

# **On Writing Well Study Guide**

## **On Writing Well by William Zinsser**

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# Plot Summary

Zinsser's book on writing well provides both a comprehensive guide to writing nonfiction and a useful writer's reference. He starts with an overview of the writing craft and moves into specific nonfiction writing forms. The book wraps up with the important attitudes that good writers develop.

The author uses all of the principles in his own writing, including bits of humor that work to keep the reader's attention. Good writing captures and holds the reader's attention from beginning to end. Zinsser's style uses rhythm and other musical ideas to please the imagination. He incorporates unusual observations and approaches to his subjects, a technique that produces fresh prose. His style is nearly flawless, and he informs the reader on how he does what he does so well.

Books on writing usually use the work of other authors as examples. Zinsser does this, and includes some of his own work because he knows exactly what he was thinking while writing. This practical approach to getting inside the writer's mind carries more power than speculation on what other authors might have been thinking. Zinsser steps through an entire article that he wrote about his trip to Katmandu, points out the composition problems he dealt with, and explains the solutions he chose. The author accurately describes the writing process as a series of problems, all of which have solutions.

On Writing Well carries an important message: everyone can learn to write well. This breaks down a myth that engineers cannot write and writers cannot engineer. Both require training, practice, and a little bit of ability. A writer may never become a famous engineer, and an engineer may never become a great writer, but most people do not need fame or greatness. Doing the job well enough is sufficient. On Writing Well guides the reader into becoming a competent writer, one who can communicate genuine personality and useful information.

Zinsser does not condescend, nor does he dwell on the confusions to be found in the English language. He tells the writer's story in an honest manner, stating that writing involves mostly hard work and some inspiration. If a problem develops in a sentence that does not have a good solution, he suggests that the sentence be dropped altogether. His emphasis on the research material is good advice, as the research often leads to inspiration. The richness in good nonfiction comes from doing more research than needed and distilling the information down to the most interesting.



# Part I: Chapter 1 The Transaction

## Part I: Chapter 1 The Transaction Summary

The author tells a story about a surgeon who writes on the side and is published. William Zinsser is a professional writer with many years of experience. The two men answer student questions together at a Connecticut school.

The surgeon says that writing is easy; Zinsser says it is not, and so it goes throughout the entire session. Every question that a student asks brings a cheery answer from the surgeon, whereas Zinsser answers on the other side of the spectrum, stating that writing consists of a lot of work and most of that work is done alone. Professional writers work every day, regardless of how they are feeling or if they want to write. To the surgeon, writing is a pleasure and a release from the tensions of being a surgeon. The author suggests to the doctor that taking up surgery might be a good diversion for a professional writer, implying that the writer might find surgery to be an enjoyable hobby, just as the surgeon feels about his writing hobby.

The transaction in writing involves how much the writer gives of self rather than the factual content of the work. Zinsser reads about topics for which he has very little interest, but a skillful author will draw him in because the author shows enthusiasm for the subject and reveals self on the pages. Humanity and warmth give a nonfiction book the life to keep the reader's interest, which is the completion of the transaction—the writer writes skillfully and gives of self, and the reader reads the entire work with pleasure, and might learn a thing or two.

Gimmicks do not work. Only clarity and strength in the writing work; these qualities, referred to as principles, come from the skillful use of the English language. Zinsser thinks these skills might not be able to be taught, but they can be learned, which suggests that one must take the initiative to become a good writer. No teacher can cram the skills into a passive skull, and Zinsser doubts that good writing is ever the result of an inherent talent.

The author does acknowledge that writers have differences in their approach to the writing task and their styles. Some writers fuss over their work, while others do not as much. Many methods exist regarding the writing task, and the right method is the one that works for the individual writer. Zinsser does not mention what these other writing methods might be, but he likely has an experimentation known as New Journalism in mind, because he mentions Tom Wolfe regularly, one of the practitioners of New Journalism. Another is Truman Capote, who is briefly mentioned.

## Part I: Chapter 1 The Transaction Analysis

Analysis



# Part I: Chapter 2 Simplicity

## Part I: Chapter 2 Simplicity Summary

The problem with American writing is that it is not simple enough, Zinsser declares. He gives many examples, including two pages from his rewriting of this book that retain his proofreader marks. Part of the problem is that many people have cluttered minds, and so the writing comes out cluttered. Others think in unclear ways. Some writers simply do not know what they want to say.

Meanwhile, the reader will quickly lose interest in the writing, thus breaking the transaction described in the previous chapter. The finished product of writing is worthless if nobody reads it. In some situations bad writing must be read; for example, a corporate memo about some big important thing that may or may not need attention, or instructions on putting the swing set together.

Zinsser emphasizes the hard work involved with writing. When people say they could write a book, he doubts it. This reflects a common misconception that writing is easy, but the fact is that bad writing is easy. Good writing is hard.

## Part I: Chapter 2 Simplicity Analysis

Analysis



# Part I: Chapter 3 Clutter

## Part I: Chapter 3 Clutter Summary

This chapter is all about simplicity, the opposite of clutter. Simplicity is not the direct opposite ("direct" can be cut) of clutter; it is the opposite, so write just that: simplicity is the opposite of clutter, and do not repeat yourself.

The author rightfully accuses politicians of being the greatest bad influence on the English language when it comes to euphemism and clutter. He lays out many examples from the Vietnam War period, yet the situation has not improved. The world of business and finance is not much better with politician's habit of using fad terms.

Zinsser draws brackets around the parts of his students' prose that can be safely eliminated. He does this rather than crossing out in order that the students learn to recognize clutter. This method seems to work, as some of his former students who have become professional writers tell him that they can still see the brackets in their imaginations while they write.

Uncluttered writing is necessary for journalists to master. The writing must fit within a limited number of column inches and should give as much information as possible. If a writer has a length of only 100 words to work with, every word must be necessary. Other kinds of writing do not have as tight a length restriction, but the elimination of clutter still helps to keep the meaning clear and the prose worth the reader's time.

## Part I: Chapter 3 Clutter Analysis

Analysis

# Part I: Chapter 4 Style

## Part I: Chapter 4 Style Summary

A writer's style cannot be affected convincingly to the reader. The style must be genuine, with the real person using words that are picked from the subconscious and brought to the writing consciousness. Zinsser does not spend much time on the psychological backdrop of the writer's mind because his book is not intended to cover this vast field, but the fact remains that good writers do not try to decorate their prose with ornamentation. If ornaments come to mind, they should be based first on solid writing and must serve important purposes.

The author admires the ability to ornament upon solid writing of two authors: Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer. Examples of such writing are not provided; the assumption being that if the reader is curious, the books by the two authors are readily available at public libraries.

A common problem that writers have is to start at the true beginning. Oftentimes the first two or three paragraphs of a piece can be cut, Zinsser has observed, because people naturally want to introduce the subject by rambling up to it.

Write—or think of the writing—initially in the first person and then edit to the expectations of the assignment, Zinsser advises. Writing in the first person naturally brings out the true personality of the writer. The author believes that most people in society are fearful of expressing their true opinions, ideas, and judgments. The courage to do this is necessary to write well, regardless if our business and political leaders dance around their true thoughts or feelings about the subject at hand.

## Part I: Chapter 4 Style Analysis

Analysis





# Part I: Chapter 5 The Audience

## Part I: Chapter 5 The Audience Summary

Although the writer should strive to keep the reader's interest, the real audience is the writer. The writer composes to please self first, and if readers are pleased as well, then all is good. The difference is between the craft of writing and the attitude the writer takes while writing. The craft of writing involves the removal of clutter and the development of style, with mastery of the fundamentals (spelling, grammar) a given. The attitude the writer must take while writing involves a negative: do not worry about what editors or readers might like. They do not know and will not know until they read the pleasing work.

This advice addresses an issue that developing writers will encounter with marketplaces—magazine editors, literary agents, and book publishers—where an appeal is made, or a directive given, to know the market before submitting work for publication. When all the haze is blown away, one fact lingers. The editors, agents and publishers have no idea what will be the next big seller until they see it and have an instinctive positive reaction to the work. Examples abound of work that had been rejected many times and, once published, has sailed to the top of the best-seller lists. A recent example is Harry Potter.

The author uses quoted examples by E. B. White and H. L. Menken. White makes the raising of chickens interesting to the otherwise uninterested Zinsser, while Menken lets his honest opinions and observations unabashedly flow onto the page. Another writer is quoted, James Herndon. Herndon purposefully breaks grammar rules where they should be broken within context. This example illustrates another part of style: that is the power that highly developed writers possess to ignore the rules of grammar, and in a broader sense, any arbitrary rule that keeps them from making their points, establishing their moods, and painting their word pictures. Any great power should never be applied without first mastering the power, so developing writers must still learn proper grammar and master grammar context.

Everybody wants to find the shortcuts to make difficult tasks easier. This can be done with the writing task too, as in gaining efficiencies that save time and effort. However, as with anything else, certain things cannot be ignored to shorten the time and reduce the effort. A musician must practice scales; a writer must practice grammar. Learning how to use the grammar checker in a word processor software package will save time and effort later on. Skipping the practice of grammar will do nothing but harm. Learning how to type eighty words per minute will save time. Ignoring the spell checker will not.

## Part I: Chapter 5 The Audience Analysis

Analysis



# Part I: Chapter 6 Words

## Part I: Chapter 6 Words Summary

Zinsser warns against the use of journalism as a good model for writers. Both journalists and editors fall into the use of cheap words, made-up words, and clichés. A good writer avoids these lethal tiger pits.

Good writers read other good writers, both contemporaries and the classics. Good writers emulate their literary heroes. Good writers love words to the point of obsession and own multiple dictionaries, a Roget's Thesaurus, and a book of synonyms. Good writers want to know all the details about words: the less common meanings, the contrasting words, the shades of meaning among synonyms, and the history (etymology) of words.

Another extremely important characteristic of a good writer is the awareness of the poetry in language, the rhythm and sound of the words together. Zinsser reads all his prose aloud before releasing it into the world, a habit for good writers to develop because readers hear the words with the ears of their imaginations. This habit also reveals subtle errors and clumsy constructions. Some writers proofread their works by reciting each sentence from back to front, an exercise that takes the sentences out of expected context and forces the mind to pay attention.

One use of Roget's Thesaurus is not brought up. The original Thesaurus has two parts: a dictionary listing of words, and a numbered section with synonyms arranged into broader concepts. The writer first locates the word in the dictionary listing and the reference number, and then looks at the numbered synonym section. This arrangement allows for brainstorming not only on word choices, but the overall concepts being thought about, such as: ocean (397), lake (398), gulf (399), marsh (400), and vapor (401). Perhaps the story should involve an ocean-going vessel that enters a gulf, becomes trapped in a marsh, and the crew is overcome by toxic vapors. Or the writer may have forgotten that an ocean and a gulf are two distinct bodies of water. Whatever the case, the original Thesaurus is a powerful stimulant for the writer's imagination, on top of being a memory jog.

## Part I: Chapter 6 Words Analysis

Analysis



# Part I: Chapter 7 Usage

## Part I: Chapter 7 Usage Summary

The issue of what is and what is not proper English usage is often soft, depending more on the writer's taste than on strict rules. The author accepts some unusual words, but not all. His opinion, while serving on the Usage Panel for The American Heritage Dictionary, sometimes went with the Panel and sometimes against. Others of the 104-member panel, consisting of writers, poets, editors and teachers, had similar experiences. Zinsser generally agrees that useful words should be kept and traditional grammar should be followed for the most part.

The English language changes all the time because it is a living language as opposed to a dead language, such as Latin. If a language is used continually for business, law, literature, and speaking, new words will always enter into the lexicon. This is especially true as technology advances and new words must be invented to express new concepts and to differentiate products. On the other side of things, a living language invites the creation of slang terms. Some of these terms prove to be useful, while others become trite or simply die out from neglect.

Zinsser is all for writers being creative with their expressions and style. English is a remarkable language not only for its confusing lack of consistency, but also the flexibility that inconsistency allows.

## Part I: Chapter 7 Usage Analysis

Analysis



## Part II: Chapter 8 Unity

### Part II: Chapter 8 Unity Summary

Unity in writing is a quality where the writer maintains consistency throughout the piece. The point of view should be chosen before the writing begins, as in the first (I do something), third (he does something) and sometimes second person (you do something). Consistency in verb tense is also very important in order that the reader does not become lost in the timing of events. A more difficult unity is that of mood or voice. This is how the piece sounds to the reader in the imagination's inner ear. Sounding like a college professor is a formal voice, whereas sounding like an everyday person is an informal voice. The point the author makes is that the voice should not shift from one to another. He gives an example of travel writing that shifts all over the voice map.

A common problem among nonfiction writers is a perceived need or obligation to say the last word on a subject, which is not possible. That covers too much ground, and so the subject needs to be narrowed down before starting the writing effort. Additionally, the focus on a corner of the subject should be an interesting and exciting thing for the writer, not a drudgery task that drains all enthusiasm out of the writer, the writer's work, and the reader—if the work ever gets that far.

The process of narrowing down involves deciding the one thought that the writer wants to lead the reader into, and not more than one. Zinsser seems to have short articles in mind, but this also applies to long works of nonfiction. Each book chapter can be treated like a relatively short article, while the overall book should leave one major impression about the subject.

The author mentions that writers often change their initial decisions while the writing progresses, a perfectly normal part of the task. Writing is more often a process of discovery than recording. The end product should have the quality of unity, and revising to achieve this unity is just part of the job.

### Part II: Chapter 8 Unity Analysis

Analysis



## Part II: Chapter 9 The Lead and the Ending

### Part II: Chapter 9 The Lead and the Ending Summary

If the first sentence of a piece does not draw the reader to the next sentence, the article is a failure. But what makes a good first sentence? Zinsser has no formulaic answer, other than a good lead is one that works. Any particular article may have two or more possible good leads, but the idea is to use the one that works best.

The basic idea is that readers want to know right away if the article is worth reading. Zinsser writes:

"Therefore your lead must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with freshness, or novelty, or paradox, or humor, or surprise, or with an unusual idea, or an interesting fact, or a question. Anything will do, as long as it nudges his curiosity and tugs at his sleeve" (p. 56).

The second most important thing to remember is to end each paragraph with something that will draw the reader to the next paragraph. The author gives two examples of his own writing that had been published in major magazines.

Zinsser strongly encourages writers to research and collect much more material than is needed for the article. He also suggests that reading everything available, even junk mail and real estate listings, will give a certain feel for what the culture is thinking, and this feel can spark fresh approaches to leads. He strongly discourages the use of clichéd leads and lists some that particularly annoy him. As a balancing act, he lists several opening lines from books that impressed him.

Good writers should forget about ending an article with a summary and instead should end at the exact point of ending, no more and no less. The author warns that an otherwise tight article can be easily ruined with a boring summary at its end. Conversely, good writers have a control, a deep understanding of the subject, that allows for endings that surprise or in some way leave the reader with a lift, not a letdown, and certainly not a snort as they stop reading.

### Part II: Chapter 9 The Lead and the Ending Analysis

Analysis



## Part II: Chapter 10 Bits & Pieces

### Part II: Chapter 10 Bits & Pieces Summary

Part II ends with a brief look at grammar and other observations. The English language is rich with words, which is one of its great strengths. Few well-chosen verbs and nouns ever need adverbs or adjectives because the good words carry the impressions already. Many small expressions can be trimmed from writing as well, which solidifies the ideas and builds reader trust.

The use of exclamation points should be avoided unless absolutely necessary, which is hardly ever outside of dialog. Whatever astonishment exists should come through the writing itself, not the punctuation. Semicolons are useful only sometimes, and they tend to make the writing appear as an older style from the 19th century. Dashes are very useful—they act as pointers to a point. In other cases—often while in the middle of a thought—the dashes serve to set off a parenthetical statement. Colons are best used for starting out a list: of things, of ideas, of places, of people, and of other sorts.

Some rules should be broken. Starting a sentence with "but" is supposed to be against formal writing rules, but it works well for changing moods. "Yet" works nearly the same way, and other words change the mood too: however, nevertheless, still, instead, and so on. Writers must clearly flag mood changes or risk losing the reader. The use of contractions is forbidden in formal writing, yet the use of them brings warmth and personality to other forms of writing. Not using contractions gives a stiff tone, which is one reason why formal writing sounds so formal.

When should "which" be used rather than "that"? Zinsser goes along with a simplified approach: Use "that" most of the time, but use "which" when the following phrase qualifies the previous phrase. This requires a comma, which is another tip-off.

Concept nouns, or nouns that represent vague abstractions, should not be used because they lead to vague abstract sentences. A better approach is to have someone do something. What the author calls "creeping nounism" is the habit of stringing nouns together where a single good verb would suffice. An example given is "communication facilitation skills development intervention," which the author thinks is a writing class.

Overstatement, as in saying that something blew up when it has not, is not good and can lead to a worse situation, and that is fabricating lies in nonfiction. A recent defense given to this situation argued that fabrication in a memoir is an acceptable practice. That may be so for the publisher, but not the readers. Fiction is the proper form for writers who wish to fabricate their lives to make them more interesting.

Zinsser advises those writers who dictate their first drafts, in most cases executives dictating to secretaries, to review the drafts and revise. Otherwise, the tone will likely be pompous. He also advises professional writers to forget about the competition. The only



competition is with self. Another bit of wisdom is that sometimes the quickest fix for a troublesome sentence is to throw it away and try again, or, as often happens, go without the sentence entirely.

Where the AP (Associated Press) style calls for very short paragraphs to help the reader along, Zinsser thinks this is condescending to the reader. Paragraphs should have their own "integrity and structure" (p. 81).

Sexism in writing is less of a problem than it once was, probably because writers have figured out the ways to write with sex neutrality without becoming clunky. Zinsser suggests using plural forms and inclusive terms, such as "family" instead of "wife and children."

The author's final set of tips includes the necessity of rewriting, the superiority of computers over typewriters—an admittedly dated observation—trusting the research material to tell the best stories, and that writers should follow their own interests when deciding on writing subjects.

At times writers seem to all have their own opinions on how to write well. This impression comes from the very fact that a part of English usage does consist of opinion. Some writers like to use semicolons; others do not. The logic behind grammar and punctuation often contradict; however, the logic should be consistent for any particular piece of writing. Zinsser gives useful ways to approach writing in a consistent manner, and for that the chapter is a useful reference. Other useful references are available in the form of style guides and books written specifically about grammar, punctuation, or both. If writing is a primary career activity, the organization might have its own style guide. Colleges sometimes give birth to style guides, the most famous perhaps being the University of Chicago. Others schools are content with adoption.

## **Part II: Chapter 10 Bits & Pieces Analysis**

Analysis



## **Part III: Chapter 11 Nonfiction as Literature**

### **Part III: Chapter 11 Nonfiction as Literature Summary**

Literature was at one time considered to be the great novels, but since World War II, literature includes nonfiction due to the changing tastes of readers and the development of nonfiction style. Magazines that once featured fiction have reduced the presence to a few stories once in a while, and many other magazines carry nothing but nonfiction.

An attitude exists today that writers are interested mainly in the old definition of literature, while the truth is that writers are interested in writing well, whether the kind of writing is fiction or nonfiction. The effect of this has been to raise another attitude, and that is the modern respect that nonfiction writers have earned, as opposed to an earlier view that all nonfiction is journalism, and journalism is not a respectable form of writing.

Zinsser makes the point that it matters not what the writing form is called. What matters is that writers perform their craft well, regardless of form. Due to various entertainment alternatives, nonfiction is currently more popular than fiction. This trend may or may not change, but one thing will always remain the same—good literature means good writing.

### **Part III: Chapter 11 Nonfiction as Literature Analysis**

Analysis





## **Part III: Chapter 12 Writing About People: The Interview**

### **Part III: Chapter 12 Writing About People: The Interview Summary**

One of the most common tasks for a nonfiction writer is to conduct interviews with people who know something about the subject of the writing project. Zinsser has found that when taking on a project that seems initially boring, the interviews bring out interesting topics and the human elements.

The author gives several insights about the interview process. The writer should always come to the interview prepared through background research and by having all the interview tools at hand. Zinsser prefers pencils and pad to audio recorders, but has used both effectively. Good interview skills come with practice. The idea is to stimulate people to talk by asking the right questions at the right time. The questions can be prepared ahead of time, and this is a good way to avoid going blank during an interview, but the writer should also know when to abandon the prepared questions for the more interesting threads that might come up.

Once the interview process is complete enough, the writing begins. Zinsser warns not to misquote or to purposely bend the intent of the interview subject. If skillfully done and if true to the subject, the writer can combine and edit quotations for smoother and more meaningful writing. He gives an example by Joseph Mitchell. The example is a compilation of many quotations taken over a long period of time, edited to create a single incident. Editing often needs to be done because the interview subject was talking, and the resulting English as it appears on paper may be full of errors. The overall goal is to be true to the interview subject's intent while creating nonfiction that the reader will find interesting and enjoyable.

### **Part III: Chapter 12 Writing About People: The Interview Analysis**

Analysis



## **Part III: Chapter 13 Writing About Places: The Travel Article**

### **Part III: Chapter 13 Writing About Places: The Travel Article Summary**

Describing a place is another major writing task for a nonfiction writer. The danger of this is falling into clichés and missing the whole point. The writer can take several approaches in describing a place, but the two overall methods are going within to find how the place impacts the writer and going outside to find how the place impacts others. Either way, a unique perspective should be developed. This is especially important for places that have often been written about.

Writers should concentrate on style and substance, according to Zinsser. Cliché words should be avoided, as should cliché details. All beaches, for example, have sand, rocks, surf, and seagulls. If the beach has something else out of the ordinary, that is good writing material. All cities have streets and buildings, but Juneau has extremely high winds and railings along the sidewalks for people to hang onto.

The writer should always be looking for what is truly unique about a place at the time the writer observes it. The place does not need to be special or particularly remarkable, but the observation does. Descriptions about how the experience of a place has changed the writer is also good substance, and with the right style, good writing.

### **Part III: Chapter 13 Writing About Places: The Travel Article Analysis**

Analysis



## **Part III: Chapter 14 Writing About Yourself: The Memoir**

### **Part III: Chapter 14 Writing About Yourself: The Memoir Summary**

Zinsser urges writers to stop being afraid of writing about themselves. Something in American culture stops writers, and he thinks this is probably an attitude that writers must please the writing teachers. The point is for the writer to please self first, and if the memoir is done well, this will also please the reader.

One can go too far the other way while writing about self. Every little detail is never good writing, but focusing in and being selective with the material can bring out a successful memoir. The overall subject should be of interest too, and Zinsser has found that the memoirs of immigrants to the United States sparks his interest. This gives him insight into these people's experiences and impressions.

Memoirs can be about any life experience that readers might find interesting. All the principles of writing well apply, and a great advantage is that the main subject, the writer's life, is already known. The writing process will likely bring up related memories long pushed into the subconscious, and so the writer learns more about self. As the memoir includes other people such as parents and other family members, the writer will probably discover new things about them, too.

### **Part III: Chapter 14 Writing About Yourself: The Memoir Analysis**

Analysis



# Part III: Chapter 15 Science and Technology

## Part III: Chapter 15 Science and Technology Summary

A very old wrong attitude is that engineers cannot write and writers cannot engineer. Put in another way, writers cannot write about technology and science, and technologists and scientists cannot write at all. Zinsser slams the coffin lid shut on this wrong attitude. Everyone can write, and can write about anything, if the approach is correct. The correct approach involves putting one sentence after another, one paragraph after another, in a way that explains the subject clearly, logically, and without assuming too much prior knowledge for the reader.

One of the problems the author sees is that in early education, attempts are made to identify broad learning capacities. An English teacher might tell a student that she or he has no language skills. A science teacher might tell a student that he or she has no ability for science. This action—whether done for good, bad, or indifferent purposes—damages the student's ability to learn by enabling their self-limiting filters. They believe they cannot do something, and therefore they cannot.

For a writer dealing with a scientific subject, the learning of the subject should be remembered while writing about it. The writing should reflect the path the writer took to understanding, starting with something everyone can understand. The scientist writing about science has a different problem, and that is to be a human being, not a pedantic professor remembered from college. Zinsser provides several examples of scientists writing about science that display the good ways of doing this. He also gives examples of the other side, professional writers explaining complex science in ways that readers can follow.

A cardinal truth must be remembered: writing is a craft. A craft can be learned, and it does not matter what the English or science teacher said in grade school, high school, or college. Conversely, complex scientific and technical ideas must start somewhere and build to where they are. Writers must find the starting point and build an inverse pyramid of understanding for the reader.

## Part III: Chapter 15 Science and Technology Analysis

Analysis



## **Part III: Chapter 16 Business Writing: Writing in Your Job**

### **Part III: Chapter 16 Business Writing: Writing in Your Job Summary**

Business writing has big problems. Professionals fall into the jargon of their profession when writing for people not in the profession, usually customers and investors. Corporate-speak and pomposity infects documents, and nobody seems to exist in the organizations. Zinsser describes how he helped people in a school district and a business to learn how to write well.

Zinsser lists his four articles of faith in regard to writing well—clarity, simplicity, brevity, and humanity—while trying to bring the professional educators closer to their true selves. He urges them to use active verbs and to avoid concept nouns. The problem of jargon usage is relatively simple to fix—translate the jargon into common English. The educators accept Zinsser's constructive criticisms and become writers, something that the author admires—the ability to change.

Corporate-speak and pomposity often come from executives who delegate the writing task to subordinates, and the subordinates assume the executives want the poor style of writing. For the school district, the administrators take the challenge and improve their writing skills. The business resists change. Businesses often have people willing to learn and change, but the hierarchy works against them, or somebody with an emotional head larger than their hat size refuses to communicate. This is a frustrating situation for both Zinsser and those whom he tries to help.

The main problem with bad business writing is its result. Alienated customers will try to find another place to buy the goods or services. Confused investors will put their money someplace more understandable. As long as competition exists in the marketplace, the quality of business writing is as important as any other way an organization represents itself to the public and its employees. The only advice that Zinsser can give employees who try but meet resistance is to keep on trying.

### **Part III: Chapter 16 Business Writing: Writing in Your Job Analysis**

Analysis



## Part III: Chapter 17 Sports

### Part III: Chapter 17 Sports Summary

Sports writers sometimes forget what they are writing about and who their readers are. The writers fall into bad habits, such as trying to use terms other than the standards when describing what an athlete does. Some writers try to be psychoanalysts or other things that they are not, and the results are usually uninteresting. This is because the readers have likely played the sport themselves and want to know what happened from that perspective. Or the readers admire the athletes and want to know something about their perspectives on the sport, not necessarily about their lives in general. The readers are not interested in the writer's opinions about irrelevant subjects. The author warns about being too critical of athletes. They deserve respect because what they do is difficult, and most people cannot perform as well.

Good sports writing is like other good writing. Nothing changes just because the subject happens to be sports. Readers will still want to know about the players and owners, the way a stadium or track feels, and what happened during the games or races. Zinsser writes:

"Hang around the track and the stable, the stadium and the rink. Observe closely. Interview in depth. Listen to old-timers. Ponder the changes. Write well" (p. 193).

### Part III: Chapter 17 Sports Analysis

Analysis



## Part III: Chapter 18 Writing About the Arts: Critics and Columnists

### Part III: Chapter 18 Writing About the Arts: Critics and Columnists Summary

A writer who wants to be a critic must become knowledgeable in the subject area, whether it is popular fiction, the theater, cinema, dance, or music. This is a requirement for writing good criticism, although many bad critics do appear in print.

The opportunity for great creative writing is in criticism of the arts. Zinsser gives several examples where good critics wrote memorable pieces, and illustrates with one wherein the critic writes better than the subject author. As with all forms of writing, the basic rules apply to criticism, but the demands of good criticism also lead to a higher level of literary ability. This becomes true when writing about dance or music. The reader cannot see the dance or hear the music, so other techniques must be used to bring the reader into the theater or concert hall.

Where an entire performance of dance or music can be described without spoiling the potential live experience for the reader, movie and fiction critics should never give away too much of the story. Related to this is television criticism. The reader should be given enough information to decide if the show is worth watching, but no more.

Columnists have one thing in common with critics of the arts. Both must take a solid stance on any given issue, although oftentimes a columnist will fall away from the conviction with a weak ending, to the effect that time will tell or the impact of something cannot be foreseen. Take a stand and stick to it, Zinsser admonishes:

"What about the coup in Uruguay?' the editor would ask.

"It could represent progress for the economy,' the writer would reply, 'or then again it might destabilize the whole political situation. I suppose I could mention the possible benefits and then—'

"Well,' the man from Texas would break in, 'let's not go peeing down both legs.'

"It was a plea he made often, and it was the most inelegant advice I ever received. But over a long career of writing reviews and columns and trying to make a point I felt strongly about, it was also probably the best" (p. 207).



## **Part III: Chapter 18 Writing About the Arts: Critics and Columnists Analysis**

Analysis





## Part III: Chapter 19 Humor

### Part III: Chapter 19 Humor Summary

The most powerful tool for a nonfiction writer is humor. Points that cannot be made in a straight manner, probably because they are too true or painful, can be brought out in a joking way. The author does not go into a current example of this, but the success of the fake news on television points to the value of humor when addressing serious national and international events.

Zinsser uses quotations from the following humor writers: George Ade, Don Marquis, S. J. Perelman, Woody Allen, Mark Singer, Garrison Keillor, Ian Frazier, and John Updike. He mentions E. B. White as another good humorist.

The rules for writing humor can be analyzed, but a better way to learn is to read good humorists and emulate their styles until the writer develops a unique approach. One drawback of humor writing that appears in the examples is that time has faded the humor. What was funny in 1980 is not so funny in the 21st century. Humor tends to have a short shelf-life.

An important quality of humor is that it needs to sneak up on the reader and evoke an unexpected laugh. The reader can be surprised only so many times before the prose becomes tiresome. Put another way, humor is a spice that should be mixed with other interesting flavors rather than overpowering everything else. Humor can be used to make a succinct point, release dramatic tension, or reduce the horror of a situation.

The writer can also interweave humor throughout the piece in subtle ways. A narrator may describe an overall situation and have not so much a definitive punch line, but a sense of absurdity. This type of humor tends to be low-energy, where the reader might not laugh out loud, but will likely be more receptive to the serious issues being addressed.

### Part III: Chapter 19 Humor Analysis

Analysis



# Part IV: Chapter 20 The Sound of Your Voice

## Part IV: Chapter 20 The Sound of Your Voice Summary

Every writer has a unique voice, but that voice needs to be discovered. Imitating others who write well and have attractive voices is where the writer needs to start. All artists of any sort start out this way too. Everybody uses models and develop their own modes of expression over time.

Zinsser sees the difference between using cliches, usually a big mistake, and adding something from the vernacular, where the addition strengthens the writing. The use of proper grammar should always be maintained. The rules exist for a reason—because readers expect good writing to follow the rules. To do otherwise distracts and shows a contempt for the language.

The writer should maintain a consistent voice throughout, regardless of subject matter. Zinsser does not use sports English when writing about sports, or jazz English when writing about jazz. He uses the English that has developed into his voice all the time. This makes his writing immediately recognizable for his readers.

Taste determines a writer's voice, but taste is something that is impossible to define. One person's taste is different from another's. Yet the results of having taste show up in the finished work, and having good taste means that the finished work appeals to an audience that appreciates the taste. Taste also changes from time to time, and what was considered good taste years ago may again be considered good taste tomorrow.

## Part IV: Chapter 20 The Sound of Your Voice Analysis

Analysis



## Part IV: Chapter 21 Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence

### Part IV: Chapter 21 Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence Summary

During his childhood, the writing style of the New York Herald newspaper impressed Zinsser. He made it his goal to learn the style and make it a part of his own. That dream came true after he returned home after World War II. The style incorporates the warmth, humor, and mastery of the English language that the author writes about throughout the book. The New York Herald is where he learned the basic ideas.

Sometimes writers need to force the writing out whether they feel like it or not. This is not different from any performer having a down day, other than the audience is not in the same room. The writer keeps the audience in mind though, and sometimes the writing pleases neither the writer nor the intended audience. Nevertheless, the effort needs to be made to throw on the writing switch. Writers write, as dancers dance and painters paint, every day.

"Probably the biggest fear for nonfiction writers is the fear of not being able to bring off their assignment" (p. 246). This fear can keep writers from exploring new subjects because they do not have a background in the area. At least two things are wrong with the fear. The first is that gaining knowledge of the subject is an important part of the writing process, called research. The second is that no subject is so far away from anyone that some part of it is not already known. An advantage of diving into an unfamiliar subject is that the writer will be asking the basic questions, and this will help reader understanding.

Zinsser takes on an assignment for Audubon magazine, although he knows very little about birds. But he does know how to conduct interviews and how to ask questions. He succeeds in the assignment and becomes known as an expert in the field, although the expertise actually comes from his interviewee, Roger Tory Peterson.

Unearned confidence seldom leads to success and more often results in foolish actions. The author advises that the best way to build confidence is to write about the subjects that interest the writer first, and then branch out into the unfamiliar. All of the skills in writing, especially conducting an interview, should be mastered before branching out.

### Part IV: Chapter 21 Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence Analysis

Analysis



# Part IV: Chapter 22 The Tyranny of the Final Product

## Part IV: Chapter 22 The Tyranny of the Final Product Summary

The author establishes an important point: writers tend to focus on the final product rather than the process of creating the final product. Zinsser does not want to teach people how to become published, and this is due mostly to his not knowing what editors want. He can teach people how to write well though, and he does this at the New School in Manhattan.

His teaching method is different from most college instructors. Zinsser throws away the idea that papers must have deadlines. He instead gives the students breathing room to make all the decisions necessary before the words are set on paper. The students must decide what to write about, what angle to take with the subject, what perspective is to be maintained throughout the writing, and how to reduce the subject down to a manageable size.

The class is different in its approach, and the technique works. Traditionally structured classes miss the entire point by keeping the focus on the final product rather than the process to get there. Zinsser speculates that American cultural habits are probably at fault. Winning is all-important. Nobody cares about all the work that goes into winning, or that the attempt is more important than the result when considering the overall life of any individual.

Along this avenue, the author explains that writing for its own sake is a valuable skill. Becoming published is one way to successful writing, but another way is to write for the self or for a small group, such as one's family. Good writing is just that, whether published or not, and the true gains for the writer may never be measured. But they exist.

## Part IV: Chapter 22 The Tyranny of the Final Product Analysis

Analysis



## Part IV: Chapter 23 A Writer's Decision

### Part IV: Chapter 23 A Writer's Decision Summary

Where the previous chapter dealt with "shape, structure, compression, focus and intention" (p. 265), this chapter brings in the many detailed decisions that Zinsser makes while writing. He searches for the right words, often for hours, and the best rhythms. Each sentence must lead to the next, and each paragraph must draw the reader onward through the whole story.

Breaking a long story into sections helps to manage the overall task. The author walks through one of his articles and explains his underlying thinking for key decisions. His lead consists of six paragraphs that quickly outline a trip he took with his wife and a few other tourists to Timbuktu, with the purposes of witnessing a salt caravan and experiencing the desert. He then uses an asterisk to break the story into its next phase.

The next section fleshes out the journey to Timbuktu and the author's perception of the place. He uses allusions to popular movies to stir his readers, creates sharp imagery, and drops small jokes. The tour guide's name is Mohammed Ali, a somewhat disinterested man, and the experience has so far not lived up to the travel brochure's promises. Zinsser makes more small jokes about this fact, which is one of his techniques for bringing his personality into the article.

The tour takes the group of tourists into the desert, where they actually do see salt caravans and experience a night in the desert with Bedouins. The author decides to end the story with his deep sense of satisfaction with the desert, as this is the real story. This is what prompted him to visit Timbuktu, which has little to do with how salt is transported by camel across the desert. Zinsser points out the importance of knowing where the story ends. Had he included the subsequent return to Timbuktu and his impressions of the salt caravans, he would have bored his readers and himself.

### Part IV: Chapter 23 A Writer's Decision Analysis

Analysis



## Part IV: Chapter 24 Write as Well as You Can

### Part IV: Chapter 24 Write as Well as You Can Summary

Zinsser cannot point to a time when he had decided to become a writer, but he does remember wanting to work for a newspaper. His mother instilled in him a love and respect for good writing, whether in books, newspapers, or whatever the print medium. His father brought to him a strong work ethic toward quality. These two character traits led him into writing, and to writing always as well as he can.

The author gains his edge over the competition by writing in an entertaining manner. His attitude is that if the writer does not make the trip for the reader enjoyable, then the entire point of writing is missed. Editors can miss the point too and try to rewrite away from Zinsser's intentions. Zinsser fights this as much as he can, even to the point of buying back an article rather than letting an editor ruin it.

The author sees a disturbing erosion of the relationships among freelance writers and editors. The editors exercise too much liberty with the writing and treat the freelance writers as if they were hired help. However, the author does give credit to all the good things that editors can do for writers. In the end, some editors are better than others from the writer's perspective. Zinsser advises that the writer should strive to do the best work possible and to defend it against overly invasive editors. The writer owes this to self and to the reader.

### Part IV: Chapter 24 Write as Well as You Can Analysis

Analysis



# Characters

## William Zinsser

William Zinsser is the author of the book. The subject of the book is largely about how the author writes, what brought him into writing, and what keeps him in the profession. He produces articles and nonfiction books, and so the focus is on these forms. The advice given is useful for all forms of writing, whether it be journalism, poetry, fiction, or business writing.

Zinsser's credibility is within his writing of this book and his choice of examples from other good writers. The man writes well, has a distinctive voice, and puts all the principles he writes about to use. Some readers may disagree with a few choices that he makes in the writing of this book, but the main strength is that Zinsser describes how he makes these choices. Every writer makes similar choices all the time, whether conscious of it or not.

The sense of ethics that the author brings to the writing profession is very strong and highly aimed. His integrity makes a good example for all writers during a time of exceptional efforts to deceive through language. Political speech writers and consultants are highly paid to dream up the next round of euphemisms and cleverly-worded lies. The corporate world is not much better, or may be worse when the broad impacts are considered. William Zinsser offers a better way for all writers, and that is to be honest, to take pride in their writing, and to defend their writing courageously.

Zinsser's style arises directly from his desire to keep every unnecessary word out of his writing. Every remaining word must do meaningful work, or out it goes. This is not to say that his style is stilted or boring. He knows that sharp imagery and humor do important work too, and that work is to entertain the reader. In essence, the writer's personality must be strong within the finished work. This is often called the writer's voice.

## Other Good Authors

Several other good authors are quoted within the book. Zinsser admires these writers for varying reasons, but they all write well. They all bring their unique personalities into the writing and have highly developed skills with the language. Some of this is talent, but Zinsser emphasizes that writing is a learned skill, a craft like any other. Good writers get that way from constant practice, through an admiration of the English language, and by way of an obsession with perfection. Only the right word is good enough, not a word that comes close to the real meaning. Bad sentences must be fixed or killed, but never tolerated. Poor writing habits must be identified and rectified. The real story must be told, and it must be told from the right viewpoint. Once the story demands to end, the good writers end it right there.



The other authors enter stage left and exit stage right when needed to illustrate and dramatize a set of Zinsser's points. At times Zinsser becomes one of the other writers himself and uses his own finished work as examples, but not out of ego motivation. The author can only guess at what thought processes go on in other writers' minds, but he knows exactly what he was thinking while writing.

Besides bringing in a variety of examples, the inclusion of other writers in the book gives a reading list for further study. The Sources section at the end of the book contains this comprehensive list. Hardly any book about writing does not give a similar list, but the choice of authors for this book is unique. These are the writers who impress Zinsser; this is not simply a list of great literature that everyone ought to read at some time or another for some reason or another. If Zinsser's lessons make sense, and if his style is appealing, then these are the other authors to explore.

## The Reader

A writer should keep the reader in mind always—when actually writing, when thinking about writing, and when observing the world. A writer does not write for an editor. The writing is for the reader who expects certain things to happen. The reader wants to be drawn into a story and be entertained. The reader enjoys a particular writer's personality, and that personality should be consistent, at least in the sense that both the actual personality and writing personality are closely related and change together.

Reading completes a transaction with the writer. Zinsser extends this transaction to the writer, where people can write for themselves. The writer is also the reader. Zinsser encourages people to write their life stories for nothing more than to gain a greater understanding of family, friends, enemies, and what went into the making of self.

## Editors

Zinsser describes two kinds of editors; those who are helpful, and those who attempt to destroy the work, oftentimes by misunderstanding the writer's intent. Either way, published works (unless self-published) must go through at least one editor before reaching the reader. Helpful editors understand the work and the author's intent. They strive toward perfecting what the author might have missed. They listen when the author tries to explain why something is the way it is. The worst kind of editor rewrites the author's work to the editor's style.

## Zinsser's Students

Zinsser takes delight in his students at the New School in Manhattan. They in turn cause him to wonder what is wrong with traditional education that makes it turn out poor writers. Meanwhile, his work with the students brings insights into the book that would not otherwise exist. The entire book seems to have been written for his students,





and Zinsser invites the reader to this special class that covers more ground than could ever be covered over a single college semester.

## Interview Subjects

The author refers to several of his interview subjects as examples on how to perform and perfect interview techniques. The interview is the best research source because it brings humanity into the story, along with facts that could never be discovered otherwise. Interview subjects are people, and when a writer interacts with people, some kind of magic happens. Ideas pop into view. Questions come to mind, one leading to another in ways that could not have been foreseen. The subjects are the next most interesting part of a writer's work, after the writer's personality.

## Zinsser's Parents

Zinsser's parents hover over all his work. His mother loves good writing, and his father keeps strong work ethics. The result is that the author loves to produce good writing, no matter how much work that takes, and he has no choice but to produce the best writing he can. He mentions his parents in passing, but that does not diminish their influence. It shows in his finished product.

## Joe DiMaggio

A quote from Joe DiMaggio ends the book. DiMaggio is a famous baseball player, and baseball is one of Zinsser's big interests. Zinsser admires how DiMaggio always does his best while playing ball. The quote has to do with how Joe does not want to disappoint a fan who might be seeing him perform for the first time. Zinsser implies a strong parallel for writers: writers should always strive to satisfy a new reader by always doing the best work possible.

## The Hack Writer

Zinsser occasionally mentions how some writers are hacks. He does not clearly define this term, possibly because it is writer's jargon, possibly because it is the worst thing one can call a writer outside of street curses. Considering the strong ethics that Zinsser holds, the hack writer must be one who does not follow a similar code. The hack writer fabricates sources, misquotes interview subjects, stretches the truth, promotes outright lies, and probably has not mastered the English language.

## Politicians

The author does not like politicians; not for their political views or use of power, but for their annoying and sometimes dangerous ways of communicating. The muddy waters

flow into the mainstream and infect the language with all kinds of monstrous deformities. The result is the death of good writing and the promotion of hack writers.

## **Jazz Musicians**

Zinsser likes jazz musicians so much that he wrote a book about them. He understands that a sense of music is necessary for writing well. Good writing incorporates rhythm and melodic flows, similar to how jazz works. The analogy is not perfect, as music exists for the moment unless recorded. By definition, writing is a recording, the record of an author's observations and thoughts about people and places.



# Objects/Places

## Articles

Articles are short pieces of nonfiction. Zinsser concentrates more on the article form than the longer book form, which makes the subject of writing well easier on reader comprehension.

## Books

Zinsser has written many published nonfiction books. He references several other books while writing this book. The writing of books involves all the principles of good writing and all of the research techniques, but at a much greater quantity than is required for articles.

## Computers

Once known as word processors, personal computers of today run word processing software as one of many possible applications. The personal computer has brought a new ease to the writing task, although all the old rules about good writing still apply. The author likes the personal computer because it has significantly reduced the drudgery of writing with a typewriter.

## Pad and Pencil

Zinsser prefers to take interview notes with a pad and pencil, not a tape recorder. He has used both and experiences fewer technical problems with the simple pad and pencil.

## Words

Words are the fundamental bricks a writer uses to construct a story. The choice of words must be accurate, strong, and useful. Most writers have a problem with using too many words on the first draft.

## Sentences

Sentences should be active, short, and move with an overall flow. A simple declarative sentence is better than a complex sentence that either runs on or comes close to doing so.



## Paragraphs

Paragraphs should not follow an arbitrary rule, but should have structural integrity built into them. One paragraph should tug the reader along to the next.

## Stories

Most nonfiction writing involves a story of one form or another. The stories may be simple, such as who did what where, when, how, and possibly why. The stories may be more complex, or they might simply tell the story on how to put a child's toy together. The story is the final structure that the writer builds with words, sentences, and paragraphs.

## The Work Area

Zinsser's work area is mentioned obliquely as a lonely place. Writers usually perform the task of stringing words together without the distractions of others, unless working in an office setting (e.g., cubicles, bull pens).

## Interview Subject's Place

Contrasting the writer's lonely work area, the interview subject's place of work, residence, or current location has direct impact on the story. Stories involve people and the places where they inhabit.

## The New School

The New School in Manhattan is where Zinsser teaches his writing classes. He enjoys doing this because he is passionate about the subject matter and interested in the students.

## Timbuktu

Timbuktu is a famous city that has declined but is still a favored tourist destination. Zinsser travels to Timbuktu and writes an article about the experience, which he uses as an example in the book.

## Sports Arenas

Zinsser loves sports and enjoys writing about them. He visits sports arenas to conduct interviews, as that is where the athletes, coaches, and owners congregate.

## Concert Halls

Zinsler loves music and enjoys writing about musicians. He visits concert halls to listen to music and to conduct interviews, as that is where the musicians congregate.



# Themes

## The Craft of Writing

Writing well is sometimes considered a talent and even an art, but Zinsser thinks of writing as a craft that should be practiced and perfected. Everybody has the ability to write well enough to produce clear prose without useless words or words that carry little, if any, meaning. Still, without clear thinking, clear writing cannot result. The act of writing can help organize thoughts on a subject, with the end result being clarity in both the thinking and writing.

Performing research on a subject is usually the first stage of writing, and the writer often conducts interviews during this stage. Mastering the interview is a major part of the writing craft and can only be learned by doing. Although the writer may be anxious about conducting interviews, most people like to talk about what they do for a living, for enjoyment, where they live, and what they have experienced. All the writer needs to do is listen, ask questions, and take notes.

Describing places is another major part of the craft. The writer needs to approach a place within the time context of the visit, yet understand the history of the place well enough to give the reader perspective. Something unique about the place beside the usual clichés should be sought out, whether that is the writer's point of view, a powerful impression within the time context, or some other angle. The writing craft often involves making the mundane special while avoiding overstatement and fabrication.

Writers make decisions all through the writing process, and a conscientious writer is aware of this. Mastering the craft means that the writer makes the decisions carefully, sometimes spending hours on a difficult problem, but mostly deciding quickly because the same problem has come up many times before.

## Writer's Integrity

The author takes integrity seriously. He insists that sources be correctly quoted, that interviews actually take place, that his background research is reported honestly, and that what he submits for publication is the very best work he can do. Zinsser has no respect for hack writers who regularly bend the truth to fit a theme or purposefully misquote. He is a little more forgiving of writers who become sloppy with their work, as they can improve if they so desire.

Connected directly with writer's integrity is the reputation of a writer and the writer's self-image. Writers should be intensely sensitive to any breach of integrity, as this can destroy the reputation and will lower the self-image. Zinsser keeps his personality in his writing and advises that all writers do the same to establish voice. This is also a public exposure of the writer's sense of ethics, and therefore a dangerous situation if the integrity is not kept high.



Sometimes writers find themselves under pressure from superiors within an organization or from editors to change the final product into something the writers do not intend. Zinsser fights hard when this happens because ultimately the reader will be seeing the author in the writing. If someone else distorts the writing, the writer will pay. The strength of Zinsser's integrity causes him to buy back an article if an editor distorts it too much, rather than allowing a bad product to be published under his byline.

## Courage

Writers must tap into courage in several ways. It takes courage to improve one's writing in the first place. The writer admits that the finished product has weaknesses, which also relates to the admission of personal faults. Zinsser admires those who can take this first step.

Conducting an interview takes courage. The writer faces a stranger, usually in a setting where the stranger is comfortable but not the writer. The writer carries the burdens of maintaining control and keeping the subject comfortable. Questions might not flow, answers might ramble away from the theme, pencils can break, and audio recorders can malfunction. Any number of things can go wrong, and facing up to the task, especially just after things went wrong in a previous interview, might cause a writer to consider alternative careers. A bad interview is like a bad live performance. Courage is needed to get back on the stage.

Revision, or as Zinsser likes to call it, rewriting, takes a kind of courage that breaks through an illusion that whatever one produces is perfect. This illusion is very strong in bad writers who do not realize yet that their writing is bad. Once the illusion is broken, the bad writers usually see where improvements can be made. Zinsser's technique for guiding people out of the illusion leads them to the continuing revision process that all good writers do regularly.

The greatest courage is required when a writer confronts a superior or an editor. The issue should therefore be highly important to the writer, as confrontation can degenerate into emotional fighting if not handled carefully. When at an impasse, Zinsser pulls his article, a clear act of courage. The integrity of his writing is more important than money and possibly any further assignments from the editor.

## Work Ethic

Writing well takes a lot of hard work. Zinsser has a strong work ethic that he learned from his father. His father ran the family business, and he never compromised the quality of the product. For the family business, this meant using only the best ingredients in the product, even if it meant that customers would be charged higher prices than the competition.

Zinsser's product is his finished writing. This starts with an idea, a round of research, refinement of the idea, more research, putting words onto paper for the first draft,



revisions, revisions—and more revisions. The amount of work that goes into a writer's finished product requires a strong work ethic, where the writer labors every day in some manner to build and improve the product.

The work ethic does not preclude working toward efficiency. The writer should try to determine point of view, article structure, and general tone before starting the writing process in order to save effort later on. Effort will be wasted if the writer postpones these decisions until well into the story because all stories need unity. Establishing unity from a half-written piece may require an entire rewrite.

## Entertainment

Zinsser tries hard to make his work entertaining. He does this by writing strong leads and concise endings, while injecting personality and humor throughout. His primary goal may be to inform, but he knows that if the reader does not feel something positive from the effort of reading, the primary goal will be lost. Oftentimes writers separate the two goals into genres, where informative pieces ignore the entertainment factor, and entertainment pieces do little to inform. Zinsser's approach is to always combine the two into a coherent whole.

Part of the entertainment factor within the author's work is his personality. He comes off as an honest man with a sense of play and humor, somebody who would be fun to be with. The story about visiting Katmandu brings out his adventuresome side, and his other pieces reflect a deep respect for people who deserve it. Zinsser knows who he is and that he is good at what he does, but his ego does not get in the way of admiring others for who they are and what they do well. This personality shading serves to draw readers into the stories, as they respect the subjects too, or will after reading about them.





# Style

## Perspective

William Zinsser is a highly published freelance writer and teacher of writing. He began his career as a newspaper reporter and columnist in New York City, where he still lives. His mother gave him a love of well-written nonfiction during his youth, and the paper gave him the training he needed to write well.

Zinsser presents a craft book for all those who wish to improve their writing skills. He makes no effort to elevate the writing craft beyond the realities of hard work, constant revision, attention to fine details, the need for high integrity, and the demands on courage. His audience could be executive management or students, professional writers or hobbyists. Many of the principles he brings out also apply to fiction writers, such as using the exact words and reducing clutter. The use of humor translates to a style of fiction writing, as does bringing in the author's personality in narratives.

## Tone

Description

## Language and Meaning

The tone of Zinsser's work is that of a highly developed nonfiction writer, where the writer's personality permeates the voice. His tone changes with mood or opinion from light banter to serious. Seldom does he fall into a bland narrative, and when he does, he pulls out with humor or some other technique meant to bring back interest.

Controlling the reader's interest constitutes the core principle of the writing craft. Changing tone is one way to accomplish this control, and integral to tone is word choice. Much of Zinsser's tone comes from his exacting word choices. He selects informal words when lightening the tone and more formal terms while in a serious mood. Another way he manipulates the tone is to end a paragraph with a short, insightful sentence. He also places some of his most powerful paragraphs at the end of chapters, where they serve to drive home important thoughts.

His tone seems conversational, but in fact he has no reader feedback on which to base tone changes. This author, and all authors, must imagine what the reader might be experiencing. Just how Zinsser came to master tone is not directly addressed, but a few hints are given. The writer should write to please self first, which means the writer is also the reader during the process of writing. The writer is always making decisions, and much of this decision-making process involves tone establishment and change. Finally, Zinsser advises the writer to read the writing aloud, an act that brings the written word into the spoken, the next best thing to having an actual conversation.



## Structure

On Writing Well starts at the beginning and ends where it must. Zinsser follows the writing task in a linear and logical progression, from the simplest to the most complex issues. A detour for miscellaneous grammar observations is given a separate chapter that can be skipped over or used as a reference. This technique avoids footnotes and makes the information potentially useful.

The book has four parts: Principles, Methods, Forms, and Attitudes. The Principles part includes an overview of the relationship between writer and reader, and several lessons on how language should be used while writing. The Methods part addresses specific skills to be developed in the writing craft. The Forms part contains chapters designed to fit several distinct writing types that people often encounter in their lives, whether as part of a profession or not. The Attitudes part talks about the higher complexities of the craft: voice, emotions, and several important issues for professional writers.

Zinsser successfully uses the tension-release form, which he borrows from his love of music. Good jazz builds tension, releases that tension, repeats the form, and eventually comes home. Zinsser comes straight out with analogies between good writing and good music.

## Quotes

"Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not the subject being written about, but who he or she is. I often find myself reading with interest about a topic I never thought would interest me—some scientific quest, perhaps. What holds me is the enthusiasm of the writer for his field. How was he drawn into it? What emotional baggage did he bring along? How did it change his life? It's not necessary to want to spend a year alone at Walden Pond to become involved with a writer who did" (p. 5).

"Who is this elusive creature, the reader? The reader is someone with an attention span of about 30 seconds—a person assailed by many forces competing for attention. At one time those forces were relatively few: newspapers, magazines, radio, spouse, children, pets. Today they also include a 'home entertainment center' (television, VCR, tapes, CDs), e-mail, the Internet, the cellular phone, the fax machine, a fitness program, a pool, a lawn, and the most potent of competitors, sleep. The man or woman snoozing in a chair with a magazine or book is a person who was being given too much unnecessary trouble by the writer" (p. 9).

"Sell yourself, and your subject will exert its own appeal. Believe in your own identity and your own opinions. Writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going" (p. 24).

"You learn to write by writing. It's a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it's true. The only way to learn to write is to force yourself to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis" (p. 49).

"Surprise is one of the most refreshing elements in nonfiction writing. If something surprises you it will also surprise—and delight—the people you are writing for, especially as you conclude your story and send them on their way" (p. 67).

"Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost. The idea is hard to accept. We all have an emotional equity in our first draft; we can't believe that it wasn't born perfect. But the odds are close to 100 percent that it wasn't" (p. 84).

"What's wrong, I do believe, is to fabricate quotes or to surmise what someone might have said. Writing is a public trust. The nonfiction writer's rare privilege is to have the whole wonderful world of real people to write about. When you get people talking, handle what they say as you would handle a valuable gift" (p. 115).

"The best gift you have to offer when you write personal history is the gift of yourself. Give yourself permission to write about yourself, and have a good time doing it" (p. 147).

"Let me illustrate how this disease infects the writing that most people do in their jobs. I'll use the school principals as my first example, not because they are the worst offenders (they aren't) but because I happen to have such an example. My points,



however, are intended for all the men and women who work in all the organizations where language has lost its humanity and nobody knows what the people in charge are talking about" (p. 168).

"How should a good piece of criticism start? You must make an immediate effort to orient your readers to the special world they are about to enter. Even if they are broadly educated men and women they need to be told or reminded of certain facts. You can't just throw them in the water and expect them to swim easily. The water needs to be warmed up" (p. 204).

"In short, our class began by striving first for humor and hoping to wing a few truths along the way. We ended up striving for truth and hoping to add humor along the way. Ultimately we realized that the two are intertwined" (p. 229).

"Decide what you want to do. Then decide to do it. Then do it" (p. 285).



## Topics for Discussion

List the stages of writing a good article in chronological order.

What is the importance of integrity for a nonfiction writer?

Select a current local topic and write a list of interview questions to be asked of a random person, any age and any profession, or no profession.

Using the same current local topic, write a list of interview questions to be asked of an expert on the topic.

Using the same current local topic, write a 500-word article about your opinions.

Describe how this book has changed your approach to writing.

Write a character description of William Zinsser based on his writing style and voice—what does he look like, what are his positive qualities, what are his negative traits, what would he do in various situations, why does he think the way he does.

Select another author whom you admire and analyze why you like the writing.

How could this book be used as a writing reference?

Of what use is a thesaurus?

Why should a writer follow the traditional rules of grammar?

When might a writer break the traditional rules of grammar?

Visit a place that is convenient and familiar, pay close attention to the details of the place, your thoughts, impressions and feelings, and then write a 500-word article about your experience.

How has modern word processing software made the writing task easier?