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BUILDING GREAT SENTENCES

How to write the kinds of sentences you love to read.

THE GREAT COURSES™

BROOKS LANDON

Building Great Sentences

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How to Write the Kinds of Sentences You Love to Read

BROOKS LANDON

A PLUME BOOK

PLUME

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of words. Digital media inundate us with language in a twenty-four/seven barrage never possible in the world of printer's ink. Constant Web updates, blogs, e-mails, instant messaging, tweets, Facebook comments, and a cascade of electronic texts give us expanded opportunities to share our writing with others. Even in the age of Skype and FaceTime we continue to interact with others through writing. More and more it is important that we represent ourselves to the world through writing that is effective—clear, precise, satisfyingly informative writing that reveals the individuality and sophistication of our thinking. And we cannot be effective writers without writing effective sentences.

Whatever the medium, print or digital, our basic unit of communication is the sentence. Good sentences are alive. We experience them in time, and we react to their unfolding as they twist and turn, challenging us, teasing us, surprising us, and sometimes boring or confusing us as we read them. This book will explore the ways we can make our sentences better. To accomplish that we need to understand how making our sentences longer or shorter can make them more effective, more informative, more satisfying. We need to understand how taking control of building and trimming our sentences can improve our writing.

Our goals will be to learn about how sentences work, what they do, and how we can think and talk about them in ways that will help both our own writing and our understanding of prose style. We will stretch our sense of all the things a sentence can be or do. We will explore the mysterious concept of "style" to discover what style does and does not mean. This is a book in which we will dance with language, not a book in which we will trudge toward remedial correctness.

Dancing with language can be a rowdy affair. We might wish this dance had the precision, rules, and predictability of a tango, but it probably has much more in common with freestyle dancing that is more spontaneous and more creative, open to new steps and encouraging the reinterpretation of old ones. When the writer dances with language, toes do sometimes get stepped on as rules are broken. Of course, in dancing, as in writing, we need some ideas of what the rules are before we can break them. Before this dancing metaphor runs away with me, however, I better start talking as the writing teacher I am, rather than the dancing instructor I most certainly am not.

I'm no writing guru with mystical formulas for success. I *am* both a longtime student of writing theory and a writing teacher with over thirty years of experience. During that time, I've both learned a lot about writing and passed along what I've learned to several generations of students. What I believe and teach about writing is more thoughtful than theoretical, based more on what I've found helpful to my students in the classroom than on strict adherence to any single philosophy or theory of composition. My approach to teaching writing does, however, grow out of the three broad categories of writing instruction that are focused on the sentence.

At the heart of my approach is Francis Christensen's belief in the value of cumulative sentences built by adding modifying phrases to base clauses or "kernel" sentences. I expand Christensen's advocacy of cumulative sentences by identifying and explaining the value of a range of syntactical and rhetorical patterns, forms, or

schemes I ask my students to imitate until they learn how to adapt these patterns to their own uses. In trusting the value of imitation as a basis for rather than as the opposite of creativity, I am championing a classical approach to writing I believe remains highly effective. The third component of my approach to writing incorporates many of the assumptions of sentence-combining strategies popular in the 1970s. I'll say more about the nature and history of those three sentence-based approaches in my final chapter, after you've had a chance to experience and try out some of my particular spin on their methods and assumptions. For now I want to assure you that my approach to building great sentences grows out of pedagogies of proven effectiveness and promotes ways of building better sentences that fine writers know and practice. In drawing from and finding ways to combine these three broad approaches to the sentence I also try to provide a better understanding of the ways in which our standards and "rules" for effective writing have changed over time—and continue to evolve.

No rules or formulas or mechanical protocols can prepare us for the infinite number of tasks our sentences must accomplish, but there are a number of basic strategies we can learn that help make our sentences more effective. I'm going to introduce you to a broad range of techniques, but a particular favorite of mine is the cumulative sentence, an especially useful syntax employed by professional writers and best understood in terms first laid out by composition theorist Francis Christensen back in the 1960s.

Before we can work with a specific syntax, we need to understand the basic principles that guide the creation and use of all sentences. Accordingly, this book will look closely and carefully at sentences from a number of different angles, starting with their underlying logic and moving through the reasons why we cannot separate the content of a sentence from its form, its meaning from its style. We will look at the ways sentences work, from the most basic kernel sentences that are nothing more than a subject joined with a verb, to the most elaborate and extended master sentences, some stretching to lengths of more than one hundred words.

In examining the ways in which sentences work and why they sometimes don't work, we will also encounter, understand, and possibly even master some of the secrets of prose style. Everyone who writes about prose style advances a particular view of it, and each view reflects the personal values and preferences of that particular writer. Yet somehow we generally agree that there is something called prose style. We generally agree on a number of aspects of writing that seem to have something to do with style, and we generally agree that there are some writers, ranging from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion to John Updike, Don DeLillo to Marilynne Robinson, who just seem to be better at it than others. When F. Scott Fitzgerald writes in *The Great Gatsby*, describing Daisy, "Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen,' a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour," who can doubt that we are in the hands of a great writer?

This book can't begin to explain all of the mysteries of prose style. Nor can it offer universally agreed-upon standards for writing that is great or even effective. What this book can do is look closely and carefully at sentences, the most important building blocks of prose, the foundation of written communication, and the essential units of prose style. I hope you will join me in considering and celebrating the magic of the sentence as you think about and try out some of the writing strategies I suggest in this book. All of my ideas about sentences may not fit your goals for your own writing, but I hope you will find my discussion useful even

when you do not agree with some of its parts. My ultimate goal, you see, is not to get you to agree with me about a specific view of writing but to encourage you to join me in the much larger and more important enterprise of exploring the power and promise of language.

Next Steps

At the end of each chapter in *Building Great Sentences* I'll suggest some writing exercises that may help illustrate the ideas and methods explored in the chapter. Writing is a purpose-driven activity and most of our day-to-day writing purposes call on us to construct something longer than an individual sentence. Yet, in this book my advice will rarely be about units of prose larger than the sentence. The classic advice given to backpackers trying to limit the weight they have to carry is "Pay attention to the ounces, and the pounds take care of themselves." Something very similar is true of writing: "Pay attention to your sentences, and most other writing problems take care of themselves." Nevertheless, in my Prose Style class at Iowa I do suggest to my students that they craft their responses to specific syntactic assignments as if the individual sentences were part of a larger writing project. I suggest they imagine that they are writing their autobiography or a description of how they mastered a skill or learned a lesson. They might imagine they are writing a profile of someone who had a significant impact on their lives. You may have an actual writing project to which you can direct your sentence experiments or you may actually prefer to craft your sentences with no connections among them other than the range of your imagination. Most of the exercises I will suggest as Next Steps involve so many variables that they will not elicit sentences that are right or wrong. But they will help you understand how sentences work—and what can make them great.

• CHAPTER ONE •

A Sequence of Words

"This is what I mean when I call myself a writer," writes novelist Don DeLillo. "I construct sentences." Thomas Berger, the author of *Little Big Man* and a writer, like DeLillo, long celebrated for the vitality of his language, makes much the same point when he terms the sentence "the cell beyond which the life of the book cannot be traced, a novel being a structure of such cells." As Berger explains:

> In another sense, only the sentence exists or at any rate can be proved to exist. Even at the stage of the paragraph, things are becoming theoretical and arbitrary. A "novel" is an utter hallucination: no definition of it, for example, can really distinguish it from a laundry list. But a sentence—there you have something essential, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken.

Of course, the sentence in which Berger describes the sentence as "something essential, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken" is not just a sentence—that's a great sentence! And here's the beauty of great sentences: they come in all shapes and sizes and lots of different things can make them great. Great precision and specificity, great dramatic impact, great sound, great ways in which they direct the reader's thinking, great ways in which they reveal the writer's mind at work, great logical progression, great imagery—and the list goes on and on. Once we start looking at and thinking about individual sentences, rather than simply thinking of the sentence as just another brick in a wall of words, once we consider the sentence with the care we bring to the reading of poetry, we separate ourselves from most other readers and writers and can set out in pursuit of greatness. Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist Michael Cunningham should be our guide here, with his wonderful comment: "I'm still hoping to write a great sentence. If I do, I'll let you know."

I think I know why Cunningham, DeLillo, and Berger declare their passionate allegiance to the sentence, and while I don't pretend to write sentences as well as they do, I believe that the sentence is where we must start if we hope to understand why some writing captivates us and other writing leaves us unmoved. To be better writers, we must first and foremost write better sentences. I'm absolutely certain that whatever great writing may be, the secret to achieving it has largely to do with learning how to write great sentences. So, as I said before, this will be a book about sentences. Even more bluntly, this will be a book about how to make sentences longer.

Why longer? It's hard to improve on any of the well-known, justly celebrated

one- and two-word sentence classics our culture has enshrined. “Jesus wept,” the shortest verse in the New Testament, comes to mind, as does “Nuts!” the famous reply offered by General Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of the 101st Airborne, when the Germans demanded his surrender during the Battle of the Bulge. But no one can really teach how to write one- and two-word sentences, and most of us will go a lifetime without being presented with the opportunity for crafting stunning short sentences. So, for reasons I hope to make clear as we go along, this is a book about how we make sentences longer, and it’s based on my assumption that longer sentences—and this is important—*when carefully crafted and tightly controlled*, are essential keys to great writing. Listen to Joseph Conrad’s elegantly balanced and extended sentence describing a native woman in *Heart of Darkness*, a sentence I truly love: “She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.” I find that sentence more interesting *as a sentence* than either “Nuts!” or “Jesus wept.”

There’s an old advertising slogan originally made famous by a cigarette manufacturer: “It’s not how long you make it, but how you make it long.” We will not be making sentences longer to showcase our big vocabularies or simply because we can. A longer sentence is not necessarily a better sentence, but a sentence containing more useful information, more specific detail, and more explanation will *almost* always be better than a shorter sentence that lacks that information, detail, and explanation. And longer sentences, when they are appropriate, need to be carefully designed and controlled in ways that make them easy to follow and understand: more information, detail, and explanation are wasted if the reader cannot easily keep in mind what the sentence is doing. My goal is to show you how to add to the informational texture of your sentences—their propositional content—and consider their affective or dramatic impact on your readers.

What Sentences Do

“Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?” Gertrude Stein once asked. Certainly the sequences of words we identify as sentences are capable of providing pleasure, just as surely as they are capable of conveying crucial information. Sometimes the most important information sentences convey *is* pleasure, as they unfold their meanings in ways that tease, surprise, test, and satisfy. Sometimes the way sentences unfold their meaning is the most important meaning they offer.

Let’s start by thinking about what a sentence is and how it works, and let’s start with that sentence from Gertrude Stein: “Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?” We know sentences can function as exclamations, imperatives, declarations, or interrogatives, and this one seems at first glance to be an interrogative. It asks a question. It’s a simple question. Or is it? Isn’t it really a declaration that a sequence of words *should be* a pleasure? Or is it an invitation to list the numerous occasions when a sequence of words is definitely not a pleasure? “I have a case of stomach flu” comes to mind, or “The Internal Revenue Service has selected your return from last year for an audit.” Not much pleasure there! Or is it an argument that language should do nothing but give pleasure? Does it almost have the force of an exclamation—saying, in effect, “Words in sequence—always a pleasure!” What does this seemingly simple sequence of words actually mean? How does it actually work?

Insofar as we think we understand what Stein meant with the above phrase, what are some of the ways she could have gotten that meaning across with different sentences? Just think of a few of the many, many different ways she might have written this sentence:

Why should a sequence of words not be a pleasure?
Why should a sequence of words not give pleasure?
Shouldn't a sequence of words always give pleasure?
A sequence of words should always be a pleasure.
A sequence of words should always be pleasurable.
Words in sequence should always give pleasure.
We should always find pleasure in a sequence of words.
Why should a sequence of words not always give us pleasure?

And so on and on and on.

Not Just a Sequence of Words: The Basic Elements of a Sentence

Sentences are sequences of words, but just adding words together to make a sequence does not create a sentence. "Teacher yellow September swims hungry" is a sequence of words, but it's not a sentence because it lacks a subject and a predicate and therefore does not express a proposition. "I am a teacher" is a sequence of words that is a sentence because it contains a subject, "I," and a predicate, "am a teacher," and thus it does advance a proposition. The subject is who or what is spoken of or talked about, and the predicate is what is said about the subject. Usually the subject of a sentence will be a noun or noun phrase or pronoun, and the predicate will contain some form of verb.

A proposition, which is usually expressed in the form of a sentence, is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected. The relationship between propositions and sentences is a little hard to pin down, since a sentence will advance or express one or more propositions, and a proposition will always be in the form of a sentence. The key here is to think of a sentence as being a visible piece of writing, while the propositions it advances are not necessarily written out. The easiest way of thinking about this relationship is to say that a written sentence usually rests on or contains or combines a number of underlying propositions, most of which the sentence simply assumes, and which would be too basic or simple-sounding to actually write out. If we write "Estranged from his family, ineffectual in his teaching, and disappointed in his writing, James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus seeks refuge in the life of the mind," we have suggested much more about Stephen than how he seeks refuge.

I like to think of the written sentence as the part of the iceberg you see above water, while many of its underlying propositions remain out of sight underwater. To put it another way, propositions are the atoms from which the molecule of the sentence is constructed. Most propositions usually contain several smaller or constituent propositions, as we see in the proposition I mentioned a moment ago, "I am a teacher," which contains within it the proposition that I exist (there is an I), and that there is a thing called teacher, and that I am one of those things. So, while many of us have been taught that a sentence is a sequence of words containing a subject and a predicate that expresses an idea, it's actually the case that most sentences express or imply *a number* of ideas. "I like hamburgers" expresses a thought, but what exactly do I mean by *like*? What kind of hamburger am I thinking

of, and why do I want someone to know this about my taste habits? As is frequently the case, many questions can be asked about this simple declaration, and each question reminds us of unspoken, unwritten propositions that may underlie the surface of this seemingly simple sentence. The sentence above about Stephen Dedalus, for example, rests on numerous propositions about his family, his occupation, and his state of mind.

We all know that sentences can convey a host of meanings, both intended and unintended, just as the manner of conveying any meaning may differ along a continuum of emotional impacts, described by stylistic theorist Walker Gibson as ranging from "tough style" to "sweet style" to "stuffy style." For instance, I might have said "You better believe I like hamburgers," which would be "tough style," or "Don't you think hamburgers are just fabulous?" which would be a "sweet style," or "My gastronomic preferences include, but are not limited to, that peculiarly American version of the sandwich known as a hamburger"—definitely a "stuffy style."

If we return for a moment to Gertrude Stein's sentence, "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" we can see that it actually advances a number of propositions, including that there are these things we call words. Words can be put together in a sequence. Words in a sequence can give pleasure. Words in a sequence ought to give pleasure. Words in a sequence should give nothing but pleasure, and are there reasons why words in a sequence should not be a pleasure?

I'm trying to make the point that the basic unit of writing is the proposition, not the word or even a sequence of words, and we build sentences by putting propositions together. The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the propositions those words stand for or refer to. One of our first goals will be to understand how sentences combine propositions to present information, and how we can present our own ideas more effectively.

Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Choices

Each sentence we write reflects several choices: Why write rather than speak? What should we write about, and what do we want to accomplish in writing about it? Which words should we use? In what order should we put those words? There's not much any writing teacher can do to tell you when to write or to help you choose your subject matter or to help you decide what you want your writing to do. But I can address some important things you'll want to keep in mind as you choose your words, particularly the degree of precision in your vocabulary choices, and I can address how you put together the words you choose. We call that order "syntax."

The order in which our sentences unfold or hit the reader is entirely within our control. Even better, syntactical choices can help us increase the precision of our writing, bringing what we say into sharper focus, even if we don't have a mental thesaurus.

Sometimes language scholars refer to the choice of words we use as "paradigmatic choices" and the choices about the order we put them in as "syntagmatic choices." We can imagine that each sentence we write results from paradigmatic choices we make along a vertical axis of alternate vocabulary choices we might make for each word in the sentence. Each sentence we write results from syntagmatic choices we make along a horizontal axis we read from left to right: deciding whether to put the verb early or late in the sentence, deciding where to put

modifying phrases, deciding whether the information in the sentence will be coordinated (adding phrases like cars to a train) or subordinated (one piece of information made a clarifying helper to a more important piece of information). The terms *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* are not in themselves important for us to remember, but they help us understand two of the most important variables in our writing: word choice and word order.

Going back to Stein's "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" we can see that in place of "sequence of words" she might have said "string of words" or "series of words" or "bunch of words" or "combination of words" or "number of words." Or she might just have said, "Why should words be anything but a pleasure?" leaving out *sequence* altogether. But she chose the word *sequence* over a number of other possibilities, just as she chose to use the word *pleasure* over *gratification*, *satisfaction*, *joy*, *delight*, or any number of other words suggesting a positive experience.

Any word we write is chosen from a list of synonyms or a list of words that are either more or less abstract. When I write "I got into my car," for instance, I could use a more abstract word such as *vehicle* or *transportation*. I got in my vehicle. I got in my transportation. Or I could use a less abstract word such as *sedan* or *minivan*. I got in my sedan. I got in my minivan. Or I could choose an even less abstract, more precise word or term, such as *Ford* or *Ford Fusion*. "I got in my Ford Fusion." You can imagine a vertical series of more abstract words above the word we choose, or more precise words below the word we choose. Semanticists refer to this paradigmatic axis as the "ladder of abstraction," and it reminds us that one of the important variables in our writing is the degree of precision in our choice of the words we use.

The other major choice we make when we write a sentence is the order in which we arrange the words we choose. For example, Stein could just as easily have made her question "Why should we get anything but pleasure from a sequence of words?" We might think of the order in which words appear in a sentence as choices made along that horizontal or syntagmatic axis we call syntax.

Form Is Content; Style Is Meaning

Now that we've identified the three main factors that determine the style and effectiveness of our writing—propositional content, word choice, and syntax—let's go back to our sentence from Gertrude Stein one more time to see the most important assumption underlying this book: that *the same words in different order have different meanings*, or to put this another way, that *style is content*.

Most of us have been taught to think of style and meaning, or form and content, as two different things and, indeed, it is almost impossible to talk about language without resorting to this binary opposition. We think of content as the ideas or information our writing conveys, and we think of style as the way in which we present these ideas. Many aphorisms and metaphors have been used through the years to describe style, ranging from "Style is the man himself" to "Style is the dress of thought." Most of these metaphors confuse our understanding of style as much as or more than they clarify it. If we have to use a metaphor to explain style, we might better think of the onion, which consists of numerous layers of onion we can peel away until there's nothing left. The onion is its layers, and those layers don't contain a core of "onionness," but they are themselves the onion.

Similarly, when we write a sentence, the way we choose to order its

propositional content subtly affects that content so that the meaning changes ever so slightly with every vocabulary and syntactical choice we make. It's probably safe to say that all of us can agree that the point of Stein's "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" is that words should do more than just convey information, that language is itself an experience worth considering, quite apart from its reference. But do we really believe that "Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?" means exactly the same as:

Why shouldn't words in sequence always be a pleasure?
Shouldn't a sequence of words be always a pleasure?
A sequence of words should always be a pleasure.

We read these sentences differently. Each reflects different stylistic choices, and each hits the reader just a little bit differently than does Stein's original sentence, which is dismissive of opposition, as only Gertrude Stein could be. Another way of looking at this assumption is to say that when we write, we are doing something with our sentences, and what we do unfolds in time, whether to our readers' eyes or ears. The summarizable information conveyed in our sentences is only a part of their meaning, since what they do to a reader, the way they direct the reader's thinking, may be at least as important as the information they contain.

The point of all this is simply to remind us of something we never forget in speaking to one another—that the way we say things may be as important as or more important than what we say—but it's something we frequently forget when we are writing. This inseparability of form from content was what poet Archibald MacLeish was trying to explain in his poem "Ars Poetica" when he famously noted that "a poem should not mean / but be."

Understanding how sentences put propositions together is the first step in understanding how they work and learning how to make them work for us. We will do this by studying the ways in which sentences combine information by coordinating it, subordinating it, or subsuming it in modification. I'm going to throw a bunch of terms at you that are simply fancy ways of talking about sentence structure. We will look at the difference between sentences that combine information through loose syntax that puts the subject and verb near the beginning of the sentence, and those that do so through periodic syntax, delaying the unfolding of the sentence's most important news until the very end, creating a sense of suspense that demands the reader's attention, sometimes to that very last word. We will pay particular attention to the cumulative sentence, a special kind of loose syntax that can also function suspensefully (and, as we will see, suspensively) because it offers powerful generative or heuristic advantages to the writer who understands its forms. We will study the sentence as a thing in motion, a thing alive, considering the strategies writers can use to give sentences pace and rhythm, particularly the duple rhythms of balance and the three-beat rhythms of serial constructions.

I'm not sure where great writers come from or how to become one. I wish I knew! I am sure, however, where *better* writers come from and how to become one. All of us can learn to use the tools and strategies writers need to master in order to write great sentences. This book will identify and explain what I think are the most important and most useful tools and strategies for improving our writing.

Next Steps

Craft a short sentence that contains at least a subject, a verb, and an object. It can be as simple as “The teacher entertained his students with a humorous lecture.” Consider the several propositions that actually underlie your sentence. Then consider “ladder of abstraction” possibilities that are both more abstract and more precise options for each word in your sentence. (This will cause you to think about the sentence’s paradigmatic axis.) And, finally, consider how you might rearrange the words and/or underlying propositions of your sentence. (This will cause you to think about the sentence’s syntagmatic axis—or syntax.) For example, the sentence I suggested above might be reconsidered with changes to both axes to read: “Captivating his English majors, the professor delivered a hilarious lecture.”

• CHAPTER TWO •

Grammar and Rhetoric

I've always been fond of a distinction John Steinbeck draws in his introduction to *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, a little book describing a marine-specimen-collecting trip Steinbeck and his friend Ed Ricketts made in 1940. Steinbeck considers what it means to go on an expedition, and how each expedition inevitably shapes the reality it hopes to study. He notes that naming the parts of a fish and cataloging a fish in terms of its structure doesn't actually tell the full story. As he explains, a fish can be rigorously identified by counting its spines:

> For example: the Mexican sierra has "XVII-15-IX" spines in the dorsal fin. These can be easily counted. But if the sierra strikes hard on the line so that our hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being—an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman. The only way to count the spines of the sierra unaffected by this second relational reality is to sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff, colorless fish from a formalin solution, count the spines, and write the truth "D.XVII-15-IX." There you have recorded a reality which cannot be assailed—probably the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself.

Sure, Steinbeck is slanting the case to stress the subjective relationship we might have with a living fish over the technical, objective way we might need to identify the fish. But I love his reminder about the great differences that exist between the way we experience a live fish in nature and the way we encounter a dead fish in the laboratory. And his point seems to me to apply equally to sentences, and not just because they can also be slippery. Most of the terms we use to identify sentences or to label their parts treat the sentence as something dead, something to be dissected, its parts laid out on a table to be identified. This ignores the fact that what Steinbeck terms a "relational reality" exists between sentences and readers, just as surely and much more frequently, with much more usually at stake, than exists between a fisherman and a fish.

Whenever possible, I will use terms that focus on the sentence as a thing in motion, an experience, something with which we form a relational reality when we read, rather than something stiff and lifeless, whose parts can be counted or named. I see this distinction as primarily between viewing the sentence as a grammatical phenomenon or as a rhetorical phenomenon.

Impressive Writing Is Effective Writing

But before I get to the distinctions between grammatical and rhetorical concerns, I want to consider two judgmental terms I'll be using in my discussion of sentences: *effective* and *impressive*. Both of those modifiers have everything to do with what Steinbeck is talking about when he describes the relational reality someone might have with a living fish, and not much at all to do with labeling and categorizing with objective rigor. What one reader or writer may find impressive is not the same as what another reader or writer may find impressive, and while we may be able to measure effectiveness a bit more objectively than we can measure how impressive something is, determining how effective writing is remains largely a matter of personal taste. Let me tell you what I mean by these two important terms.

First, *effective*: Effective writing is writing that anticipates, shapes, and satisfies a reader's need for information. Effective writing gives the reader the information necessary for thoughtful consideration of the writer's purpose in introducing a subject. It anticipates the obvious questions an interested reader may form, and it accomplishes both the informational and emotional goals of the writer. Effective writing guides the reader's thinking, satisfies the reader's need for essential information, and implicitly assures the reader that he or she is in good hands, reading prose by a writer who anticipates both the reader's informational and emotional needs.

Unless the situation demands otherwise, sentences that convey more information are more effective than those that convey less. Sentences that anticipate and answer more questions that a reader might have are better than those that answer fewer questions. Sentences that bring ideas and images into clearer focus by adding more useful details and explanation are generally more effective than those that are less clearly focused and that offer fewer details. In practice, this means that I generally value longer sentences over shorter sentences, as long as the length accomplishes some of those important goals I've just mentioned.

Many of us have been exposed over the years to the idea that effective writing is *simple and direct*, a term generally associated with Strunk and White's legendary guidebook, *The Elements of Style*. Or we remember some of the slogans from that book, such as "Omit needless words." Unfortunately, it's a lot harder for us to remember that Strunk concluded his discussion of the mandate to omit needless words with this all-important qualifier: "This requires not that the writer make all sentences short or that he avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell." Strunk's concern is specifically with words and phrases that do not add propositions to the sentence, phrases like "the reason why is that" used in place of "because," or "owing to the fact that" in place of "since." It's far easier to remember the term *simple and direct* as a summary of Jacques Barzun's advice in his *Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* than it is to remember that simple does not mean simplistic, direct does not mean short, and simple and direct does not mean that we should all write like Ernest Hemingway in a hurry.

I like Faulkner as well as I like Hemingway, and I'd like to believe that even William Strunk and certainly E. B. White would not have tried to edit Faulkner out of existence. When Hemingway writes "He disliked bars and bodegas," speaking of an old waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," few of us would argue that his sentence is not simple and direct or that it is cluttered with needless words. But when Faulkner writes about the boy who's the protagonist in "Barn Burning" it's hard to see how Strunk and White's admonition might apply:

> The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish—this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of the blood.

Simple and direct it most certainly is not. Both writers, Faulkner and Hemingway, introduce us to the thinking of their characters, but just as the thinking of Hemingway's old waiter is infinitely more tired and less active than the thinking of Faulkner's boy, the sentence each writer constructs is intended to hit us in very different ways for very different reasons. Start cutting out words and simplifying the syntax in Faulkner's sentence and we'll miss the complex thinking that haunts the boy throughout the story.

But even Hemingway, the poster boy for simple and direct, reminds us that a simple and direct sentence is not the same as one that is simplistic and short, as we can see from another, earlier sentence from "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place": "In the daytime, the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference." While the propositions in this sentence are very short and are simply tacked together by conjunctions, the repeated use of *and* to link these propositions taps into the emotional power of polysyndeton, the classical rhetorical trope of stressing the use of conjunctions where a comma would suffice, in this case building a sense of great calm. A summary of the propositional content of this sentence would sound quite simple, but the rhetorical and affective impact of the sentence is carefully designed and employs a sophisticated rhetorical pattern.

"Omit needless words" is great advice, but not when it gets reduced to the belief that shorter is always better, or that "needless" means any word without which the sentence can still make sense. I don't intend any advice I give about writing sentences to contradict the generally quite useful advice we can find in Strunk and White, but I do want to suggest that it presents a very subjective aesthetic. Strunk and White do a great job of reminding us to avoid needless words, but they don't begin to consider all of the ways in which more words might actually be needed. My goal will be to explain why, in many cases, *we need to add words to improve our writing*, as Faulkner so frequently does, rather than trying to pare our writing down to some kind of telegraphic minimum, as is frequently the case with Hemingway.

While I'm mentioning Strunk and White, let me suggest that we could all do a lot worse than digging out that tattered copy we've had since high school or college and giving it a fresh read. Then let me suggest you acquire and put on your bookshelf, right next to Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, Bill Walsh's *Elephants of Style*, subtitled *A Trunkload of Tips on the Big Issues and Gray Areas of Contemporary American English*. And there's also another wonderfully irreverent critique of the Strunk and White bible in Arthur Plotnick's *Spunk and Bite: A Writer's Guide to Punchier, More Engaging Language and Style*.

Now, *impressive*: Effective writing is largely determined by how well the writer's efforts respond to the situation that has occasioned the writing, the writer's purpose in writing, and the reader's needs. Most of us can agree whether writing is effective or not, although we may disagree widely about whether one kind of

effective writing is preferable to another. Impressive writing is much harder for us to agree upon, and indeed, the implication of Strunk and White and a number of other guidebooks about writing might be that impressive writing—writing that calls attention to itself through complexity, elegance, or some other rhetorical flourish—is gaudy writing, overly lush, opulent, and mannered, and therefore should be avoided. What I term an impressive sentence will frequently display some form of "elegance" that may at first seem above and beyond the requirements of effectiveness. In his celebrated *Modern English Usage*, H. W. Fowler specifically warns against "elegant variation" in prose style, what he characterizes as the tendency of second-rate writers to concentrate more on "expressing themselves prettily" than on "conveying their meaning clearly."

I don't want to argue with Fowler any more than I want to argue with Strunk and White, so let me say that I'm referring to "impressive prose style" in the same way mathematicians refer to an elegant solution to a math problem. In fact, elegant solutions in math are the most direct routes to solving a problem, taking the fewest number of steps, offering the solution that is seen as the simplest, neatest, or cleanest response to a problem, no matter how complex the problem is. Writing problems, of course, are very different from mathematical problems.

As Jacques Barzun reminds us, "Language is not an algebra," and there is no single right answer to any given predicament with words. In impressive writing, elegance is indeed a matter of efficiency, but we need to remember that the problems a writer attempts to solve have an emotional dimension not associated with mathematics. There may be only one elegant solution to a math problem; there may be many different impressive solutions to a problem we address with language.

There may not be that much difference between writing we find effective and writing we find impressive. The two may actually be inextricably wrapped up with each other. We might think of impressive writing as writing that is unusually effective. Both terms, however, are subjectively relational, having to do with the impact writing has on a reader, with the way the reader experiences writing, rather than being objectively describable *only* in terms of the propositions they advance.

When we refer to sentences as being effective or impressive, we refer to what they do, rather than the parts they consist of, and no amount of sophisticated vocabulary or complicated syntax can make a sentence effective or impressive unless that sentence accomplishes the task it was intended to accomplish. Both Hemingway and Faulkner strike me as impressive writers because they're so good at accomplishing what they set out to do. It's hard to imagine the writer who could out-Hemingway Hemingway or out-Faulkner Faulkner, and attempts to do so generally seem humorous, as each found the impressive and elegant solution to the problems he wanted to write about.

Grammar Is Not Rhetoric

The final two terms I want to discuss, *grammatical* and *rhetorical*, are both easier to define than *effective* and *impressive*, and they're more important. If we remember Steinbeck's discussion of different ways of looking at and thinking about the Mexican sierra, we might say that grammatical descriptions of the sentence are primarily concerned with identifying its parts, while rhetorical descriptions of the sentence are primarily concerned with identifying that relational reality established when a reader reads or hears the sentence.

Grammar has to do with relationships among words, largely irrespective of

then try to represent those propositions in your versions by using different words and different word order. Then consider how the versions you came up with might be read differently—how they might have slightly different meanings.

• CHAPTER THREE •

The Primacy of Propositions

In 1926, H. W. Fowler, the legendary English lexicographer and philologist, writing in his authoritative *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, complained vociferously that *proposition* was a "Jack-of-all-trades" word that had come to be used in so many different ways that it really had no meaning. Disdainfully noting that misuse of this term had apparently spread from America to England, Fowler thundered that people use *proposition* because "there is less trouble in using it than in choosing a more suitable word from the dozen or so whose places it is apt to usurp."

What so bothered Fowler was that this term, so clearly tied to propounding or setting forth an idea in philosophy, had come to be used to refer to commercial proposals, tasks, jobs, problems, occupations, trades, opponents, prospects, enterprises worth undertaking, areas, fields, and, most galling of all, when used as a verb, making an "amatory advance." In the study of logic, a proposition is a statement in which the subject is affirmed or denied by the predicate. I have suggested that a proposition is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected. I like to think of a proposition as a kind of basic or elementary statement that can't easily be broken down into constituent propositions. "I live" is thus a proposition, but "I am tired and hungry" actually expresses two basic propositions, "I am tired" and "I am hungry."

Now, in rigorous logical terms, each of those propositions can actually be broken down further into propositions: that there is something called an "I"; that I am in the category of those things; that there's a category of physical or emotional condition known as being tired; that my physical or emotional condition falls into that category; and so on. But this kind of rigor will make us crazy and doesn't help us to write better sentences, so I generally won't push things past identifying the propositions directly indicated by visible words in a sentence. So I'll call "I am tired" a proposition and "I am hungry" a proposition, and say that the sentence "I am tired and hungry" expresses two propositions and that these two propositions can be expressed or advanced in a number of different ways. I might say "I, who am tired, am also hungry" or "I, being tired, am also hungry" or I might boil the two propositions down to single-word modifiers that let me start a sentence with "Tired and hungry" and then take it from there: "Tired and hungry, just back from a week in the bush, I limped into the mess hall, hoping the food lines were still open."

Propositions à la Chomsky

Fowler probably wouldn't approve of the way I'm using the term *proposition*, but Noam Chomsky probably would. In 1966, Chomsky famously made a seventeenth-

century discussion of propositions by the Port Royal Grammarians one of the central arguments for his theory of deep structure and transformational grammar. In *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, Chomsky claimed that the loose association of seventeenth-century French scholars known as the Port Royal Logicians, or Grammarians, had developed the framework for his discussion of language formation in terms of deep and surface structure, and the transformative steps that lead from the former to the latter.

Chomsky's claims in *Cartesian Linguistics* were immediately challenged, and his linguistic theories remain a site of controversy. For my purposes, however, those controversies are beside the point, since my concern is not with linguistic theories about the formation of language, a process that seems to take place largely at the unconscious level, but with theories of composition that focus on conscious decisions we make when we write sentences. What matters in Chomsky's discussion is the example of the relation between a sentence and its underlying propositions, as he cites from the *Port-Royal Grammar* published in 1660. The sentence Chomsky cites is "*Dieu invisible a créé le monde visible*." This sentence in English is "Invisible God created the visible world." The *Port-Royal Grammar* noted that this sentence actually advanced not just one, but three different propositions: that God is invisible, that God created the world, and that the world is visible, with the second proposition—that God created the world—being the most important. As Chomsky sums up his argument:

> In other words, the deep structure underlying the proposition "Invisible God created the visible world" consists of three abstract propositions, each expressing a certain simple judgment, although its surface form expresses only the subject-attribute structure.

Or, as he puts it another way, there exists a deep structure, an unwritten or unspoken "underlying mental reality," the unwritten propositions, below the surface structure of the spoken or written form of the sentence. He concludes that "the deep structure consists of a system of propositions, and it does not receive a direct, point-by-point expression in the actual physical object (the sentence) that is produced."

Propositions à la Landon

In borrowing Chomsky's example and applying it to the conscious choices we make in writing sentences, I'm neither endorsing nor challenging his theories of transformational grammar. His concerns are quite different from mine. The key here is to think of a sentence as being a visible piece of writing, and the propositions it advances as assumptions and ideas not necessarily visible or written out. As I've noted before, a written sentence usually rests on or contains a number of underlying propositions, most of which the sentence simply assumes, and which would be too basic or simple-sounding to actually write out.

I'll say it again: the basic unit of writing sentences is the proposition, and we build sentences by putting propositions together. The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the propositions those words stand for or refer to.

Let's take a look at some of the ways we can join propositions. Sentences can coordinate propositions by putting them side by side. For example, I might combine