔw close is the subject to its verb?
'e they separated by an inserted phrase?
hat does that do to the velocity of the sentence?

ɔw many of the verbs are variants of “to be”—“is,” “are,” “were,” “was,” and so on?
'e the verbs active, energetic?
· do they merely connect or arrange or present or relate?
'e the constructions passive?
ɔw often does the word “as” appear, and in which of its many senses?
'e you using “with” as a preposition or as a false conjunction, a false relative pronoun?
'e there inadvertent repetitions—words repeated unintentionally?
every phrase in its proper place, every word?
everything next to what it should be next to?
ıything outright ungrammatical?
ords used improperly?
› verbs that require direct objects (transitive verbs) lack them?
there’s a modifying phrase at the start of the sentence, does it modify the subject of the sentence? (It must.)
ın the sentence be broken in two or three?

› these questions sound overly technical to you?
ıey’re basic.
ıt they raise another mistaken assumption about writing.

any people assume there’s an inherent conflict between creativity and a critical, analytic awareness of the medium you work in.

ıey assume that the creative artist works unconsciously And that knowing too much about matters like grammar and syntax diminishes or blunts creativity.

ıis is nonsense.
ɔu don’t need to be an expert in grammar and syntax to write well.
ıt you do need to know the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs.
:tween active and passive constructions.
ıe relation between a pronoun and its antecedent.
l the parts of speech.
ıe different verb tenses.
ıe nature of participles and their role as modifiers.
ıe subtleties of prepositions—the hardest part of speech even for native speakers of English.
ɔu need a toolbox of rhetorical devices, like irony, hyperbole,
ıd the various kinds of analogy.
ɔu need an ever-growing vocabulary—and with it the awareness that most words carry several meanings.
ɔu need to look up even familiar words every time you have a doubt
ıd especially when you don’t have a doubt.
ıat is, very often.
ıat is, every time you write.

ıe history of a word is part of its meaning,
metimes even the better part of its meaning.
ɔu’re responsible for the nuances of the words you use.
ɔw else can you use exactly the right shade of meaning?
ɔw else can the reader trust you?

ɔu can’t disclaim this responsibility.
ıose nuances are embedded in etymology.

. . .

good example: the word *autopsia*,
hich I came across while working on a book of my own.
hought—by inference from the context and by analogy with “autopsy”—
ıat *autopsia* meant a collection of stuffed or dissected animals,
ıe sort of collection a natural historian might accumulate.
ıt if I had thought more carefully and considered the word’s roots,
vould have realized that it means
collection of objects one has “seen for oneself.”
liscovered that when I looked up the familiar word “autopsy,”
hich means, etymologically, to see for oneself.
ɔu’ll need to look up nearly every word you use for longer than you think.
s the only way to be sure of meaning
ıd etymology
ıd pronunciation, which has a bearing on rhythm.

ıink of your vocabulary as your *autopsia*—
ords you’ve actually seen for yourself.

---

you don’t know the language of grammar and syntax, try this.
gin with the parts of speech.
ɔpy or print out a couple of pages by an author whose work you like.
(For example, the opening of John McPhee’s *Coming into the Country*.)
ıther some colored pens or pencils.
ıoose one color and circle all the nouns.
use to consider them.
ıen choose a different color and circle all the verbs.
use again.
tto the articles, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections.
ıything left over?
ıere shouldn’t be.
ıis will clarify the parts of speech, and it will help you see how the author uses them.
a word puzzles you, look it up.
good dictionary will tell you what part of speech it is.
ɔn’t just imagine doing this someday.
ɔ it. It’s interesting.

ɔw try a slightly harder version of this experiment on a separate copy.
rcle the direct objects.
ıe indirect objects.
ıe participles.
ıe relative pronouns.
ıe metaphors and similes and analogies.

ıy word that seems to be used in a way that distorts its meaning.
ıy particularly rhythmic phrases or sentences.
ıy spot where you sense a change in direction or time or voice.
ıy phrase that interests you.
ıy word that stops you.
ıything you *notice*, whether you think it matters or not.
matters because you noticed it.

› any of the words surprise you or call attention to themselves?
n not asking whether you know what they mean.
›u've already looked up every word you don't know.
ıven't you?

s easier to answer a comparative question
ıan a question that depends on an implicit standard of judgment.
s this sentence longer than that one?" is easier to answer than
s that word poetic?"
›u don't need much experience to tell whether one sentence is longer than another.
ıt you do to say whether a word is poetic in usage.
ıat experience is easy to come by.
s called "reading poetry."
ırn to the poets.
arn from them.

. . .

first, ask comparative questions.
ıey'll help you understand how writing works.
:amine the quantities that appear in prose—
ıe things that can be measured or counted:
ıythms, patterns of repetition, length of words and sentences,
ngth of paragraphs, the breadth of an ellipsis.
:amine the distance between sentences.
ıme lie close together, making small steps forward.
hers seem to stand well apart from each other,
lvancing the piece discontinuously.

ıese kinds of questions will help you understand
ıe character of what you're reading and how it was made.
e take for granted that what we love in our reading is
rception, wisdom, poetry, wit, irony.
t it's surprising how often what we love is really found in the material structure, the concrete details, the rhythm of the sentences.

k yourself questions about the words you find—especially less ordinary or less familiar words.
(But query the familiar ones too.)
here do they come from?
hat line of work are they in?
ho's likely to use them?

ɹd in what context?
ɹis will remind you that every word carries a social freight.

ɔw perform the same experiment with an author whose work has a different feel.
(Try Joan Didion's essay "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.)

ɹen try it again with a page from a very different context—
business article or a best seller or a critical essay in an academic journal.

hat do you find?
fferent patterns of usage, different lexicons,
hich create, in turn, different textures and rhythms in the sentences themselves.

y the same experiment on some pages of your own prose.
hat do you notice?

ake some comparative lists:
ɔw does the menagerie of Didion's nouns compare with the menagerie of McPhee's nouns or the nouns in a critical essay or a business article—or something you're writing?
k the same question about verbs and sentence structures.
k yourself too how present the writer feels to the reader.
ɔw strong is your sense of the speaker or narrator?
ɔw is that sense created, and where do you detect it?

ɹagine it this way:
ery piece is an ecosystem of words and structures and rhythms.
ɔw rich and diverse is the ecosystem in each of these pieces?
om which do you derive the most pleasure?
ɹd why?

patient with yourself and the things you discover.
ɹis isn't a test.
ery reader will notice different things.
ɔu won't know the significance of everything you notice.
ɔn't let that deter you.
ɔn't try to give a *meaning* to the things you notice.
st observe them.
gain, the effect of these discoveries may be nothing more than
ɔticing the effect of making these discoveries.
ɔu'll become much more adept at seeing how your own sentences are shaped and where they succeed and go awry.

ɹinking in terms of grammar and syntax is also a good way to make your sentences seem less familiar.
ddenly you're looking at their bones and muscles,
ɹe way they're joined and the kinetics of their movement.

ɹt notice.
ɹe point of learning the fundamental language of grammar and syntax

ı't correctness or obeying the rules.
s keeping the rules from obtruding themselves upon the reader
:cause you've ignored them.

ıe reader is just like you,
ll of subtle, distracting feelings when things are going wrong in a sentence.

'ery reader is always two readers.
ıe reads with a deep, intuitive feel for the way language works
ıd yet with overwhelming literalness.
ıis reader (no matter what he consciously knows about grammar or syntax) is troubled by mistakes, misspellings,
ıd especially the syntactical miscues that cause ambiguity.
ıis reader will always stumble over your errors.
a sentence offers an ambiguous path—two ways of being read—this reader will always take the wrong one.

. . .

ıe other reader—literate, curious, adaptable, intelligent, open-minded—
ill follow you anywhere you want to go
: long as your prose is clear.
(More on this excellent person soon.)
'ery reader is both of these readers in one.
rite for both together.

:re's another reason for learning the basics of grammar and syntax:
ntactic and grammatical accuracy is the precondition for being sure
ɔur sentences say what you think they say.

s no trouble to learn these things.
ıowing them doesn't detract from your creativity or spontaneity.
hat you're learning isn't a code of ethics or the rules of proper behavior in decent society.
isn't etiquette or table manners.
ɔu aren't being handcuffed or detained or taught to curtsy
· forced to wear a borrowed tie at a fancy restaurant
· compromising your standards.

ɔu're merely learning what is:
ıe names of the kinds of words, their relation to each other, and their functions.
ke a painter's knowledge of color and the laws of perspective,
jazz musician's knowledge of chord structures and his instrument.

ɔur job as a writer is making sentences.
ɔur other jobs include fixing sentences, killing sentences, and arranging sentences.
this is the case—making, fixing, killing, arranging—how can your writing possibly flow?
can't.

ɔw is something the reader experiences, not the writer.

writer may write painstakingly,

sembling the work slowly, like a mosaic,
tting and refitting sentences and paragraphs over the years.
ıd yet to the reader the writing may seem to flow.

ıe reader's experience of your prose has nothing to do with how hard or easy it was for you to make.
ou're not writing for a reader in the mirror whose psychological state reflects your own.
ou have only your own working world to consider.
ıe reader reads in another world entirely.

why not give up the idea of "flow" and accept the basic truth about writing?
s hard work, and it's been hard work for everyone all along.
ıere's a good reason to believe this, apart from the fact that it's true.
you think that writing—the act of composition—should flow, and it doesn't, what are you likely to feel?
ostructed, defeated, inadequate, blocked, perhaps even stupid.
ıe idea of writer's block, in its ordinary sense,
ists largely because of the notion that writing should flow.

ıt if you accept that writing is hard work,
ıd that's what it feels like while you're writing,
ıen everything is just as it should be.
ur labor isn't a sign of defeat.
s a sign of engagement.
ıe difference is all in your mind, but *what* a difference.

ıe difficulty of writing isn't a sign of failure.
s simply the nature of the work itself.

r the writer, the word "flow" is a trap.
is any word that suggests that writing is a spontaneous emission.
riting doesn't flow, unless you're plagiarizing or collecting clichés or enlisting volunteer sentences.

ou'll experience certain kinds of suddenness as you work:
ıe illusion that time is passing quickly,
ı episode of unusual mental clarity,
ı almost unnoticed transition from one mood to another.

ıe piece you're working on may take a jump forward,
ıd you notice the jump instead of the hours and days of thinking that enabled it.
erything may flow when you're setting thoughts down on paper.
ıt that's jotting, not writing.

low" means effusion, a spontaneous outpouring of sentences.
ıt what it really, secretly means is easy writing.

ıe more you know about making sentences, the easier it is to fix them,
get out of trouble, to find the really good sentences—
ıe better sentences—hiding beneath the skin of your thinking.
hat matters isn't how fluidly the sentences are emitted.
ıly how good they are.

s easy to believe in “flow” if you can’t feel the difference between a dead sentence and a living one Or see the ambiguities you’re accidentally creating.

other words, “flow” is often a synonym for ignorance and laziness.

s also a sign of haste, the urge to be done.

hy do I say all this?

cause so many writers worry that their writing isn’t flowing.

ıey worry that they can’t live up to expectations—to a cultural illusion—

ıd they get in trouble with themselves because of it.

ɔn’t underestimate how hard it is to discard a cliché like “flow,” even in your own assumptions.

ke so much else about writing well,

tting rid of useless, even harmful, ideas is hard work.

---

hat lurks behind “flow”?

ɔove all, the idea of naturalness.

latural” is a word that invites suspicion.

should always present itself in quotation marks,

sign that its meaning is slippery.

ımans can justify almost anything by calling it natural.

ıturalness is the pervasive myth—the one to root out of your head.

. . .

ıere’s nothing natural about writing except the tendency to assume that it’s natural,

ıanks to a false analogy with talking.

ıe connection between talking and writing is nearly as complex as the connection between reading and writing.

ɔu probably don’t remember learning to talk as a child.

ɔu probably do remember learning to shape letters and spell words.

ılking is natural.

riting is not.

ɔst children can say words before they’re two and speak in sentences before they’re three.

ıey can sing the alphabet song almost as soon as they can sing.

ıt they can’t write the alphabet until they can hold an instrument of writing.

may seem strange that the manual dexterity needed to hold a pencil—or use a keyboard—comes later than the lingual and mental dexterity needed to speak.

ıt it does.

writing, there’s always a separateness,

ıe sense of manipulating a tool for producing words at arm’s length,

ıt there at the ends of your fingers,

ılike speaking, which arises invisibly from within, like thought and breath.

writing, there’s a psychological separateness too,

ıe sense of watching yourself think and thinking about it as you do,

self-consciousness that interrupts the movement of your thoughts

you experience it while talking.

ımans have a language instinct
ıt not necessarily a writing instinct.
ıe difference between talking and writing
the difference between breathing and singing well.
takes years of work to write well,
ıd only part of that is learning to type.

[atural," like flow, is also an effect in the reader's mind.
doesn't describe the act of writing.
describes the effect of writing.

ıd like "flow," "natural" is one of the words behind writer's block.
let's suppose there's no such thing as writer's block.
ıere's loss of confidence
ıd forgetting to think
ıd failing to prepare
ıd not reading enough
ıd giving up on patience
ıd hastening to write
ıd fearing your audience
ıd never really trying to understand how sentences work.
ɔove all, there's never learning to trust yourself
your capacity to learn or think or perceive.

ople will continue to believe that writing is natural.
ıis harms only writers who believe it themselves.

ıd yet good prose often sounds spoken,
if the writer—or the reader reading aloud—were *saying* the sentences.
(This isn't the same as sounding colloquial.)
ıt the arc of education—and the arc of emulation—are usually
vay from spokenness and toward the unspeakable,
ɔward longer, more convoluted sentences
ing more elaborate syntax and more jargon-like diction.

ıere's nothing natural about making sentences that sound spoken,
ɔ matter how natural they sound.
hat are their characteristics?
ıey're fairly short.
ıey're rhythmic, often with the rhythms of actual speech.
ıe diction is simple—very few multisyllabic words.
is the construction—almost no suspended phrases or dependent clauses.
ıis simplicity makes the rhythm more perceptible.
ıere's also an acute awareness of the listener's attention and understanding,
sense of contextual alertness, and a vivid sense of the unspoken.
ıese are all qualities worth building into your prose.

ıey must be created, discovered, revealed, constructed.
ıey don't appear "naturally."

s always worth asking yourself if you can imagine *saying* a sentence
ıd adjusting it until you can.
st as it's always useful to ask yourself, "What *exactly* am I trying to say?"
ıe answer to that question is often the sentence you need to write down.

hen your prose begins to stiffen and your thoughts get stuffy,
s sometimes worth reworking the piece you're writing as if it were
letter or a long e-mail to a friend,
meone who knows you well but hasn't seen you in a while.
hat happens?
ıe prose relaxes, the sentences grow more informal.
ou remember to use contractions,
en the words grow shorter.
ddenly things are clearer and simpler and more direct, as if they were being spoken.

ıt something else happens too.
ıere's suddenly a wider variety of tone, an emotional latitude,
sense that the reader will be able to fill in the gaps,
en the possibility of humor.

hy the difference?
isn't the change in genre.
s the change in the reader.
ou're writing to someone who knows you, who understands your allusions,
our patterns of speech, who's quick and empathetic
reading your thoughts and feelings, whether they're spoken or unspoken.
hat makes this reader valuable is a sense of connection and kinship,
ı intuitive grasp of what you say and don't say.

ou can make any piece feel like an informal letter
using the generic characteristics of an informal letter.
ıt it's far easier to get that feel
writing to the reader you imagine reading it.
ıe reader you construct in your imagination
ıanges the way you write almost without your noticing it.

---

hind "flow" there's something else,
en something ecstatic—
ıe priority of thoughts over sentences.
ıoughts leaping ahead, words barely keeping up,
hectic chase.
the other way around,
ntences spinning out of each other, one after the next,
ırase eliciting phrase, words—if not sentences—rushing ahead of thought.

feels like inspiration.

e've all had these moments.
ıey're enticing.
ıe mistake is overvaluing them.

ɔu have an effusion one day.
spawns a piece.
the piece evolves, you try to protect those original, effusive sentences.
ıly to realize, at last, that what you're writing won't come together until they've been removed or revised.

hat were you trying to protect?
ıe memory of the excitement you felt when those words "came to you."
(Where did they "come" from?)
ɔu were protecting the memory of the excitement of really concentrating,
paying close attention to your thoughts and, perhaps, your sentences,
ıe excitement of feeling the galvanic link between language and thought.

ıat excitement matters, and the memory of it is worth preserving,
en if those sentences aren't.

ɔncentration, attention, excitement, will be part of your working state.
ıily.
ɔw, inspiration—the spontaneous emission of sentences—will not.
ıat distinction is worth keeping in mind.

rite consciously, deliberately.
arn how to get out of trouble.
arn how to free yourself when you're stuck.
arn how to know what you're doing when you're making sentences.

ıe workings of your unconscious mind,
ıe current of your subterranean thoughts and intuitions,
ıe flickerings of insight and instinct—
ıese will always surface, if you write clearly enough to let them.
ıt they're only some of the tools of your daily work,
hich is making sentences.

ıe most damaging and obstructive cluster of ideas you face as a writer are nearly all related to the idea of "flow."
ke "genius."
ıd "sincerity."
ıd "inspiration."

strust these words.
ıey stand for cherished myths, but myths nonetheless.

ıspiration" is what gets you to the keyboard,
ıd that's where it leaves you.
spiration is about the swift transitions of thought,

dden realizations,
most all of them carefully prepared for by continuous thinking.
spiration has nothing to do with the sustained effort of making prose.

ou'll have many serendipitous moments while writing.
ou'll learn to expect them.
t "inspiration," as it's commonly used, is just another word for "flow."

---

ink of all the requirements writers imagine for themselves:

cabin in the woods
plain wooden table
solute silence
favorite pen
favorite ink
favorite blank book
favorite typewriter
favorite laptop
favorite writing program
large advance
yellow pad
wastebasket
shotgun
e early light of morning
e moon at night
rainy afternoon
thunderstorm with high winds
e first snow of winter
cup of coffee in just the right cup
beer
mug of green tea
bourbon
litude

oner or later the need for any one of these will prevent you from writing.
ything you think you need in order to write—
be "inspired" to write or "get in the mood" to write—
comes a prohibition when it's lacking.
arn to write anywhere, at any time, in any conditions,
ith anything, starting from nowhere.
l you really need is your head, the one indispensable requirement.

---

you consciously shape your writing,
ow its ins and outs, understand its subtleties—
en you know exactly what you're doing
d are therefore manipulating the reader.

hich, of course, you are.

e hate the thought of being manipulated,
ıd yet reading means surrendering to the manipulations of the author's prose.
ıis is an experience we love, love so much, in fact,
ıat we hope to be able to manipulate readers ourselves someday.
:aders usually choose not to think of it that way.
ıey prefer not to think of it at all.
ıt you should.

ıe of the few sad parts about writing is that it's almost impossible to surrender to the manipulation of your own prose.

(It's just as well.)

hat prevents it is the memory of all the choices you've made
›vering around every sentence you've written.

writing, it's impossible to express sincerity sincerely.
ıat is, just by being sincere.
›u really mean what you mean to say.
›u feel an intense sincerity burning inside you.
ıd yet your sentences feel choked or formulaic.
riting can't convey sincerity—or any other emotion or mood in the writer—simply because you feel it.

e believe so strongly in sincerity and naturalness of expression in writing that we're almost unable to see how false this belief is.

you want the reader to feel your sincerity, your sentences have to enact sincerity—verbally, syntactically, even rhythmically.
ıey have to reveal the signs of sincerity—a modesty and directness—
st as you do when you're talking sincerely.

you speak sincerely with someone
ıt in a voice and manner that suggest you're being ironic,
ho would believe you're sincere?

. . .

ıcerity is a dramatic role for you and your sentences.
ıat makes it sound insincere.
ıt the apparently insincere manipulation of language is the tool that persuades us of your sincerity.

ıere is no simple, sincere, "natural" space or role for you to occupy in your writing.
riting is always a gesture requiring your dramatic presence, no matter how subtle—
presence made up of rhetorical choices:
ıoices about who you are in relation to your subject and your reader,
ıoices about your presence in the piece, about diction, structure, and the rigor or casualness with which your sentences are constructed or linked.

ıe emotional power the reader feels
:pends on how clearly you know what your words are doing.
ıat clarity isn't natural.

s artificial, the result of hard work.

ou be the narrator.
t *us* be the readers.
ou'll discover that being the narrator is not the same as being yourself.
s a role, and a dramatic one.
osorb it and inhabit it.

. . .

ou're always building a habitation in your prose,
place from which you speak to the reader.
ou're never merely, sincerely yourself.
ıe question then becomes, who are you?
ıat's a question every piece needs to answer.

ovelists, short-story writers, and poets understand the gesture in their writing.
ıey know they occupy a dramatic role and a rhetorical space.
ıey're rarely afraid to *be* the narrator or actor, to perform the act of telling a story,
en if they're telling it under the guise of their own name.

ıe sense of who you are, what role you choose to play,
hat gesture you make toward the reader—
ıese things are far more important than ideas of
tyle" or "voice."

ked to write short sentences, writers often say,
ut what about my style? What will that do to my voice?"
if they're sure they have one.
tyle" and "voice" are passive constructs,
arkers of individuality, bow ties of self.
ıey have more to do with what the writer makes of himself
ıan how the reader experiences his prose.

ıe idea of "voice" at least implies a notion of dramatic presence,
sense of the writer's gesture.

ıt what's a writer's "style"?

yle is an expression of the interest you take in the making of every sentence.
emerges, almost without intent, from your engagement with each sentence.
s the discoveries you make in the making of the prose itself.

e assume that style is self-expression.
can be, but only in this sense:
s the fusion of your command of language and your commitment to your own intent,
en as your intent shifts under the weight and opportunity
the discoveries you make as you work,
scoveries that are linguistic, conceptual, structural, imaginative.

ıis doesn’t sound like a useful or conventional definition of style Or much like self-expression.
ıt it does clarify an important thought:
tyle” shouldn’t linger in your awareness.
ɔu don’t need to think about style.
s as likely to appear in the character of your thinking,
ıe shape of your ideas, your sense of humor or irony,
it is in any “stylistic” markers in the prose itself.
ıt this will only be true if your prose is clear enough to reveal the character of your thinking, the shape of your ideas, and your sense of humor or irony.

here ambiguity rules, there is no “style”—or anything else worth having.

ırsue clarity instead.
the pursuit of clarity, style reveals itself.
ɔur clarity will differ from anyone else’s without your intending to make it differ.
ears later, looking back over your collected works,
ɔu can contemplate your style at leisure.
ıt for now you have more important things to think about.
ke revision.

---

l writing is revision.
ıat’s not what you learned in school.
school you learned to write a draft and then revise.

. . .

ıt imagine this:
ɔu begin to compose a sentence in your head.
ɔu don’t write it down.
ɔu let the sentence play through your mind again.
(It’s only six words long.)
ɔu replace one or two of the words.
ɔu adjust the rhythm by changing the verb.
ɔu discard the metaphor.
ɔu decide you like the sentence.
ɔu write it down.
this composition?
· revision?

s both.
ɔmposing a sentence always involves revision
ıless you write down the words of a sentence exactly as they pop into your head.
ıd why would you do that?

ɔu look at the sentence you’ve written down.
ɔu choose a simpler noun and a stronger verb.
this revision merely because the sentence was already written down?
· is it composition too?

makes no difference.

it's taught in school, revision means little more than
rrection after the fact
r possibly proofreading, a completely forgotten but invaluable skill).
is becomes clear when students ask if they can revise a piece.
ey mean can they fix what already exists,
just a sentence here or there,
ve a couple of paragraphs.

ey never mean
et me reimagine the piece completely,
ginning with my approach to the subject
d keeping only the handful of sentences that actually worked."

riters at every level of skill experience the tyranny of what exists.
can be overwhelming—the inertia of the paragraphs and pages you've already composed, the sentences you've already written,
matter how rough they are.

hether you love what you've written or not,
ose sentences have the virtue of already existing,
hich makes them better than sentences that don't exist.
so it seems.

d yet because they're rough and provisional,
ey form an overlapping grid with unsuspected gaps,
network that seems to defy revision.
king one sentence almost always means fixing another and then another
though revision were an infinitely recursive act.
ere's almost never enough time for revision, if revision comes after the fact
d if it's really revision.

---

let's change things.
y this instead:
vise at the point of composition.
mpose at the point of revision.
cept no provisional sentences.
ake no drafts
d no draft sentences.
ing the sentence you're working on as close to its final state as you can
fore you write it down and after.
the same for the next sentence
d right on through to the end.
ink of composition and revision as the same thing,
fferent versions of thinking,
ilosophically indistinguishable.

ıe usual premise is that composition brings something new to the page
ıd revision fixes it.
ıis is a useless distinction, and it creates a false sense of priority—
belief that the writer's real work is making newness out of nothing,
if creativity only takes place where the ink stops and the blank page begins,
here the cursor sits blinking.
if newness couldn't originate between sentences or within a sentence.
if revision were essentially secondary and uncreative.

evision (or composition) just as often means
riting from the middle—from the many middles—and not the end.
ıe end—where the page goes blank—has no priority.
ɔu're not reading, picking up where you left off.
ɔu're writing.
ɔu left off everywhere at once.
ɔu may have left off in the middle of a paragraph many pages ago,
ıd everything since has been a detour.
ɔu may find the path you're looking for only by taking a detour.
you begin rereading a piece you're working on,
ɔn't hurry to resume work at the end.
eat every sentence you read as if it were still under revision.

ɔmposing and revising at the same time won't be easy at first.
ɔu'll make sentences that seem finished and then find flaws in them.
ıding flaws is how you learn to make better sentences.
ɟoy it.
ɔu can't prevent yourself from repeating a mistake you haven't noticed.
ɔu'll have to read your work many, many times to find all the problems embedded in it.
en experienced writers have to do this.
ıme flaws do a wonderful job of hiding.

, you'll be revising each sentence as you compose it.
ɔmposing each sentence as you revise it.
ıd you'll read and reread every sentence you make many dozens of times,
fting out problems as they materialize in front of you.
ɔu'll be looking for flaws.
ıt also for opportunities—and for missed opportunities:
ıings you might have said, ideas you might have developed,
ɔnnections you might have made.

evision isn't only the act of composition.
evision is thinking applied to language,
ı opening and reopening of discovery,
search for the sentence that says the thing you had no idea you could say
dden inside the sentence you're making.

. . .

evision is the writer's reading,
ıe habit of noticing choices,
oticing that every sentence might be otherwise but isn't.

---

nguage writhes with urgency to be saying something.
our job is to understand and control that urgency.

first, what you mean to say will emerge
setting aside the things you don't mean to say
well as trying to say the thing itself.

arning to do this will take some time.
ou'll feel as though you've bogged down,
though you'll never find your way to the end.
ıt you'll also find yourself making discoveries you never could have predicted,
nding thoughts you never knew existed because they didn't exist
ıtil you were exploring sentences for their implicit possibilities.

ith practice, this will become a more efficient and more creative way to write,
way of discovering what you didn't know you could say,
hich also means learning something important about yourself.

s also a vastly more interesting way to write.
ith practice, it will become more efficient in every sense,
ster, more accurate, and far more direct than the way you were taught to write.
ou'll learn to trust it implicitly
ıd yourself as well.

here do sentences come from?
ow do they reveal themselves in your thinking?
e like to think we move from thought to expression,
ith no more fuss than a handshake.

metimes you know just what you want to say,
ıd you find the words to say exactly that.
ıt just as often what you want to say emerges as the sentence takes shape.
ıe thought isn't primary or absolute.
ıe thought is only a hint.
nguage offers guidance and resistance both.
ıe sentence *becomes* the thought by bringing it fully into being.
e assume that thought shapes the sentence.
ıt thought and sentence are always a collaboration,
ıe sum of what can be said and what you're trying to say.

. . .

writing you love, the sentences are endlessly various.
ow do you find that variety in your own prose?
ıe way is by looking for sameness, uniformity, and working against it.

ou wouldn't repeat the same words over and over again,
why repeat so many sentence structures?
tter to look for that variety as you're thinking and writing,
ving as much attention to the shape of the sentence
you do to what you're trying to say.

metimes a rhythm insinuates itself.
ou find yourself listening for echoes, opportunities.
metimes you find yourself watching the traces of words,
rases, memories, flitting through your mind.
ch of these can engender a sentence, offer a shape.
responsive to the variations that present themselves as you think.

on, you'll grasp that sentences originate and take their endless variety
om within you, from your reading,
ur tactile memory for rhythms,
ur sense of the playfulness at the heart of the language,
ur perception of the world.

. . .

u'll learn to let a single word, a simple rhythm,
thing you've noticed,
nerate a sentence you didn't expect.
is requires a change in your mental habits.
d a reconsideration of how you work.

---

the outline and draft model of writing, thinking is largely done up front.
tlining means organizing the sequence of your meanings, not your sentences.
derogates the making of sentences.
ignores the suddenness of thought,
e surprises to be found in the making of sentences.
knows nothing of the thoughtfulness you'll discover as you work.

prevents discovery within the act of writing.
says, planning is one thing, writing another,
d discovery has nothing to do with it.
overemphasizes logic and chronology
cause they offer apparently "natural" structures.
preserves the cohesiveness of your research
d leaves you with a heap of provisional sentences,
hich are supposed to sketch the thoughts you've already outlined.

. . .

fails to realize that writing comes from writing.

u're more likely to find the right path—
e interesting path through your subject and thoughts—
a sentence-by-sentence search than in an outline.

ıe standard model wastes the contemplative space of writing.
ın you think all the good thoughts in advance?

ıtlining has at least as much to do with rescuing the writer from himself
: it does with planning the shape of the piece.
s meant to free you from thinking as you write.
provides a catwalk across the open spaces in your mind
› keep you from falling into rumination as you write.
›u'll never know what you think until you escape your outline.

ıe purpose of an outline is also to conserve your material, to distribute it evenly so that *meaning* discloses itself near the end.

ere's a better approach.
uander your material.
›n't ration it, saving the best for last.
›u don't know what the best is.
· the last.
:e it up.
ıere's plenty more where that came from.
›u won't make new discoveries until you need them.

hat writers fear most is running out of material.
ıe sound of a writer's fears is the sound of nothing—
› typing, no clicking, no scratching of pens.
ıt you can only run out of material
you haven't been thinking or noticing.

---

y this:
› outline.
:search, reading, noticing, interviewing, traveling, paying attention, note taking—all the work you do to understand the subject, whatever it is, whatever kind of piece you're writing.
:read your notes, and take notes on them.
ıd again.
ıke notes on your thoughts.
›st of all, take notes on what *interests* you.
: certain you've marked out what *interests* you.
›n't make an outline from your notes.
›n't turn your notes into a road map for the sentences to come.

:read your notes.
› matter how long or short they are.

. . .

ıen think.
ıd think again.
arn to be patient in the presence of your thoughts.
arn to be equally patient in the presence of a new sentence or a phrase you like.

t yourself pause and work on that sentence.
your head.
ɔn't write it down.
patient.
y attention to everything you're thinking.
ɔtice your thoughts,
e if you can feel your awareness illuminating them.

you're paying attention, you'll notice that some of your thoughts interest you and some don't.
ɔw can you tell?
ɔu'll stop and rethink the thought,
use in its presence.

t the thoughts that interest you distract you.
k yourself about them.
hy do they interest you?
hat were you thinking about before they appeared?
ıen come back to the main sequence,
ıless you've discovered a better main sequence
following a thought you're interested in.

ɔn't try to distinguish between thinking and making sentences.
etend they're the same thing.
ɔn't rush your thinking.
ɔn't rush to make sentences.
e what happens when you try to put words to a thought that interests you.
e what words the thought itself is presenting and try making a sentence out of them,
sentence like the ones we've been talking about, with rhythm and clarity and balance.
ɔt a volunteer sentence.
e if the thought you're interested in becomes sharper and clearer by making a sentence from it.
may become more obscure.
hat does that tell you?
ɔn't panic, keep working at it.

you make a sentence while thinking,
doesn't mean you have to make more sentences immediately.
ɔu can go back to thinking and see what the business of making a sentence stirred up in you.
may have dislodged other thoughts, other connections.

ɔ one will teach you how to wait while you think or what to wait for while you're thinking.
ɔu'll have to teach yourself.
ɔove all, you'll have to teach yourself to be patient.

. . .

ying this once or twice won't do.
s a skill, not an instinct.
ɔu may have to try it in small increments,
ıd you may have to cling to a partial outline for a while.

ıat’s okay,
long as you’re prepared to abandon it.
s a map of the places you may end up not going.

actice,
ıd you’ll learn to trust the agility and capacity of your thinking.
ɔu’ll learn that you don’t have to set aside inviolate chunks of time to think.
ɔu’ll find yourself working—thinking, making sentences—in the brief intervals of your ordinary life,
increments no longer than a few seconds.
ɔw long does a thought take?
· a sentence?

ɔur thinking will help you discover what interests you in the subject you’ve chosen
ɔ matter how indirectly or elliptically or obliquely connected it is.
ıy thread, any perception, any link, any phrase, any intuition.
ɔu may discover an orderly way to go about this,
· you may move through your thoughts in ways you can’t predict.
makes no difference.
ɛsist the temptation to start organizing and structuring your thoughts too soon,
ɔxing them in, forcing them into genre-sized containers.
ɔstpone the search for order, for the single line through the piece.
t your thoughts overlap and collide and see what they dislodge.

ɔw do you begin to write?
ɔok for a sentence that interests you.
sentence that might begin the piece.
ɔn’t look too hard.
st try out some sentences.
ts of them.
e how they sound.
ɔ any of them sound first?
scard them readily, easily, with no sense of loss,
ıen try out some more.
ıis is important.
ɛt used to discarding sentences.

ɔu’re holding an audition.
any sentences will try out.
ıe gets the part.
ɔu’ll recognize it less from the character of the sentence itself than from the promise it contains—promise for the sentences to come.

ıis will get easier with practice.
ɔn’t be alarmed if it takes a day or two of trying out sentences
ɛfore you find the promising one.
may only be promising enough to lead you to the real first sentence.

: casual about this.
ok for a sentence that interests you,
sentence whose possibilities you like because of the potential you see in its wake.
lon't mean a "fantastic first sentence" or one that sounds "introductory."

lon't mean a sentence that sounds first because it sounds like other first sentences you've read.
lon't mean the kind of first sentence teachers sometimes talk about—the one that *grabs* the reader.
ıe reader doesn't need grabbing.
:e needs to feel your interest in the sentence you've chosen to make.
othing more.

hat makes the first sentence interesting?
: exact shape and what it says
ıd the possibility it creates for another sentence.

. . .

beginning needs no éclat, no cleverness, no tricks,
› coyly hidden awareness of where the piece will take us.
ıe opening sentence is only creating an opening for the next sentence.

ıt there's also nothing incidental about that first sentence.
ou—your role as a writer, the role you construct, your presence to the reader—you and your first sentence begin together.

ou want to *begin* the piece, not *introduce* it, which is the difference between a first sentence already moving at speed and a first sentence that wants to generalize while clearing its throat.

ıe beginning is one sentence long.
leads to the next sentence and is largely indistinguishable from other sentences leading to the next sentence.
: many writers stumble by making the first sentence try to do too much
ıd end up making every sentence try to do the same.

ıt of all the possibilities created by the first sentence,
ake a second sentence, full of more possibilities, even disconnected ones.
e if you can write the sentence that *arises* from the first sentence,
ot the sentence that *follows* from it,
'en if that means the second sentence lies at some distance from the first.
ıe second sentence you write may turn out
ot to be the second sentence after all.
may be the ninth.
ıe sentence isn't burdened by the question, where will it go?

ıe piece is now two sentences long.
ot two sentences plus the missing pages that haunt you.
ıe next step is to make the piece three sentences long.

on't worry about trajectory or sequence.
on't look further ahead than two or three sentences.
ıd don't *plan* those sentences.
rite them in your head instead.

ɛsist the temptation to rush ahead to see where they're pointing.
hat matters isn't where they're pointing
ıt what interests you in the sentence you're making,
hich you may have to discover as you make it.
ɔn't steer the sentences where you want them to go.
e if you can follow them there.
ıey may be going in many different directions at first.

. . .

ɔn't get trapped by the thought of writing sequentially.
you uncover a sentence that seems to belong to an earlier passage,
ɔ back to that passage and work there.

ɔu have no idea what you're going to say
ıtil you discover what you want to say
 you make the sentences that say it.
ery sentence is optional until it proves otherwise.
riting is the work of discovery.

agine sentences instead of writing them.
ep them imaginary until you're happy with them.
ı imaginary sentence somehow feels less *bound* than one you've written down.
aking sentences soon ceases to be a separate act
ıd becomes part of the process of thinking.
en't you already thinking in sentences?

ɔu'll discover that the act of making sentences in your head—
ɔmposing and revising at the same time,
aking them sharper and more accurate—
nds to uncover thoughts you didn't know you had,
lowing you to say things you didn't know you knew how to say
 sentences stronger than you knew you could make.

. . .

ɔon you find yourself *expecting* to say things you didn't know you knew how to say.
ɔu'll get into the habit of surprising yourself.
ıe reader will feel the freshness of the discovery in the prose
cause the writer almost always reveals the excitement of making a discovery
 the rhythm and the vividness of the sentences themselves.

ıt you distrust your memory.
ɔu're afraid you'll forget the sentences you're imagining.
hy would you?
ıey're important.

rite them down, just in case.
ıd then go back to thinking—imagining sentences and their possibilities,
eling your way into each new opportunity.

ıt imagine the sentence in its entirety—and the next one too—before writing anything down.
: back from the keyboard or notepad.
: back, and continue to think.
ıat's where the work gets done.

. . .

ɔu may glimpse where the piece might go.
ɔu may even see your way through to the end.
you do, you'll feel a fresh anxiety about forgetting,
: if the forest were closing in on the path you see before you can reach
ıe warm, welcoming cottage where writing is over.
ıt thought isn't as fleeting as you think, nor does it come completely unbidden.
the thought was worth having, you'll rediscover it or find a better one.
ıe fear of forgetting and the rush to be done are closely related.

ɔu'll learn to trust your memory as you work,
ıough it isn't even a matter of trusting your memory.
ɔu'll realize that thinking and remembering are almost indistinguishable.
ɔu're not only imagining sentences you want to write down.
ɔu're also reexploring your subject, sifting your research
ıd all the elements that make up your subject
'en as you're imagining sentences.
ɔn the distinction between thinking about your subject and
ıinking about sentences vanishes.

ɔu'll have stopped making sentences in quarantine,
the special ward set aside for sentence making once the outline is finished,
ıe way you were taught in school.
stead, writing becomes intrinsic to the act of thinking,
ɔmpletely intertwined with it.

ɔu're also learning to trust the ability to work in your head
ıd learning how your mind works,
hich is something you may not have noticed before.

---

e're always hastening to be done writing,
ıt we're also hastening to get out of the presence of our thoughts.
'erything about thinking makes us nervous.
e don't believe there's much of value to be found there.
e don't know when we'll come to the end of our thoughts,
ıt we think it may be soon.

hy?

ɔur mind is silent yet filled with voices and uncertainty.
ıe uncertainty you feel is one of the places sentences will come from,
ıd experience will make your uncertainty more certain.
ɔp fearing what you'll find as you think.

ve yourself over to this experiment.
ur intentions will diverge from themselves.
ur starting point may lead to places you didn't imagine,
aces that ask you to reconsider your starting point.
u may feel yourself clinging to your original intention.
hy?
cause it came first?
hy not follow the crosscurrents of your thinking
d see where they lead?
lon't mean follow them blindly.
low your thinking to adjust your intentions in the light of your discoveries.
is may mean relinquishing your original intention
you find a better one as you write.

e piece you're writing is simply the one that happens to get written.
you'd begun another way, made a different turn, even started in a different mood,
different piece would have come into being.
e writer's world is full of parallel universes.
u discover, word by word, the one you discover.
n minutes later—another hour of thought—and you would have found your way into a different universe.
e piece is permeable to the world around it.
s responsive to time itself, to the very hour of its creation.

is is an immensely freeing thing to understand.

liberates you from the anxiety of sequence,
e fear that there's only one way through your subject,
ly one useful approach.

arn to accept the discontinuity between yourself and what you write,
e discontinuity between your will, your intention, your plan
d the discoveries you make as you work.

andon the idea of predetermination,
e shaping force of your intention,
til you've given it up for good.
ing your intentions, by all means, but accept that the language we use
a language of accidentals, always skewing away from the course we set.
is is something not to mourn but to revel in—
t only for the friction and sideslip inherent in the language
t for freeing us from the narrowness of our preconceptions.

. . .

agine this:
e piece you're writing is about what you find in the piece you're writing.
thing else.
matter how factual, how nonfictional, how purposeful a piece it is.
oner or later, you'll become more interested in what you're able to say on the page and less interested in

your intentions.
ou'll rely less on the priority of your intentions and more on the immediacy of writing.
may sound as if I'm describing a formless sort of writing.
ot at all.
rm is discovery too.
s perfectly possible to write this way even when constricted by
narrow subject, a small space, and a tight deadline.

---

ow do you decide what works?
hat do you do when your sentences seem to waver in quality and value before your eyes?
ou read what you've written, and it looks good.
ou read it again, and it looks bad.
ou read it a third time, and now you can't tell.
our emerging skill as a reader will help.
ou'll read your sentences against the backdrop of all the rest of your reading.
ou'll get better at examining your own choices—the ones you've already made
nd the ones you see waiting to be made as you reread what you've written.
fore long you'll notice possibilities you would have been blind to once upon a time.
ou'll see that some of your sentences are still conjectural.
ou'll stop seeing only the narrow procession of the sentences you've made
nd start noticing the thoughts and implications surrounding them.
ou'll become strangely aware of what you've chosen not to say
nd how that affects the sound of your sentences.

riters too often respond to whole chunks of what they've written,
hether it's a paragraph or the entire piece.
ou read it and think, "This is terrible," and throw the whole thing away with a sinking heart.
ou read it and think, "This is terrific," with a smile and set it aside, done.
th responses end your engagement with what you've written.

ere's a better way.
art by fixing the sentences that need fixing.
(There will surely be some. If you can't find any, look harder, or begin rereading this book.)
plore the possibilities that open up.
ntinue making small, incremental changes
the sentence level wherever you see problems,
ith no priority given to the beginning or end of the piece.
sten for rhythm.

ep reading and rereading what you've written.
ything that strikes you—anything that causes a subtle, inward sensation of discomfort, an inner alarm, no matter how faint—stop there and figure out what's going on.
may have to do not with the sentence itself
t with its relation to some other sentence.
ere's no rush.

s surprising where these incremental changes lead,

ɔw they solidify what seems to be unstable,
ɔw they open up directions you hadn't glimpsed before.
ɔu may find that the most important section of the piece—a section you haven't written yet—emerges from the gap created when you break a long sentence in two.

s true that the simplest revision is deletion.
ıt there's often a fine sentence lurking within a bad sentence,
better sentence hiding under a good sentence.
ork word by word until you discover it.
ɔn't try to fix an existing sentence with minimal effort,
ithout reimagining it.
ɔu can almost never fix a sentence—
find the better sentence within it—
using only the words it already contains.
they were the right words already, the sentence probably wouldn't need fixing.
ıd yet writers sit staring at a flawed sentence as if it were a Rubik's Cube,
ying to shift the same words round and round until they find the solution.
ke note of this point: it will save you a lot of frustration.
ıis applies to paragraphs too.
ɔu may not be able to fix the paragraph using only the sentences it already contains.

ɔw soon will you be getting good?
hy not ask how soon you'll be getting clear?
ok for improvement wherever you find it,
ıd build on every improvement.
ıt don't look for too much improvement all at once.
nding a flaw is an improvement.
is discarding an unnecessary word or using a stronger verb.
riting even one clear, balanced, rhythmic sentence is an accomplishment.
prepares the way for more good sentences.
teaches you how you respond, inwardly, to a successful sentence of your own making.

you write a good sentence, how will you know it's good?
ɔu may *know* it's good, feel certain about it.
ıt you're likelier to sense an inward difference,
subtle feeling telling you this sentence isn't the same as the others.
en beginning writers notice this.
arning that feeling is important.
s a guide and an incentive to making more good sentences.

ıis doesn't happen in a void.
happens against the backdrop of your constant reading,
ɔur unending exposure to superb sentences.

ıd then one day
ɔu'll write a sentence that says more than its words alone can say.
ɔu'll know that it says what you mean without having said it,

ıd you'll know that the reader knows it too.
ıis will sound impossible until you've done it once.
ıen you'll see how possible it is, and how inviting.
lets the reader complete the thought.
sets an echo in motion.
ıis is writing by implication.

ɔn't let the success of a sentence or a paragraph or a piece deter you.
ıme writers freeze, fearing the next one won't be as good.
ıme writers polish a single paragraph until it glows,
aring that the next paragraph will ruin it somehow.
:cept it: you'll surely fail again and just as surely succeed.
ıere's nothing linear or steady in your growth as a writer.
ıd the moment you find yourself getting good at one thing,
s time to push on into unsafe terrain.

ɔ do this work requires a balance between your commitment to the sentences you're making
ıd the knowledge that each of them could be otherwise.
ıme should be otherwise; some shouldn't.
ake that simple distinction again and again
ıd you'll get good at making that simple distinction,
hich is the foundation of writing.
ɔu'll learn to live somewhere between certainty and flux.
ɔu'll learn to remember that your sentences don't acquire their final inertia
ıtil *you* release them.

ıere's nothing permanent in the state of being written down.
ɔur sentences, written down, are in the condition of waiting to be examined.

ɔu commit yourself to each sentence as you make it,
ıd to each sentence as you fix it,
:taining the capacity to change everything and
ways remembering to work from the small-scale—
ıe scale of the sentence—upward.

:joicing and despair aren't very good tools for revising.
ıriosity, patience, and the ability to improvise are.
 is the ability to remain open to the work and let it remain open to you.

ɔn't confuse order with linearity.
ɔu'll find more than enough order in the thoughts and sentences that interest you.
' order I mean merely connections—
ıme close, some oblique, some elliptical—
·der of any kind you choose to create, any way you choose to move.

. . .

ɔn't give in to the memory of your school writing,

ıe claustrophobic feeling that there's only one right order of arguing, proving, demonstrating,
ıe assumption that logic persuades the reader
stead of the clarity of what you're saying.

ıere's little actual logic in good writing.
ıere's a current of thoughts and ideas and observations.
ıme may be linked by evidence.
ıe point may substantiate or corroborate another.
ıt what passes for logic or argument is usually little more than a succession of ideas
ınnected mostly by proximity and analogy.

riting doesn't prove anything,
ıd it only rarely persuades.
does something much better.
attests.
witnesses.
shares your interest in what you've noticed.
reports on the nature of your attention.
suggests the possibilities of the world around you.
ıe evidence of the world as it presents itself to you.

oof is for mathematicians.
gic is for philosophers.
e have testimony.

. . .

ıe logic of writing, as you learned it in school,
ırns out to mean little more than an obsession with transition
ıd the scattering of rhetorical tics—overused, nearly meaningless words and phrases.

fact.
deed.
ı the one hand.
ı the other hand.
ıerefore.
ɔreover.
ɔwever.
one respect.
course.
hereas.
ıus.

ıese are logical indicators. Emphasizers. Intensifiers.
ıey insist upon logic whether it exists or not.
ıey often come first in the sentence,
ying to steer the reader's understanding from the front,
if the reader were incapable of following a logical shift in the middle of the sentence,
if the sentence had been written in the order the writer thought of the words,

ithout any reconsideration.
ıese words take the reader's head between their hands and force her to look where they want her to.
ıagine how obnoxious that is,
ıat persistent effort to predetermine and overgovern the reader's response.

ıese phrases also obscure the content of your sentences.
a piece is truly assured in its order, no matter how connected or oblique,
needs no logical indicators.
will be obvious when one sentence negates or affirms another.
ıese words betray the writer's anxiety,
ıe false belief that proof is necessary and possible,
ıat persuasion is just a "thus" away.
ıey also try to bolster the apparent authority of your piece
echoing the apparent authority of other people
ho can't write and who distrust their own thinking.

simple experiment:
y removing "but" wherever you can,
ıd see if the sense of negation or contradiction—
ıe feel of a reversal taking place—isn't still present.
ut" is always preferable to "however,"
cept in the rare cases where "however" is preferable to "but,"
hich has everything to do with rhythm, formality, and context.
ıd yes, you may begin a sentence with "but."

ıother example of linearity: chronology.
ıronology will always offer itself as the "natural" means of telling a story or recounting an event.
ıt there's nothing "natural" about moving chronologically in writing.
s a rhetorical choice among many choices, and usually a dull one at that.
feels like a privileged choice only by analogy with the sequence of our own lives.
ıronology in our lives is "natural" in a limited sense.
e live on time's arrow,
ıd our days and nights follow the clock.
ıt there's no such thing as thought's arrow
mood's arrow
memory's arrow.

ɔnsider your interior life—what you feel and think and the ways you remember.
ɔw much of it is chronological in order?
ief segments may be imbued with the orderliness of time.
ıt in their relation to each other the elements of our internal lives are more likely to be associative, even dissociative,
ıked in ways that have nothing to do with the clock or the day by day of life itself.
riting is often an appeal not to the order of our chronological lives But to the order of our internal lives,
hich is nonchronological and, in fact, unorderly.

sist chronology.

will always try to impose itself.
eak the flow of time once it begins.
tter yet, resist it from the start.
there's a pleasure in seeing time revealed as we read,
ere's an equal pleasure in seeing it suspended, violated,
d broken as only writing can do.
e the simple past tense—
oiding the layering of several pasts—
d give the reader clear temporal clues when needed.

takes a skillful writer to make the ordinary motion of time engaging.
rrative is harder to write than almost anything else.
vels contain far less chronological narrative than you think.
ke a page from almost any novelist.
ok carefully at each sentence.
w many propel the story forward in time?
d how many are devoted to enriching our sense of place and character?

r lives are full of endings.
e sun goes down every day.
e ask for the check.
entually it comes.
w broad a hint does it take to make a reader who lives on a planet full of endings
el the end of your piece approaching?
u've already written the ending you need.
u didn't see it, because you were looking for something more dramatic.
e reader saw the end coming from miles away.

hen I say resist chronology, I also mean resist the chronology of observation.
hy report on events in the order you observed them?
hy stick to the sequence in which things happened
less there's a good reason for it?
lso mean the chronology of the evidence you gather,
e way it tends to clump together in your notes and pieces,
mps of this and lumps of that as if every word
lhered stickily to a cohort of equally sticky words:
e transcript of the interview, the quotation from an article,
e sequence of your impressions as you arrive on the scene.

ur job isn't to arrange chunks of evidence,
unks of the world in the order you gather them.
ur job is to *atomize* everything you touch,
dissect your evidence into its details and particulars and Resist the inherent jargon of your subject,
eaking apart every clod of words you come across.
ur job is to undo the adhesiveness of the evidence you've gathered,
tendency to clump into indissoluble units.
ssolve them.

y attention only to what interests you in it.
eak the complexity of what you've learned into the very small pieces of a mosaic
aped not by the clumping of evidence but by your conscious decisions as a writer.
e the one detail you need as you need it.
ware of the way it sticks to other details.
hy reproduce the whole scene when only one moment matters?
e only the quotation you need where you think it belongs,
ıd only the very bit that matters.
e only the words *you* choose.

riting is a way of ordering perception, but it's just as often a reordering of perception in a form peculiar to the writer's discovery.
lling takes the order *you* want it to, which may have nothing to do with the order that seems "natural," the order that volunteers itself.

ıe order of what you're writing is determined by your interest in the material And the sense you make of it and by your presence to the reader.
ou're not just filling space now.

---

ere's an experiment:
opy or print out a couple of pages from a nonfiction work you admire, something not purely memoir.
(For example, the opening of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.)
ıderline each fact or assertion, every detail of landscape or character or time or causation.
member that everything you're reading—
ıe very scene in your mind that emerges from the page—
a construct of assembled facts.
ıen ask yourself, how does the author know these things?

e if you can imagine, or guess, the source of his evidence for each detail,
ch quotation, the particles of every description.
ake a list of those sources.
lon't mean merely the books and articles the author may have read.
nean people interviewed, repeated visits to the site
ı days when the weather differed in different seasons.
nean police logs and newspapers, hearsay and rumor,
unty records and tax rolls, photo albums and gravestones,
ıything the author might have touched upon to make these pages.

adds up to quite a collection,
om which the author has taken, bit by bit, only the elements he wants.
ıe evidence has been atomized.
ch minute detail has been removed from the immediate neighborhood of
original context—where it was first found or noticed or transcribed—
ıd given a new neighborhood in the web of the prose itself,
here newly autonomous facts surround it,
ch of them relocated too.

ıis new neighborhood is governed by many forces, including rhythm.
›ove all, it's governed by the writer's needs.
›t by chronology or logic or spatial sequence
· any other organization that seems, at first glance, to be "natural."
ıere will be moments of chronology,
›ments of analysis and reflection,
›ments of visual movement,
ke a tracking shot in the movies.
ıere will be moments of stationary depth,
ke a landscape drawing by Rembrandt.
ıt the order of the piece is not determined by any single one of them.
can have many orders, all flowing into one,
hich is the reader's experience.

›u were taught in school to repose on the authority of the evidence you gathered,
ıe resplendent figures you quoted.
›u remember those papers, filled with great lumps of quotation.
›ur sentences piloted around them like a ship among icebergs.

ıt what if you were to muster your own authority?
lon't mean making up facts and quotations.
nean, what if the reader trusted your prose,
stened with interest to what you're saying
ır the sake of what you're saying,
stead of noting the complacency, the deference, even the ceremony
ith which you bow to the authorities you cite?

hat if the reader believed, somehow, in you?
stened for your voice, not the voices of others?
atched for your perceptions?
hat if the reader felt your authority
ıd thought about quoting *you*?

. . .

our world—the writing world—
ıthority always rests in the hands of the reader,
ho can simply close the book and choose another.
ıe most fashionable novels and the greatest poems
ınnot force you to read themselves.
ıthority always belongs to the reader.

reader who's opened a book to its first page is in a tender predicament,
hether she's standing in the aisle of a bookstore or sitting at home.
l the authority belongs to her—the authority to close the book.
ıd yet she's willing—yearning—to surrender her authority to the author
ıd keep reading.

eaders exercise their authority almost unconsciously
their search for the authority that belongs to the author.

a reader, you know the feeling of looking up after eighty pages and wondering how you got there,
ıe sense of immersion, of entering a shared but private space.

l the authority a writer ever possesses is the authority the reader grants him.
t the reader grants it in response to her sense of the writer's authority.

ıthority arises only from clarity of language and clarity of perception.
ıthority is how the reader's trust is engaged.
uthority" is another word for the implicit bond between writer and reader,
ıe desire to keep reading.
ıe desire to follow the writer wherever she goes.
ıe question isn't, can the reader follow you?
ıat's a matter of grammar and syntax.
ıe question is, will the reader follow you?

---

ou've been told again and again that you have to seduce the reader,
ll the story in the very first paragraph.
(Nonsense, but it explains a lot of bad writing.)
ıe reader isn't looking for the tease of a single paragraph,
numbingly clever prose, or sentences full of self-exhibition.
ıe reader is in love with continuity, with extent, with duration,
ove all with presence—the feeling that each sentence isn't merely a static construct but *inhabited* by the writer.
amine yourself while reading and see if that isn't true.

ıythm is a vital source of the writer's authority.
the sentences were shaped any other way, the rhythm would be completely different.
ıythm comes to the reader as a precursor of many things.
anticipates the intelligibility of the sentence.
grounds the tongue and the mind.
creates balance and propulsion.
s deeply assuring and worth getting right.

---

ost of all:
ıthority arises from the way you write,
t from the subject you write about.
subject is so good that it can redeem indifferent writing.
ıt good writing can make almost any subject interesting.
ıat's the point of my epigraph from Joyce Carol Oates:
he subject is *there* only by the grace of the author's language."
ur grace, your authority, doesn't borrow the subject's validity:
creates it.
ıe subject can never justify your prose or redeem its failures.

hen it comes to writing, the intensity of the writer's feelings and
ıe power of the subject mean almost nothing.
e only glimpse that power and intensity
the power and intensity of the prose.

t somehow we believe that subject is everything.
e believe the writer *is* her story
ıd that her authority somehow depends on what's happened in her life,
ıat her authority is authenticity.
ople clamor to tell their stories in words.
ıis doesn't make them writers,
ɔr does it make their stories matter.

you are your story, where do you get another?

you understand how to build silence and patience and clarity into your prose,
ɔw to construct sentences that are limber and rhythmic and precise
ıd filled with perception,
ɔu can write about anything, even yourself.

ɔu may feel uncomfortable with the word "authority."
rhaps it sounds dominant, overbearing, "authoritarian." You may need to work on the problem of self-deprecation,
lf-distrust,
pecially when it comes to noticing the world around you
ıd what you're able to say about it.
ɔu may be used to denying your perceptions and dismissing your awareness.
ɔu may be caught in a constant state of demurral
have the habit of belittling yourself.

atch for the chronic language of self-disparagement,
ıe moments when you say, "My problem is …"
"It doesn't matter what I think."
you say these kinds of things, you probably say them out of habit, almost unconsciously.
ıis is a product of your education too, at home and at school.
y attention to it.
cognize how harmful it is.
message—subliminal and overt—is that your perceptions are worthless.

everything you can to subvert this habit.

. . .

ıe most subversive thing you can do is to write clearly and directly,
serting the facts as you understand them,
ɔur perceptions as you've gathered them.

ɔu'll ground your own authority in the language itself
your sentences become better and better.

ɔu may need to write for yourself for a while,
ıd listen only to the language.
ıat's okay.
ıe first person who needs to be persuaded of your authority
you.
ɔn't make it impossible to persuade yourself.

ırt of the trouble may be this:
ɔu're afraid your ideas aren't good enough,
ɔur sentences not clever or original enough.

ıt what if your ideas are coherent and thoughtful?
hat if your perceptions are accurate and true?
ɔur sentences clear and direct?
hat if allowing us to see what's accurate and true is among the best work writing can do?
ying the obvious thing briefly and clearly and
ɔserving the critical detail are hard enough.

s surprising how often ideas that seem obvious to you
'e in no way apparent to the reader.
ıd vice versa.
hat seems like common sense to you may come as a revelation to the reader.
ıe only sure test of your ideas is whether they interest you
ıd arouse your own expectations—
ıe capacity for surprise that you discover as you work.

ıe purpose of writing—its central purpose—is to offer your testimony
ɔout the character of existence at this moment.
will be part of your job to say how things are,
ı attest to life as it is.
ıis will feel strange at first.
ɔu'll wonder whether you're allowed to say things that sound
ɔt merely observant but true,
ıd not only true in carefully framed, limited circumstances,
ıt true for all of us and, perhaps, for all time.
ho asked you to say how things are?
here do you get the authority to do any of this?
ıe answer is yours to find.

ıme people think that discipline is imposed from without,
:gular hours, strict containment, rigorous exclusion.
ıme people think discipline is revealed from within,
ılightenment, purity, solidity of intent.

scipline is nothing more than interest and expectation, a looking forward.
s never hard to work when you're interested in what you're working on.

ıt what if you hate what you're working on?
helps to examine the content of your loathing.
hat is it you hate?
ıe movement of your ideas?
ıe nature of your prose?
ıe obligations and prohibitions you still secretly honor?
ıe rules and fears you cling to?

›es it feel as though every word you set down is part of an inescapable trap?
though you're following a logic or order that's not your own?
ıilding a maze with nothing but dead ends?
riting in a language you would never say?

s surprising how often the trouble with a piece of writing
ıs nothing to do with the writing itself.
ıe trouble is anything that keeps you from looking with undiverted attention at what you're thinking and trying to say,
how you're trying to say it and what the sentence is revealing.
ıything that keeps you from watching the foreground of your mind.

ue discipline is remembering and recovering—inventing if necessary—what interests *you*.
it doesn't interest *you*, how could it possibly interest anyone else?

ıe problem may not be the sentences at all.
may be the expectations that seem to emerge as you write,
ıe different audiences you're trying to please,
ıe criticisms you imagine,
ıe conventions you're obeying without actually choosing them,
ıe constraints of genre,
›t to mention an endless army of volunteer sentences.

'e you writing on a truly blank screen or piece of paper?
are you writing on a palimpsest of rules and regulations,
ıings you think you must do, methods you must conform to?

. . .

ake yourself aware of the forces getting in the way of your writing.

›u may be creating syntactical and logical patterns that cast themselves forward
to future sentences and end up constricting you.
rallelisms and contrasts, for instance.
ıey seem to offer structure and guidance, but they're tying your hands.
›tice how instinctively you grasp any pattern, any parallel,
ıy connection that promises to help you define how
ıe next few sentences, the next few paragraphs, will lay themselves out.
s as though you can't help wanting the piece to move faster or seem easier to write.
:sist that instinct.

ou'll recognize the feeling when that happens, the sense of being trapped,
erced into writing a sentence of a predetermined shape.

ne of the most powerful feelings a writer experiences while working
a sense of obligation, of *having* to make a sentence or a paragraph
is way or that way, being obliged to write *that* sentence or *that* paragraph.
s a terrible feeling and always a sign of trouble.
uestion that obligation. See if you can think your way around it.

oiding what you feel you *must* write is as much a part of writing
discovering what you didn't know you could write.
ery sentence is entitled to structural freedom.

t part of the writer's economy is sometimes finding
ne simplest, most direct route, making a simpler, plainer sentence,
cepting that in the variety of sentences you make,
me will do their work most effectively if they do it in a straightforward manner.
ain sentences are as purposeful and efficient as the sentences that seem to resonate.

ne way to recover your interest, your discipline, often begins on a small scale,
fixing sentences, working on syntax,
oking for problems in the sentences themselves.
you work—sentence by sentence, thought by thought,
aking this phrase better, that verb stronger—your mood will lift too.
ne work will rescue you instead of you rescuing it.

---

ow it's time to talk about the *other* reader.
rhaps you've been wondering about her all along.
ot the reader with a genius for taking you literally,
ho always makes the wrong turn in ambiguous sentences
nd stumbles over syntactical blunders,
ut the other one who lives beside her in the very same brain:
terate, curious, adaptable, intelligent, and open-minded.

t's begin by presupposing she exists,
hich is more than your education presupposes.

early everything you've been taught about writing
sumes that the reader is plodding at best,
ways distracted and needing a surfeit of superficial cleverness
keep his head pointed toward the text.
ou'll find that assumption all around you.

e remove the unfamiliar words for him
he'll never have the chance to learn them.
e over-reason for him, filling our prose with approximations of logic,
he'll feel he's had a good think.

ıe ordinary reader—the ordinary audience—is a barren conceit.
guarantees a shared mediocrity.
ɔn't preconceive the reader's limitations.
ıey'll become your own.

ɔ write well, it isn't enough for you to read differently.
ıagine the reader reading differently too,
ive to the movement of language
ıd the qualities of writing that depend
ı an unspoken understanding between writer and reader:
it, irony, inference, and implication.

ıagine a reader you can trust.

ıis sounds like a simple imperative.
ıt the difference between writing for the reader implicit in your education
ıd writing for one you trust is the difference between writing clumsily,
ːing all the grappling hooks of transition and false logic,
ıd writing well, able to move briskly and freely,
ɔing anywhere from anywhere almost instantly.

l your life you've been reading books that trusted you,
usted your intelligence, your keenness,
ɔur ability to feel an invisible wink,
ɔ follow any trail,
ˈen while you were learning in school not to trust the reader.

. . .

ıe books that trusted you most may be the ones you love best.

ıd what happens if you trust the reader?

l the devices of distrust fall away,
ıe pretense of logic, the obsession with transition,
ıe creeping, incremental movement of sentences,
ntences stepping on each other's heels.

ith them go all the devices
eant to overawe the reader, that aping of authority
hich even young writers learn so soon and so well—
prose about hierarchy and its demarcations
ıther than the authority of clarity and directness.

hy would you try to overawe a reader you can trust?
ıe reader you can trust is a reader predisposed to trust you.
that reciprocity lies the joy of writing and reading.
ɔu can't trust the reader without also trusting yourself.

ıe trustworthy reader is alert to the way your sentences
eate promises and contracts.

ıese implicit promises are a descant running through your sentences.

. . .

you write ambiguous sentences, you create a state of uncontrolled implication,
ıd among those implications are commitments to the reader that can't be fulfilled
:cause the writer isn't aware of them.
ıt the reader feels them being made and broken, again and again.

›ur sentences come one by one onto the stage
ıd leave it one by one, without assisting each other.
ıt they listen intently to one another,
ith special attention to the promises they've made.

the syntax and rhythm of the sentences,
the pace of thought, the intensity of movement,
ıe crescendo and decrescendo,
ıe trustworthy reader learns the writer's habitude and how to move with it.
›u converse, in a sense, with the voice on the other side of the ink.

ıat kind of reading is the pleasure of being summoned out of ourselves by the grace,
ıe ferocity, the skill of the writing before us.
›w else to explain our love of even difficult writers?
ıeir agility evokes our agility.
e move at their speed, elliptically, obliquely,
›wever they move.

ıagine a cellist playing one of Bach's solo suites.
›es he consider his audience?
(Did Bach, for that matter?)
›es he play the suite differently to audiences
different incomes and educations and social backgrounds?
›. The work selects its audience.

›u'll be tempted to ask, "Who is the reader?"
ıe better question is always, "Who am I to the reader?"
ıd also, "How many versions of 'I' are present in this piece?"
ho said there had to be only one?

›oner or later, you'll also wonder,
What can I expect the reader to know?"
s a perplexing question for writers,
way of asking, "How much of my world overlaps with the reader's?"

dden behind that philosophical question is a more practical one:
low much do I have to explain?"

helps to remember that your prose is going to be read Against two different backdrops:
hat the reader knows about reading and what the reader knows about life.
s surprising how many writers forget the life part.

usting the reader is a way of controlling
ıe temptation to over-narrate, over-describe, over-interpret, over-signify.
lets the reader share the burden of comprehension.
ıis is part of the constant negotiation between writers and readers.
good reader will follow a good writer wherever she goes,
ıd the good writer will do all she can to help.

ıat's why learning to read your own work as a *reader*,
ɔt as its writer, is so helpful.
arn to trust yourself as the reader.
ɔu'll never know another more thoroughly.

stead of writing for an imaginary audience of readers, however large or small,
y writing for the reader in yourself,
stand-in for the reader you trust,
ho's always at hand and always consistent.
ke being the narrator, this is a kind of role-playing—
ıpersonating the literal-minded reader and the trusting reader at the same time.

. . .

means trying to come to your work
ithout the immense foreknowledge of having written it.
ıd it means imagining the reader's experience
he gathers what he knows about your piece
ıly from what each sentence reveals, one after the other.

ıis would be impossible if you hadn't spent so much time
a reader yourself making your way through other writers' works,
ienting yourself in unfamiliar worlds, sentence by sentence,
arning characters and deciphering plots, word by word,
ɔsorbing arguments, and tracing the meditative currents of essays,
ıdaunted by the newness of the next thing you read.

---

ing your own reader doesn't mean you're writing only for yourself.
isn't solipsism or egocentricity.
s one of the writer's important economies,
faith in the kinship between you and the reader who isn't you,
ıe assurance that what interests you will interest the reader If your sentences warrant it.
ıis you will have to take on trust—that you and the reader
e more alike than you like to think.
herwise how would any of this be possible?

sides being your own reader, you're also your own editor.
ɔur only editor.
ɔur writing is your responsibility, first and last, in every detail.
ɔ one will fix it or clean it up.
s your job to be clear, precise, intelligent, resourceful, poetic, and wise

prose of staggering clarity, all of it perfectly proofread.
ıat's why you became a writer, isn't it?

ɔu're not responsible for your readers' ignorance,
ıd they're not responsible for your erudition.
ıow what you want to know, learn what you want to learn,
:e what you want to use,
ithout worrying whether you're wandering out of the reader's depth.

the same time show a tender care
ɾ the reader's attention, his knowledge of place and time,
s sense of his whereabouts in the pages before him.
use now and then to make sure he's with you.
ing him up to the crow's nest to get a feel for the current and where you're headed.
ıis sounds contradictory, I know.
ıt then, so much of writing is.

---

hen will you be done?
ıis isn't about getting to the end of the writing day and out of your head at last.
s about knowing when a piece is finished.

ıis question is a variant of "How will I know when to stop revising?"
question that rings with a certain fear,
though you might spawn a thousand mutations of every sentence
ith no means of natural selection.

ɔone" isn't absolute or arbitrary.
ɔr is it really about learning your limits as a writer.
s a compromise.

ıis is another of the writer's economies,
ıowing how far to push a piece and when to let it go.
ıere's sometimes a relenting when you stop at last.
ɔre time, more money, more research, more intelligence,
ight have made a difference.

. . .

ıt there's sometimes a certainty too,
ıe knowledge that this particular parallel universe is now complete.

ɔone enough" sounds too callow to describe the compromise,
call it "perfection enough,"
perfect as possible under the circumstances.

ıere's no objective measure of "done."
s an assurance within yourself,
response to the work that's as much feeling as judgment,
feeling derived from your rich experience of the completeness
all the books you've read in your life.

first, “done” will come too soon.
ou’ll think you’re finished only to find, again,
ow well some sentences hide ambiguity.
· “done” may seem too remote, an unimaginable state of perfection
:hieved after infinite revision.

ıt in a certain sense, the completeness of your piece
ill have been inherent in it all along.
ou come upon it with one final revision, one final fix.
s likely to take you by surprise.

. . .

ou’re urging forward every word, every phrase,
'ery sentence, every rhythm, until they find their balance, their coherence.
ou may think you know, at the start, what you want that coherence to feel like.
ıt it won’t.

let’s not talk about “done.”
s premature, something you’ll discover for yourself when the time comes.
ou’ll need to know two things:
ou won’t write a final sentence and then “The End,”
ıd the distance to completion will change with the changes in the way you write.

ıe better question now is the more fearful one:
[ow will I know when to stop revising?”
ou may not be able to tell yet whether your revisions are really improvements.

revise toward brevity—remove words instead of adding them.
ward directness—language that isn’t evasive or periphrastic.
ward simplicity—in construction and word choice.
ward clarity—a constant lookout for ambiguity.
ward rhythm—where it’s lacking.
ward literalness—as an antidote to obscurity.
ward implication—the silent utterance of your sentences.
ward variation—always.
ward silence—leave some.
ward the name of the world—yours to discover.
ward presence—the quiet authority of your prose.

ıd when things are really working,
ıat’s when it’s time to break what already works,
ıd keep breaking it
ıtil you find what’s next.

---

egan this book by writing,
ıow what each sentence says,
hat it doesn’t say,
ıd what it implies.

ıe way to keep going?
ever stop reading.
y more than you thought you knew how to say
sentences better than you ever imagined
ır the reader who reads between the lines.

Some Prose and Some Questions

Here are some passages to experiment with as you read this book.

But let's set aside a few responses:
Whether you like a passage or not.
Whether you like the author or not.
Whether or not you think the author likes you.
Whether you like what a passage is saying.
Those aren't useful layers of response for these experiments.

Let's also set aside the question of meaning, significance.
Don't be concerned with what the author is "trying to say."
Each of these passages—with one or two possible exceptions—is bound to other passages in the work it was taken from and is therefore incomplete.

Watch yourself carefully.
You may be trying to discover things that can later be converted into meaning.
You may also find yourself trying to describe the style of the prose or its ideological or theoretical content.
Don't.
The most valuable thoughts may be the ones that begin, "I don't know if this is important but …" or "This will sound like nitpicking …"

All you're doing is noticing what you notice.
Try to resist deciding whether what you notice is important or not.
Of course it is, even if you can't say precisely what it is you've noticed.

Begin by reading these passages aloud.

I've already listed some of the questions you might ask about these passages (on this page).

You will think of many others.

MY BANDANNA IS ROLLED on the diagonal and retains water fairly well. I keep it knotted around my head, and now and again dip it into the river. The water is forty-six degrees. Against the temples, it is refrigerant and relieving. This has done away with the headaches that the sun caused in days before. The Arctic sun—penetrating, intense—seems not so much to shine as to strike. Even the trickles of water that run down my T-shirt feel good. Meanwhile, the river—the clearest, purest water I have ever seen flowing over rocks—breaks the light into flashes and sends them upward into the eyes. The headaches have reminded me of the kind that are sometimes caused by altitude, but, for all the fact that we have come down through mountains, we have not been higher than a few hundred feet above the level of the sea. Drifting now—a canoe, two kayaks—and thanking God it is not my turn in either of the kayaks, I lift my fish rod from the tines of a caribou rack (lashed there in mid-canoe to the duffel) and send a line flying toward a wall of bedrock by the edge of the stream. A grayling comes up and, after some hesitation, takes the lure and runs with it for a time. I disengage the lure and let the grayling go, being mindful not to wipe my hands on my shirt. Several days in use, the shirt is approaching filthy, but here among grizzly bears I would prefer to stink of humanity than of fish.

JOHN MCPHEE, *Coming into the Country*

THE DISTANCE FROM NEW ORLEANS to Alexandria is about 190 miles. The first 90 miles, from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, are on a throughway, a straight, fast road on the east side of the Mississippi, far enough back from the bank to avoid meanders, and high enough over the marshes to obviate bridges. There is nothing worth a long

look. The bayous parallel the road on either side like stagnant, weed-strangled ditches, but their life is discreetly subsurface—snapping turtles, garfish, water moccasins and alligators. The mammals are water rats and muskrats and nutria, a third kind of rat. The nutria, particularly ferocious, is expropriating the other rats. Bird life, on the day we drove through, was a patrol of turkey buzzards looking down for rat cadavers. There pressed down on the landscape a smell like water that householders have inadvertently left flowers in while they went off for a summer holiday. It was an ideal setting for talk about politics.

A. J. LIEBLING, *The Earl of Louisiana*

THE TIDE WAS OUT. So far as the eye could see there stretched the matted bents of the mudflats: a soft monotony blended of grey and green and blue and purple. It had a quilted look, for the thousands of rivulets, which cast a network over it, followed the same course day in, day out, and had worn down the mud into channels between the hummocks some feet deep. To the small creatures which lived here this must have been a most fantastic landscape. At the bottom of these deep channels the tiny streams, only a few inches wide, had their established, deeply graven waterfalls, their rapids which tested to the utmost the gallantry of straws, and lakes with bays and beaches; and on the islands grass roots found purchase on the mud by gripping it and one another so that they grew into cushions of jungle, one plant rising on another like minute vegetable pagodas. The scene was incised and overstuffed with profligate ingenuity; and it was odd to think of all this elaboration being wiped out twice in every twenty-four hours, the rivulets losing their identities in the rough inundation of the tide, the springing grasses, so obstinate in their intention of making dry land out of mud, becoming the bottom of the sea. There was the same spendthrift and impermanent fabrication going on at ground level as there was over our heads, where great clouds, momentarily like castles, temples, mountains, and giant birds, were blown by the cleansing winter wind to the edges of the sky, here not clipped away by hills or streets and astonishingly far apart. There could not have been a more generous scene, nor one which was less suited to receive the remains of Mr. Setty, who from infancy had been so deeply involved in calculation, and so unhappily, who had tried keeping figures outside his head and got sent to prison for it, and had kept them inside his head and got killed for it.

REBECCA WEST, "Mr. Setty and Mr. Hume"

TO MY AUNT MAE—Mary Elizabeth Davenport Morrow (1881–1964), whose diary when I saw it after her death turned out to be a list of places, with dates, she and Uncle Buzzie (Julius Allen Morrow, 1885–1970) had visited over the years, never driving over thirty miles an hour, places like Toccoa Falls, Georgia, and Antreville, South Carolina, as well as random sentences athwart the page, two of which face down indifference, "My father was a horse doctor, but not a common horse doctor" and "Nobody has ever loved me as much as I have loved them"—and a Mrs. Cora Shiflett, a neighbor on East Franklin Street, Anderson, South Carolina, I owe my love of reading.

GUY DAVENPORT, "On Reading"

EVEN WHEN YOU WATCH the process of coal-extraction you probably only watch it for a short time, and it is not until you begin making a few calculations that you realise what a stupendous task the "fillers" are performing. Normally each man has to clear a space four or five yards wide. The cutter has undermined the coal to the depth of five feet, so that if the seam of coal is three or four feet high, each man has to cut out, break up and load on to the belt something between seven and twelve cubic yards of coal. This is to say, taking a cubic yard as weighing twenty-seven hundredweight, that each man is shifting coal at a speed approaching two tons an hour. I have just enough experience of pick and shovel work to be able to grasp what this means. When I am digging trenches in my garden, if I shift two tons of earth during the afternoon, I feel that I have earned my tea. But earth is tractable stuff compared with coal, and I don't have to work kneeling down, a thousand feet underground, in suffocating heat and swallowing coal dust with every breath I take; nor do I have to walk a mile bent double before I begin. The miner's job would be as much beyond my power as it would be to perform on the flying trapeze or to win the Grand National. I am not a manual labourer and please God I never shall be one, but there are some kinds of manual work that I could do if I had to. At a pitch I could be a tolerable road-sweeper or an inefficient gardener or even a tenth-rate farm hand. But by no conceivable amount of effort or training could I become a coalminer; the work would kill me in a few weeks.

GEORGE ORWELL, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

WHAT IS THE CHINESE WAR LIKE? Well, at least it isn't like wars in history books. You know, those lucid tidy maps of battles one used to study, the flanks like neat little cubes, the pincer movements working with mathematical precision, the reinforcements never failing to arrive. War isn't like that. War is bombing an already disused arsenal, missing it and killing a few old women. War is lying in a stable with a gangrenous leg. War is drinking hot water in a barn and worrying about one's wife. War is a handful of lost and terrified men in the mountains, shooting at something moving in the undergrowth. War is waiting for days with nothing to do, shouting down a dead telephone, going without sleep and sex and a wash. War is untidy, inefficient, obscene, and largely a matter of chance.

W. H. AUDEN, 1939

THE WINTER FIRES OF NEW YORK burn everywhere like the ghats in Benares. On the valueless land north of the ship canal some children, dressed like aviators, are burning a Christmas tree. An ashcan is blazing on the banks of the river. Rubbish fires glow in the backyards of Harlem. Farther south, where a slum is being cleared, there is a large conflagration of old lathes. Another rubbish barrel and another Christmas tree are burning on Ninety-sixth Street. On the curb at Eighty-third Street an old wicker table is being consumed with fire. In a vacant lot in the fifties some children are burning a mattress. South of the United Nations there is a big fire of cardboard cartons behind a grocery store. Many fires burn in the gutters and backyards of the slums; there are bonfires of wooden crates in front of the fish market and on Battery Park, untended, an iron basket, full of waste, lights the gloom as all these other fires do on a winter dusk when the dark begins to fall before the lights go on.

JOHN CHEEVER, *Journals*

IN THE SUMMER OF 1943 I was eight, and my father and mother and small brother and I were at Peterson Field in Colorado Springs. A hot wind blew through that summer, blew until it seemed that before August broke, all the dust in Kansas would be in Colorado, would have drifted over the tar-paper barracks and the temporary strip and stopped only when it hit Pikes Peak. There was not much to do, a summer like that: there was the day they brought in the first B-29, an event to remember but scarcely a vacation program. There was an Officers' Club, but no swimming pool; all the Officers' Club had of interest was artificial blue rain behind the bar. The rain interested me a good deal, but I could not spend the summer watching it, and so we went, my brother and I, to the movies.

We went three and four afternoons a week, sat on folding chairs in the darkened Quonset hut which served as a theater, and it was there, that summer of 1943 while the hot wind blew outside, that I first saw John Wayne. Saw the walk, heard the voice. Heard him tell the girl in a picture called *War of the Wildcats* that he would build her a house, "at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow."

As it happened I did not grow up to be the kind of woman who is the heroine in a Western, and although the men I have known have had many virtues and have taken me to live in many places I have come to love, they have never been John Wayne, and they have never taken me to that bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow. Deep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls, that is still the line I wait to hear.

JOAN DIDION, "John Wayne: A Love Song,"
in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

I GREW UP IN THE MIDWEST and despised horses. The ones I rode struck me as stupid and untrustworthy. I went to Wyoming when I was young, and the ones there were worse. On a cold morning, two out of three would buck you down. They were, I felt, an ugly necessity for where a truck wouldn't go.

I've been kicked, stepped on, and bitten. Bitten I liked least. My most trustworthy saddle horse leaned over once while I was cinching him up and clamped on my upper leg, turning the thigh into what looked like a Central American sunset. I threw him down on the ground, half-hitched his feet together, and put a tarp over him. I let him up two hours later: he thought I was the greatest man in the world, one he wouldn't think of

biting. Horses only remember the end of the story.

TOM MCGUANE, "Roping, from A to B,"
in *An Outside Chance*

THIS MORNING, an invasion of tiny black ants. One by one they appear, out of nowhere—that's their charm too!—moving single file across the white Parsons table where I am sitting, trying without much success to write a poem. A poem of only three or four lines is what I want, something short, tight, mean, I want it to hurt like a white-hot wire up the nostrils, small and compact and turned in upon itself with the density of a hunk of rock from Jupiter …

But here come the ants: harbingers, you might say, of spring. One by one they appear on the dazzling white table and one by one I kill them with a forefinger, my deft right forefinger, mashing each against the surface of the table and dropping it into a wastebasket at my side. Idle labor, mesmerizing, effortless, and I'm curious as to how long I can do it, sit here in the brilliant March sunshine killing ants with my right forefinger, how long I, and the ants, can keep it up.

After a while I realize that I can do it a long time. And that I've written my poem.

JOYCE CAROL OATES, "Against Nature"

I CARE NOT TO BE CARRIED with the tide, that smoothly bears human life to eternity; and reluct at the inevitable course of destiny. I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I, and my friends: to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit, as they say, into the grave. Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging, puzzles and discomposes me. My household-gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. They do not willingly seek Lavinian shores. A new state of being staggers me.

Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks, and summer holidays, and the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candle-light, and fire-side conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests, and *irony itself*—do these things go out with life?

CHARLES LAMB, "New Year's Eve," 1821

Consider each sentence on its own, disconnected from the whole.
(That's inevitably one of the ways you consider the sentences *you* make.)

Pay attention to the ordinary way you might say something.
Think of that as the backdrop for the questions you ask these sentences.

. . .

See anything peculiar?
A phrasing you didn't expect?
A rhythm more pronounced than its surroundings?
A word in a position that sounds odd?
Note in each passage how variant in structure the sentences are—no two quite the same in shape.
And how, when they're invariant, you can feel the reason why. (See Auden.)

How closely—or how loosely—are the sentences in a passage bound to each other?
Can you feel a gap between them—something indiscernible going unsaid?
Are there sentences that explain or fulfill the sentence that precedes them?
That build a rhythm with other sentences?
Sentences that misdirect or decoy the reader?
A sentence that's working harder than the others—doing more to draw or turn the reader's attention?
Let yourself ask the question why.
Why is the author choosing this word, writing that sentence that way?

Don't expect to find *an* answer.
Expect to find some possibilities.

Here are some examples.

Why does John McPhee use the word "refrigerant"?
Why not simply "cooling"?
And why "the temples" and not "my temples"?
And why "days before," as if this were legend, or "level of the sea" instead of "sea level"?
Notice the word "there" in the parenthetical phrase near the end of the passage.
Can you feel how it orients us? How it situates McPhee?

Take a look at the verbs (and the sentence structures) in the passage by A. J. Liebling.
For the most part, they're pretty plain: "is," "are," "was."
So where does the life of this passage come from?
Repetition does one kind of work here, another, vastly different kind in the passage by Auden.
Consider the economy of using the verb "to obviate."
Can you see that Liebling has left the vase out of the penultimate sentence?
And how much it would complicate things to include it?

Slow down a great deal as you read the passage by Rebecca West.

If necessary, take a pen or pencil and indicate the breaks between phrases or clauses where she hasn't already used a mark of punctuation.

Then read it aloud again.

In this passage, it would be useful to sort through the nouns and see what kinds there are, what categories they fall into.

It would also be useful to break this into a series of short sentences—as short as possible ("The tide was out")—and then watch how West recombines them into the texture, the rhythm, of her prose.

Look for the modifiers in this passage—individual words but also, more important, entire phrases.

Pay attention to the way they extend and structure West's sentences.

In Guy Davenport, too, it's worth seeing if you can find the separate assertions that underlie this extraordinary single sentence and turn them into their own sentences:

Over the years, she and Uncle Buzzie had visited places like Toccoa Falls, Georgia, and Antreville, South Carolina. They never drove faster than thirty miles an hour.

Then look at the words that are left behind.

This is a sentence built by suspension—a sense of equivalence—not subordination. How does that come about?

And *why* would Davenport write a sentence like this?

In George Orwell, what's the difference between the sentence he gives us, "When I am digging trenches in my garden, if I shift two tons of earth during the afternoon, I feel that I have earned my tea," and *If I shift two tons of earth during the afternoon when I am digging trenches in my garden, I feel that I have earned my tea*?

There's nothing elaborate or uncommon about the words that appear in any of these sentences.

But notice how patient he is as he builds this passage, step-by-step, rising from calculation to astonishment to a kind of self-abnegation.

And yet can you feel the lack of thus-ness—the way these sentences stand side by side, each one on its own feet?

How tempting it would have been to supply this paragraph with logical indicators to bind the sentences together.

. . .

This passage by W. H. Auden was written as a radio talk for the BBC—to be read aloud, or rather spoken into a microphone.

And yet apart from "Well, at least" and "You know"—which suggest an intimate, colloquial connection with his audience—there's nothing here that doesn't sound written to be read silently.

The sentences that begin "War is …" look repetitive, but it's worth noting how un-repetitive they really are, structurally and rhythmically.

Listen, too, for the restraint in this passage, the things Auden refrains from doing.

For instance: he avoids the temptation to build a crescendo into the sentences beginning "War is …"

He also doesn't let these sentences become more parallel than they need to be.

Though everything is just as he wants it in this paragraph, it doesn't feel overdetermined.

He's paying more attention to what the reader hears than he is to the possibility of building more pattern into his prose.

The passage from John Cheever's *Journals*—what kinds of journals are these?

Clearly not the kind we often mean: daily jottings, notes on life and living, an informal archive of emotions and events.

At play here is perception—the gathering in his mind of all these fires—but also the play of sentence making: How many ways are there to say something is burning?

This passage has no larger purpose than to exist, to work out, for a moment, the possibilities of some sentences.

And yet we feel its inadvertent testimony—the vision of a city lit up by small conflagrations, a city where children instinctively gather near the flames.

Those children dressed like aviators persist.

Look carefully at the rhythm of the last sentence, how it keeps wanting to settle into a familiar, steady beat and how Cheever keeps it from doing so.

And if you lose your sense of what rhythm is, simply remember the line Joan Didion quotes in this passage: "at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow."

But look for the counter-rhythms, the passages that are more abrupt, less sinuous.

Where do those staccato pulses come from?

This is also a passage to help you remember how brief—and how extensive—rhythm can be.

The first paragraph is neutral, almost plain, except when Didion turns to the hot wind and the dust—an extended rhythm.

And also the very end: "and so we went, my brother and I, to the movies"—a brief rhythmic pulse to close the paragraph and open what follows.

Remove the word "forever" from the last sentence.

The first time you read the sentence that way, it seems to stumble over itself.

But can you read it without "forever" and still find the rhythm of its opening clause?

Now reinsert "forever."

This is a test you need to be performing on your own sentences.

In the passage from Tom McGuane, think about the sentence "Bitten I liked least."

A "correct" way to say this might be: *I liked being bitten least.*

But there's a moment of discovery in the gap between "I've been kicked, stepped on, and bitten. Bitten I liked least"—a chance to intensify the compression, the terseness, you can feel all through this passage.

Also a chance, in that bitten-off sentence, to intensify the reader's sense of the writer's character.

The essay containing this passage by Joyce Carol Oates also contains the epigraph I borrow from her.

The ellipsis at the end of the first paragraph is hers.

I'll let you find the questions and discover the experiments to perform here.

We've been taught to create a kind of vocal uniformity in our prose—one voice, one tone, a very narrow

band of ourselves visible to the reader.

Charles Lamb defies all this, gloriously.

There is something luminescent and completely various in the versions of himself he presents in this essay—as though each emotion revealed a different Lamb.

Don't worry about "Lavinian."

But do pause to admire his use of the verb "reluct"—the root of the only form we use, "reluctance."

And just as Lamb is the most various of all these authors, in the character he presents the reader, this is also the most various passage rhythmically and in the shape of its sentences.

How hard now to say, simply, "I am in love with this green earth."

Some Practical Problems

Reading these sentences—and my commentary on them—you'll be tempted to side with the writer, to think, "I know what he means" or "I can see what she's saying." But that's because it feels so normal to try to deduce the meaning of the sentence instead of observing what its words actually say. We're so trained to read for meaning—to look through the sentence to what we think is the author's intention—that in our search for it we're prepared to disregard the literal significance of the prose itself.

You may also be tempted to say, "Maybe the writer wants it that way." But you can only judge intentionality in context. If all the sentences in a piece are clear and sharp, then perhaps—perhaps!—we can say that a slightly aberrant sentence is intentional, if there seems to be a reason for it. But if many of the sentences in a piece are unclear, ambiguous, or weak, we have to assume that intention is irrelevant—indiscernible at best. We have to assume the writer lacks control.

These sentences were written by excellent college students who went on to be very good writers. They—the sentences, that is—are no worse and no better than the sentences you'll come across on any day, in any medium, anywhere.

She didn't trust him with his accent or his gentle demeanor.

Note how "with" distorts the sentence. It could read, *She didn't trust him*. Or *She didn't trust his accent or his gentle demeanor*. And note too that "trust him with" is an active, meaningful locution in English, for example, *She didn't want to trust him with her new car*. You can feel the pressure of that locution in this sentence, even though it doesn't belong there.

I despise the feeling of something falling apart in your body.

Note the shift from the first to the second person.

This makes no sense unless the author is despising you.

The second person requires some attention, or it easily goes awry.

Erica wobbled uncertainly as she tried to sit down on the stool next to me.

Can one wobble *certainly*? "Uncertainly" is implicit in "wobble" and "tried." An example of the kind of redundancy that adverbs often create.

The buffet of diseases, cancers, viruses, and overall deteriorations our present world has to offer is impressive and wary.

Several problems, beginning with an unworkable metaphor: the "wary buffet." The adjectives at the end of the sentence must modify the subject. The author of this sentence has completely lost track of the beginning by the time he reaches the end.

By the time I was 11 the milieu of doubts, questions, and skepticism had culminated into a daunting tangle of despondent confusion.

The trouble? Words used incorrectly: "milieu" and "culminated." By "milieu," he means something like "mix" or "combination." No such thing as "culminating into"—"culminating in" is possible. This would be a tolerable sentence if it said, *By the time I was eleven, my doubts, questions, and skepticism had turned into*

despondent confusion. Note the metaphorical feeling of "tangle"—it wants to be more literal, and plural, than "despondent confusion" allows. A tangle of feelings, yes. A tangle of confusion, no.

Her hair, dyed black, is neatly quaffed.

A delightful sentence if the author means that her hair is easily imbibed. The word is "coiffed." This problem is solved by using the dictionary.

Grimy rinds of snow still squat along the northern walls of buildings.

"Grimy rinds of snow" is good. But look what the word "squat" does. It animates the already metaphorical "rinds." In regular life, rinds don't squat.

This is a room where mornings are had in loneliness, and evenings are had in relief.

A nice attempt flawed by a very weak verb—"are had." Slight additional confusion because, as a locution, "to be had" has a very different meaning, as in "We were had." And why the weak verb? The effort to heighten the parallel between mornings and evenings. But could the sentence be as powerful without a parallel structure? Certainly. Shanghaied by a syntactical choice.

His gaze was fixed to the ground with an occasional glance at the horizon for a brief inspection of the distance to the next knoll.

He gazed at the ground, but sometimes he glanced at the horizon. Note how "was fixed" throws everything into disarray. There's a kind of verbal poverty in this sentence. Why only one verb? And a flawed one at that? Note how "with an occasional glance" and "for a brief inspection" are trying to do the work of verbs. But they can't. "To glance" and "to inspect" have been turned into nouns, which depletes their energy. Note too that "gaze" is the origin of much of this trouble. The verb again gets turned into a noun, and a noun that's incapable of action. "He," as the subject, offers better verb choices than "his gaze."

The lifejacket dug into my armpits as heavy boots pulled my legs down.

"As" is nearly always trouble. What's it doing here?

Insisting on simultaneity? "And" would work as well and more simply. Note the feeling that these could be someone else's—anyone else's—boots. And note too the feeling that the legs are going down without the rest of this writer's body.

On occasion Etta James may faintly be heard singing in the kitchen, a creek throughout the floorboards or whining from the attic ceiling.

Etta James seems to be whining from the attic ceiling and also to have become, somehow, a stream flowing through the house. Chaos. Instead of "On occasion" try "sometimes." "Creek" does not equal "creak." From the attic—not from the attic ceiling, which is the ceiling *over* the attic, not over the room below the attic. This attempt to list some of the sounds in a house goes completely awry—and why? Because one verb—"may faintly be heard"—is trying to govern "creak" and "whining." And why? Because the sentence is fundamentally passive. *You can hear Etta James singing faintly in the kitchen. You can also hear creaking in the floorboards and a whining from the attic*. And what if we revise further and remove the verbs of perception? *Sometimes Etta James sings faintly from the kitchen. The floorboards creak, and the ceiling whines*.

So I have found myself inside this intensely feminine world in much the same way as the crossing-dressing men in *Some Like It Hot* when they infiltrate an all-woman jazz band.

A typo makes it sound as though the author means these men dress up as street crossings. What's the trouble here? The men in *Some Like It Hot* (and the actors who play them) have names, but the author doesn't know them, or won't use them if he does. He isn't sure whether he can count on the reader's knowing the movie. If he was sure, he wouldn't have added "when they infiltrate an all-woman jazz band." Also, "much like the cross-dressing men" is better than "in much the same way as the cross-dressing men" simply because

it uses fewer words. Even better is “much like Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon.”

In the last row, I sat between my mother and father, the latter of whom was to die three months later.

“In the last row” sounds oddly placed, though that depends on context. Note that “the latter of whom” over-specifies—and over-formalizes—a much simpler construction: *I sat between my mother and father, who was to die three months later*. Notice that there’s no confusion about who will be dying, even without “the latter of whom.” That phrase and the forward-looking past tense verb—“was to die”—do a very good job of draining any emotion out of this sentence. Also, there’s an odd sense of intentionality in “was to die.” What’s wrong with this version: *I sat between my mother and father, who died three months later*? It’s ambiguous. Do they both die? Its ambiguity can be resolved easily enough: *I sat between my mother and my father, who died three months later*.

Throughout the year, the chubby pigeons would perch on the south-facing roof of her home.

This sentence implies that svelte pigeons perched elsewhere. Removing “the” from “the chubby pigeons” helps. As does turning “would perch” into “perched.” The habitual nature of their perching—which is what “would perch” is meant to suggest—has already been established by “throughout the year.”

Since I was little, Wallace has been around.

Notice how different this version of the sentence sounds: *Wallace has been around since I was little*. What’s the difference? “Since.” In the original, it has the ambiguous overtone of “because,” which vanishes in the revision.

He shines from stem to stern due to his three chunky gold rings and spiffy dress shoes.

Perhaps, if he’s wearing chunky gold rings on his stem and spiffy dress shoes on his stern. But I doubt he is. Betrayed by a cliché. “Due to” does the work a verb should be doing.

A lot of the older campers still look to me as someone they can confide in.

A syntactical trap. The sentence starts out reading as though it might say something like, “A lot of the older campers still look to me like children.” Saying “still regard me” would help. But what if the sentence simply said, *A lot of the older campers still confide in me*?

There is an old man who lives there.

How did this sentence escape fixing? Because it became invisible, that’s how. *An old man lives there*.

When the Germans sensed the end of the war, they stopped actively murdering the newborn babies in the camp.

This has the unfortunate effect of implying that “passively murdering” is possible.

All of them are in some kind of ill-fitting jacket.

Of course it’s an ill-fitting jacket. All of them are in it. Plural persons in a singular jacket.

The family photos on my mother’s side are scarce.

Look at what the word “the” does. It posits the existence of family photos which are then scarce, as if they’d run away from home. Remove “the” and the sentence makes much more sense.

Diane’s death must have shocked the family into the realization that in the end death would come for them all.

“Realizing that death,” not “the realization that in the end death.” Replace the noun phrase with a verb

form.

Children in this age group are generally developing social awareness skills where they become aware of the role of the self in relation to others.

"Where" is trying vainly to serve as a relative pronoun, which it's not. All it really succeeds in doing is holding a redundancy apart. *Children in this age-group are generally just becoming aware of the role of the self in relation to others*.

Denizens of America's northwest corner are not exceptionally fond of products derived from the flesh of swine, of course; however they, like any Americans, were keen to be the beneficiaries of the excessive political patronage known as "pork barrel legislation."

This is an attempt at humor by being orotund. Is it really true that people in Washington and Oregon don't like bacon? After the semicolon, the pork becomes metaphorical. This sentence is studded with the attributes of prose as it is usually taught today. It's periphrastic, illogical while insisting on its logic, and awkwardly metaphorical, and the author is buried somewhere under the rubble.

I studied abroad the fall of my junior year in France.

Betrayed by two words that like to stick together: "study abroad." *I studied in France the fall of my junior year*. The abroadness will be implicit, unless this sentence was written in France.

I am not a typical daughter of Seattle, though I do love the Mariners with a passion that can cause the uninitiated ballpark companion to flee Safeco Field for fear of losing an eardrum.

The last half of the sentence can be paraphrased thus: *I scream so loud it hurts my friend's ear*. Nothing is gained by loosing this avalanche of words.

As I dive in, the water gives me its usual jolt in the stomach, but I welcome the shock and hang for a moment in the closest approximation of flight I know.

Note how time runs backward and then stops in this sentence. First the diver feels the jolt of the water but welcomes the shock even in mid-dive, before he has hit the water.

The two families line up like competing rugby teams. The bride takes the place of the rugby ball standing between the two groups in full wedding regalia.

A metaphor that begins to work and then fails completely. The bride as rugby ball is deeply unfortunate.

Whatever ghosts were left in Pompeii had long disappeared, leaving behind twisted plaster casts and British families on holiday.

There's a nice idea behind this sentence, but "leaving behind" must modify "ghosts," which makes them sound as though they'd littered the site with British families on holiday.

Exempt from army duty until the close of the war because of a lame leg it was noticed at the shooting range that he was a good shot and he was told that someone like him could be useful at the front.

Automatic revision: make this two sentences, probably three. Note that "it" was exempt from army duty. And "it" has a lame leg. The difficulty? The passive voice—"it was noticed … that" and "he was told that"—governs the sentence. Any sentence containing "it was noticed that" qualifies for instant demolition and reconstruction. Everything about this sentence—"army duty," "the close of the war," "someone like him could be useful"—is fuzzy.

One at a time I pull my feet up to my knees and wipe my legs dry.

Written by a contortionist. With telescoping legs, it sounds like.

In front of you a grassy meadow dusted with colorful flora extends.

Translated from the German. This sentence is trying to be expressive, descriptive. But “dusted”? “Colorful flora” hides the names of all the wildflowers in that meadow—names that could be looked up and used. This sentence is trying hard not to say, *There’s a grassy meadow*. But why? At least that doesn’t sound like a peculiar inversion of ordinary syntax.

Throughout the trip we had tried, despite our cameras and the other tourists, to pretend that we were true Parisians. We ordered in broken sentences and struck up awkward conversations with anyone willing to put up with us.

Note that the second sentence is implicitly going to tell us what true Parisians are like. Not like we thought.

About halfway through, I saw to my utmost horror that I could not apply a particular symbol to what I was typing.

Why be hyperbolic here? Hang on to your utmost horror. You may need it for something genuinely horrifying. “Apply a particular symbol to what I was typing”? I think the writer means he didn’t know the keystroke for the symbol he wanted to use. Writers often try to be humorous by being hyperbolic. They never succeed.

There are at least eight places to eat crappy food within eyesight from where you stand.

“From where you stand” is unnecessary. Just plain “nearby” would be a welcome substitute for “within eyesight from where you stand.”

Those walking on solid ground might lose their hats in a gust of wind, but the manic depressive stands on a seasonal tightrope.

Notice that “but” is being asked to do what it can’t possibly do: yoke together these two clauses. We have no idea what contradiction might exist here, if only because the first clause sounds literally plausible while the second is metaphorically confusing. “A seasonal tightrope”?

Occasional cars flash past us.

“Occasional” modifies “cars.” That’s the problem. How can a car be occasional? This use turns an adverb into an adjective. “Occasional,” like “random” and “typical” and even “stereotypical,” is often—or even occasionally—used in an almost meaningless way. Don’t make time or frequency an attribute of the vehicle. Let the time or frequency indicator stand on its own. *Cars flash past us now and then.*

In a steep inner gorge, a sandstone amphitheatre has formed with a ribbon waterfall cascading from its hundred-foot precipice.

What’s the problem? “With.” It’s trying to be both conjunction and relative pronoun when all it can be is a plain preposition. It also obscures the motion of the ribbon waterfall which “cascades” from a (not “its”) hundred-foot precipice.

Displayed in glass cases and lit up like jewelry, tuna is cherished in Japan.

If the tuna comes first, the sentence won’t sound so strange. *Tuna is cherished in Japan, even displayed in glass cases and lit up like jewelry*.

An array of noble mountains surround the valley. Robust with pines, spruces, and aspens, they are colorfully vibrant in the warm months.

Can you feel the emptiness of the modifiers here—“noble,” “robust,” “colorfully vibrant”? And note that summarizing word, “array.” *Mountains surround the valley*.

My dad and I are similar in that we both hate "stuff."

"Are similar in that we" equals "both." *My dad and I both hate "stuff."* Note that you can even do without "both."

He hunched his shoulders, placed one arm on his left leg, and slid into the passenger seat before reaching across his body for his seatbelt.

Can you actually visualize this action? No. Descriptions of physical action require incredible care because we read them with our bodies as well as our brains.

With those closest to me, I don't think twice about taking an unsolicited bite, whereas with newer acquaintances, I worry my probing fork will injure a tenuous relationship.

This writer is having trouble managing her stilts. *I don't worry about stealing a bite from friends. But I do if it's a new acquaintance.* "Whereas," "unsolicited," "tenuous relationship"—all trouble, as is the fact that the literal fork implicit in the first half of the sentence suddenly performs a metaphorical action in the second half.

We hold a mythological view of soldiers. We see them fly off filled with ideology and return wearied and homesick.

Note how the first sentence leads us to expect an explanation in the second sentence—an explanation of what the "mythological view" is. But it isn't forthcoming. And note too the ambiguity in the second sentence. It sounds very much as though we see the soldiers off and then return home ourselves feeling wearied and homesick. Filled with ideology?

Lovers on blankets support the theory that Sevillanos are more public with their affection than lovers anywhere else in the world.

But lovers without blankets disagree. The writer needs to return to the fundamental question: What am I trying to say? Losing "theory" would be a good place to start.

The small tube of sunblock weighs little in my right hand.

But it's much heavier when I hold it in my left. This sentence seems to be trying to say, *I'm holding a small tube of sunblock in my right hand.*

The watching of Super Bowl commercials has truly become a sacred tradition in this country.

"Watching," not "the watching of"—verb form versus noun phrase. This sentence dies by overemphasis. Get rid of "truly" and "sacred." In other words, let the sentence relax and trust that the reader will take your point. You don't have to be so insistent.

Even with my drapes pulled back, there's not much visibility from where I sit.

The possessive pronoun goes awry. This writer seems to be wearing curtains instead of eyeglasses. "The drapes." And how about *I can't see much from where I sit*? "There's not much visibility" could mean there's a heavy ground fog in the room. That's how the word "visibility" is used outside the peculiar world of this sentence.

The architecture was gray and beautiful and old and stretched out in all directions.

No, the buildings—but never the architecture.

The woman is twenty-eight, with the leathery sun-worn skin of a retired couple from Florida.

What a strange woman this is, to have the skin of a retired Florida couple in her possession. How could her

sun-worn skin (nice phrase) resemble that of a couple? Why is she being compared to two people? It must have been some couple to have only one skin.

My mother had started planning this pilgrimage since the day I was born.

"Since"? And why the compound past? *My mother started planning this pilgrimage the day I was born*. Or *My mother has been planning this pilgrimage since the day I was born*. The continuity of "since" requires the continuity of "has been planning."

She looked straight at me as she pulled the steering wheel around to make a graceful turn as she shook her head and said: "What a waste; I just don't get it."

"As" runs amok. Breaking this into at least two sentences would help eliminate "as."

The Lincoln-Marti School resides in Little Havana, Miami.

"Resides"? The author is clearly trying not to use "is." But why? It's simple and economical and doesn't make the reader feel as though the Lincoln-Marti School had retired to Florida.

Bread, rice, and bananas constituted my diet.

Ugly in so many ways. Why not choose a subject that is capable of eating? *I ate mostly bread, rice, and bananas*. "Constituted" is the kind of verb—abstract, dull, essentially passive, academic—that should immediately send you hunting for a stronger, more active one.

I had never seen the word "hubris" and allowed my familiarity with the similarly concluded word "debris" to guide my pronunciation.

Can you hear the writer's distrust of the reader (or of herself), as though we might not notice that "hubris" and "debris" both end in "ris"? *I'd never seen the word "hubris," so I pronounced it like "debris."*

I recall listening to a ten-minute soliloquy concerning the tomatoes in the refrigerator, which then moved from item to item on the shelves and kitchen table.

Can you feel the tomatoes moving about in this sentence? "Which" wants to point to "soliloquy" but can't.

The small houses are considered "quaint," with their well-manicured lawns and expensive landscaping of topiary, hedges, well-pruned fruit trees, cobbled footpaths lined with decorative pathlights.

Look what "with" does. It allows the writer to jumble together a pile of nouns and adjectives without going to the bother of constructing a sentence using verbs. Notice how "with" replaces syntactical possibilities that would make this a much stronger sentence.

If there is one landmark here, it is not the 335,024-square-foot anchor store so big it takes up two buildings.

After the opening phrase, we expect to learn what the one landmark is, not what it is not. A promise to the reader is not fulfilled.

While hospitals charge hundreds of thousands of rupees for a prosthetic leg, Jaipur Foot charges two thousand.

The first word is doing the steering, as if readers won't grasp the internal logic of the sentence unless we get a good long glimpse of it coming. *Hospitals charge hundreds of thousands of rupees for a prosthetic leg. Jaipur Foot charges two thousand.* The contrast is perfectly clear even without pointing to it.

Then the whole cat rises and stretches, arching its back and driving each leg into the ground until it quivers.

Pronoun problems. The antecedent of "it" is clearly meant to be "leg," and yet technically it is "ground"—

the noun closest to the pronoun. This cat makes the ground quiver.

After seven hours of zooming, dropping, soaring and twisting through the air, the day had come to its natural end.

The day loves to zoom, drop, soar, and twist through the air. The opening phrase *must* modify the subject of the sentence. But it doesn't.

Los Angeles is the largest city in California with a population of over 4,997,340 spanning 498 square miles.

What does this sentence actually say? That of all the cities in California with a population of over 4,997,340 spanning 498 square miles, Los Angeles is the largest, somehow. Again, the word "with" is the culprit. A comma after California would help, but the sentence would still be weak syntactically. "With" is not remotely strong enough to sustain a sentence like this.

Every morning, just before 9 a.m., artists begin to funnel into the building, as one by one, with deliberate steps, they get off the Paratransit bus.

The artists somehow funnel into the building while at the same time getting off the Paratransit bus. The problem? The overall sequence of the sentence, certainly. How about getting them off the bus first and then having them funnel into the building? But the problem is also "as," which insists on simultaneity. Note that reality is simply imperceptible in this sentence.

A world away from his son and his granddaughters, after over a year of suffering of Alzheimer's and diabetes, he died alone in a hospital in Taiwan.

A simple, effective revision—put the right phrase in the right place. *After months of suffering from Alzheimer's and diabetes, he died alone in a hospital in Taiwan, a world away from his son and granddaughters*.

Her clothes were nondescript, a white t-shirt and jean shorts.

And yet the writer can describe them. How about *She wore a white T-shirt and jean shorts*? The nature of her clothing—its plainness, its simplicity, even its nondescriptness—will be apparent to the reader.

Under the bridges connecting the canals' sides, there are shacks built from scrap metal and wood.

As if the bridges had a function other than connecting the sides of the canals. *Under the bridges are shacks built from scrap metal and wood.*

What we do share in common, though, is our voice.

"Share" implies "in common." And note how the force of the word "though" is already implicit in the very structure of the first four words—"what we do share." *What we do share is our voice*.

As you enter town, you're guided down Main Street by two Quaker burial grounds, one on either side of the road.

These Quaker burial grounds sound rather like traffic cops. The only way to fix this sentence is to back out of it entirely. Instead of writing from the perspective of a procession into town, describe the town and then let someone (if necessary) proceed into it.

In the distance, elephants and buffalo lumber across ancestral stomping grounds.

We say, "These are my old stomping grounds," without implying that we actually stomped there. And yet somehow, in this sentence, it's hard to avoid the picture of elephants and buffalo stomping on their ancestral grounds. What the writer is trying to say has been distorted by the unbidden presence of a cliché.

There are constantly trucks flowing in and out of National Meats.

The natural subject of this sentence is "trucks." *Trucks flow in and out of National Meats*. But trucks are bad at flowing. Perhaps "A stream of trucks flows …" But perhaps "flow" is a bigger problem than it's worth.

It was on a heated summer day when my partner Heather and I were assigned to patrol Riverside County.

"Heated"? This makes the day sound as though it had been warmed artificially or was perhaps angry with someone. And note how cumbersome the overall structure of the sentence is—largely because it begins with "It was on a …" *On a hot summer day, my partner Heather and I were assigned to patrol Riverside County*. This is less emphatic than the writer's version, but then the writer's version is also clumsy, and we can't tell what's really being emphasized or set up.

Following the fence we built the day before, we had come across a mud wallow, the calling card of wild pigs and a sore in ranchers' sides.

The pasts are confused. "Had built" and "came." Asking a wallow to be a pig calling card and a rancher's sore at the same time is asking too much.

By 1556, biographer Giorgio Vasari had written that *The Last Supper* was ruined.

This sounds like an assertion about Vasari rather than an assertion about *The Last Supper*. What the sentence is trying to say is this: as early as 1556, some people thought *The Last Supper* was already ruined. This sentence is telling us something different. It could be saying, for instance, that at last, by 1556, the notoriously slow-writing Giorgio Vasari was able to write that *The Last Supper* was ruined. Also, note how inadequate that defining epithet—"biographer"—is. This is a journalistic habit, and a bad one.

We knew our miserable one mile per hour trekking rate was decreasing exponentially as we pressed on.

This sentence sounds neatly scientific, doesn't it? And yet it indulges in false specificity. If their rate of progress really did decrease exponentially, they'd never get there. Note how the action of walking—which should elicit a verb—vanishes from this sentence, thanks to "our miserable one mile per hour trekking rate."

I leaned against the parapet as the wind blasted me and looked out over the sea.

The wind likes to look out over the sea whenever it can. Who doesn't? Note how useless "as" is here.

She's wearing tapered, elastic-waist jeans that hang 2 inches above her ankles, and an oversized white sweatshirt with a blobby pink heart in the center.

How low is she wearing her jeans? We have to be able to picture how she actually wears them. At the very least, the sentence shouldn't actively prevent us from picturing it, the way this one does.

Kaneisha desperately wanted me to buy new clothes because mine were so bad that they embarrass everyone in their proximity.

Notice how the author suddenly seems to have vanished from her clothing. *Kaneisha desperately wanted me to buy new clothes because mine were so embarrassing.*

It is especially nice to sit there in the evening, when the sun has just set or is in the process of setting.

Or is only a few minutes away from beginning the process of setting or perhaps even beginning the process of just having finished setting. Simplify: when the sun is setting. That's enough.

My hometown gets less annual rainfall than Atlanta or Boston, but somehow we've acquired the gray reputation. Fine by me—our bad rap keeps too many Californians from moving north.

Note how the end of the second sentence completely contradicts the writer's meaning. It says, literally, that she wishes more Californians would move north. Get rid of "too many" and the sentence begins to say

something sensible.

But perhaps living in Nevada would enable me an appreciation of beauty in scarcity.

"An appreciation of"? A noun phrase. No energy. Static. "To appreciate"? A verb. Better, but not perfect. Never substitute noun phrases for verbs. "Enable me"? How about this: *But perhaps living in Nevada would teach me to see the beauty in scarcity*?

The waves are loud as they crash against the beach.

Remove "as." Assume that "crash" contains the quality of loudness. *The waves crash against the beach.*

It is a comforting smell, evoking Proustian memories of sledding and snow and knitted mittens.

Yes, we now associate all sensory memory with Marcel Proust. We just didn't know he spent so much time sledding in his knitted mittens.

The world is calm, quiet, indifferent, moving at its own pace unfettered by the frenzy of human activity.

The writer has no idea what "fetter" means, much less "unfettered."

Capitola is outside the picture window.

It would be alarming if Capitola was *inside* the picture window. Even the slightest effort will produce a more useful, descriptive sentence.

The week before my flight home departed, we decided to explore drugs.

How about "the week before I flew home"? That yields a verb instead of a noun and removes the unnecessary "departed." And the phrase "explore drugs"? Strictly a billboard cliché. No one would ever say, "Let's explore drugs," except ironically. No trace of irony here.

The view from the small balcony was of other apartment buildings.

What tells you that this sentence needs revising? How about the appalling "was of"? Can you feel how this sentence was written? Beginning with "the view" seemed to make sense. But note how summarizing that word is and how it excludes the presence of anyone capable of doing the viewing.

I have never found words, never heard or read any, that would have alleviated the aching and emptiness I always felt following death.

This sentence was written by someone who has died many times. Also "would have" is unnecessary. *I have never found words that ease the aching and emptiness I feel.* Make the dying happen in a separate sentence.

My cousin's baby gurgled in the middle of the carpeted living room, and mourners moved around her, tall legs gathering near a cheese plate.

This sentence is trying to adopt the baby's perspective—not a bad idea. But don't those tall legs sound disembodied? They may have gathered near a cheese plate, but one wonders how they managed to eat.

But when the Plains Indians hunted bison, they used every bit of the kill, from its meat to its dung and its hooves to its bone marrow; whites were notoriously wasteful.

Two sentences to begin with. Notice the awkwardness of the "from … to" structure, which implies a spectrum of possibilities. It's nearly always awkward. Instead: *they used every bit of the kill—meat, dung, hooves, bone marrow, and so on.*

And despite Crosby's distinguishable crooning, *White Christmas*'s Danny Kaye always got the laughs.

What does "distinguishable" mean here? It means that when Bing Crosby croons, we can tell he's crooning.

The author probably means "distinctive." And note what this sentence doesn't say: Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye are both in *White Christmas*. This sentence makes it sound as though only Kaye is.

She exasperatedly cleans it up with her napkin and gets him more milk.

It takes only a fleeting thought to realize that "exasperatedly" is grotesque, a destroyer of rhythm. The writer will need to convey exasperation some other way.

I had to travel to Spain to see smoking on widespread display.

Note how inactive and unpeopled this is. Smoking is on widespread display in Spain, but who's doing the smoking?

The white steeple sits on the side of a hill across from the Long Ridge Tavern.

And yet one wonders what happened to the church beneath it. Steeples don't sit, except perhaps on the churches below them. They rise.

While one can lament the decrease in imagination that the television show's imagery perpetuates or the loss of emphasis placed on people's distinct intonation, such criticisms discredit the television version by comparison to an incorrigible other, not by its own merit.

One has to be *taught* to write like this. And then one has to be taught *not* to write like this. Barely intelligible.

Melissa later told me that a random man offered her $800 to spank him.

Whatever you think of this man, he was certainly not random. He was the very man who was going to offer Melissa $800 to spank him. "Random" has an actual meaning, and this is not it.

The air was hot and damp under the awning of branches and leaves that hung over us.

A common mistake—making explicit what's already implicit. *The air was hot and damp under the awning of branches and leaves*.

The 61–59 contest will be remembered by Duke's imposing size, Butler's resiliency, and the game's final play.

This sentence says that Duke's size, Butler's resilience, and the game's final play will remember the 61–59 contest. The problem? "By" instead of "for."

In the last ten years or so, the revival of the Los Angeles River has emerged as a major policy priority, as activists have successfully convinced public officials that revitalizing the LA River will help them fix the city's worst troubles.

What is the word "as" doing here? Merely joining two sentences and making a single awkward one. Remove "as" and you have two passable sentences.

Cacti are supposed to be the pinnacle of survival.

There's a thought here, though what it is is nearly impossible to say. "The pinnacle of survival" makes no sense. And note that "are supposed to be" could imply the author's disappointment with cacti.

My mom and I drove to where the flames were.

Or perhaps *drove toward the fire*?

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A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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