

**WILLIAM
ZINSSER**

Author of *WRITING TO LEARN*

**ON
WRITING
WELL**

**FOURTH
EDITION**

**AN INFORMAL GUIDE
TO WRITING NONFICTION**

The classic book on nonfiction writing (more than a half million copies sold), revised, updated and expanded to include two new chapters, many new sections and many new examples of good writing

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 Harper Perennial

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Introduction

This book was written in 1976 and expanded in 1980 and 1986. Now, in 1990, it has been expanded again and has also had a major overhaul. I won't go so far as to say that with this Fourth Edition I've finally got it right. But I can say that it's the book I would like to have written in the first place.

I didn't write it earlier because I didn't know enough; I've continued to learn new things about writing and teaching writing. Much has also happened in the field itself. The advent of the word processor has given writers a whole new way to write, rewrite, edit and organize their work. Better yet, women have achieved recognition as important writers in every area of non-fiction. *On Writing Well* was still lopsidedly male, and I was impatient to fix it. One fix led to another, and I ended up writing two new chapters, adding many new sections, and making a number of revisions, updatings and cuts.

Originally the book grew out of a course that I created and taught at Yale, starting in 1971. I gave the course a plain title—"Nonfiction Workshop"—because I had a plain purpose: to try to help Yale undergraduates to write about the world they lived in. I taught out of my own experience: thirteen years as a writer and editor on the *New York Herald Tribune* and eleven more as a free-lance writer for magazines. I had been lucky in my apprenticeship: the *Herald Tribune* was an education in high

standards. The older editors who made us rewrite what we had written—and rewritten—were custodians of a craft; writing well was a point of honor. That notion of nonfiction writing as honorable work was what I now wanted to pass along myself.

In 1976 I put what I had been teaching into a book and assumed that it said everything I wanted to say. But then I began to visit schools and colleges and to talk with teachers and students. They raised many questions that hadn't occurred to me before, and I found that there was more to say after all. I wrote a Second Edition, which dealt with the questions that had been asked most often. I also expanded the chapter on humor, having since taught a course at Yale in humor writing, and wrote a new chapter on business writing, having since taught some workshops at American corporations which told me that they couldn't understand their own memos any more. The new edition of *On Writing Well* took on a robust new life—reason enough to leave well enough alone.

But unexpected events continued to help me in my own writing that I thought might help other writers; a Third Edition would have to be written. At least it could be written on a word processor, and I began with a chapter on how that machine helps writers to write—and, more important, to rewrite. Rewriting is the essence of writing, as this book has always insisted, but nowhere had I explained the process—what writers should look for when they revisit their first draft. Another new chapter, "Trust Your Material," grew out of a lesson that had taken me by surprise during a writing project of my own: that truth needs no adornment and that writers who overexplain their material are doing considerable damage.

Another new chapter, on nonfiction as the new American literature, grew out of an anger I had noticed among writers and teachers and had long felt myself. *On Writing Well* is grounded in the belief that nonfiction is where much of the best writing of the day is being done. Yet writers and teachers of

writing kept telling me that they are made to feel guilty if they prefer it to fiction. I wanted to assure them that no such guilt is necessary and to place nonfiction in its rich historical context. Finally, I wrote a new concluding chapter—very much a personal statement—called “Write as Well as You Can,” which states my belief that writers must set the highest standards for their work and then defend it against editors whose standards may not be as high. With this summarizing credo I felt that I had said my final word.

Suddenly, however, 1990 arrived. *On Writing Well* was a child of the '70s. Was the child ready for the new decade? I knew that its principles were still valid: it still worked as a teaching book. But did it represent the different person I had become and the different society America had become? I took a fresh look and got a jolt. Much of the nonfiction that I admire today is written by women; yet the examples of good writing that I had put in the book were mostly by men. How that happened was easy to see in retrospect. When I first started teaching, the writers I cited as models were the ones who had influenced me when I was learning the craft: H. L. Mencken, E. B. White, Joseph Mitchell, Virgil Thomson, Red Smith and many others. When the course became a book I just took those men along. I also now saw (with a little help from women readers) that the book was littered with male pronouns. “He,” “him” and “his” were used throughout to refer to “the writer” and “the reader.” Both in content and in tone *On Writing Well* was not representative of nonfiction writing today or of how I thought about it.

I hacked at the pronouns first, getting rid of several hundred examples of sexist usage. Where the male pronoun remains, I feel that it's the only clean solution. (For a fuller explanation of what I did, and why, see pages 117–120.) Then I added passages by women writers in many areas of nonfiction, from Diane Ackerman in science to Eudora Welty in memoir.

What the newly arrived women bring to the book is far more than the sum of who they are. They bring a new range of sensibilities and concerns. Janice Kaplan, for instance, writing about sports, goes to the heart of the gains—both in performance and in public attitude—that have revolutionized the status of women athletes. Molly Haskell, writing about movies, wonders at the compulsion of so many of today's male film-makers to make films about their idealized boyhood. Would a male critic also have found it odd? Kennedy Fraser, writing about memoir, reveals the healing power that women writers hold for other women when they dare to use such personal forms as journals, diaries and letters.

Next I took a fresh look at the men writers in *On Writing Well*. Some who had been in previous editions no longer served my purposes, and they were gently eased overboard. But many others came to mind—writers I wanted to have along on the trip to illustrate forms and subjects I had added, such as memoir (John Mortimer, Leonard Woolf) and mathematics (S. M. Ulam), or to approach an old form from a new direction: writers such as Garrison Keillor and Tom Wolfe. In the case of two old favorites who have been with me from the beginning, Alan Moorehead and Lewis Thomas, I rewrote their sections to make a new point.

I also wrote two new chapters. One, "Writing About Yourself," deals with a loss in American life that I have come to feel strongly about. A blanket of timidity has settled over the country, paralyzing writers of all ages. Students feel that they have to write what the teacher wants; writers feel that they have to write what the editor wants. None of them will give themselves permission to write what *they* want to write—to use their own lives as material. This erosion of self-esteem is a national writing problem and a national teaching problem, and Chapter 20 tries to address it. On one level it's a chapter about memoir, one of nonfiction's most appealing forms. But on a deeper level it's a

plea to writers of all ages to believe in their individuality and in the validity of their everyday experience. The plea is echoed in several subsequent passages that talk about integrity, initiative and risk.

The other new chapter, "A Writer's Decisions," is an attempt to make specific the general advice that has gone before: to provide in condensed form a handbook to *On Writing Well* as a whole. Strictly pedagogical, it analyzes the decisions that went into one of my own articles, about a trip to Timbuktu. My hope was to demonstrate that all writing boils down to a succession of big and small decisions, that no decision is too small to be worth wrestling with, and that every writing problem contains within itself the decision that will solve it.

On Writing Well is a highly subjective book—one man's opinions and prejudices—and every new edition has been more subjective than its predecessor. That's no accident. Since 1976 I've talked with or heard from thousands of writers, editors, teachers and students all across America. Their affection for the book has been a nourishment to me, and their letters have taken me into their own writing and teaching concerns. If this Fourth Edition is the most personal and the most trusting of its readers, it's because so many people have put some part of themselves into it.

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PART I

Principles



1

The Transaction

About ten years ago a school in Connecticut held "a day devoted to the arts," and I was asked if I would come and talk about writing as a vocation. When I arrived I found that a second speaker had been invited—Dr. Brock (as I'll call him), a surgeon who had recently begun to write and had sold some stories to national magazines. He was going to talk about writing as an avocation. That made us a panel, and we sat down to face a crowd of student newspaper editors, English teachers and parents, all eager to learn the secrets of our glamorous work.

Dr. Brock was dressed in a bright red jacket, looking vaguely bohemian, as authors are supposed to look, and the first question went to him. What was it like to be a writer?

He said it was tremendous fun. Coming home from an arduous day at the hospital, he would go straight to his yellow pad and write his tensions away. The words just flowed. It was easy.

I then said that writing wasn't easy and it wasn't fun. It was hard and lonely, and the words seldom just flowed.

Next Dr. Brock was asked if it was important to rewrite. Absolutely not, he said. "Let it all hang out," and whatever form the sentences take will reflect the writer at his most natural.

I then said that rewriting is the essence of writing. I pointed out that professional writers rewrite their sentences repeatedly

and then rewrite what they have rewritten. I mentioned that E. B. White and James Thurber rewrote their pieces eight or nine times.

"What do you do on days when it isn't going well?" Dr. Brock was asked. He said he just stopped writing and put the work aside for a day when it would go better.

I then said that the professional writer must establish a daily schedule and stick to it. I said that writing is a craft, not an art, and that the man who runs away from his craft because he lacks inspiration is fooling himself. He is also going broke.

"What if you're feeling depressed or unhappy?" a student asked. "Won't that affect your writing?"

Probably it will, Dr. Brock replied. Go fishing. Take a walk.

Probably it won't, I said. If your job is to write every day, you learn to do it like any other job.

A student asked if we found it useful to circulate in the literary world. Dr. Brock said that he was greatly enjoying his new life as a man of letters, and he told several stories of being taken to lunch by his publisher and his agent at chic Manhattan restaurants where writers and editors gather. I said that professional writers are solitary drudges who seldom see other writers.

"Do you put symbolism in your writing?" a student asked me.

"Not if I can help it," I replied. I have an unbroken record of missing the deeper meaning in any story, play or movie, and as for dance and mime, I have never had even a remote notion of what is being conveyed.

"I *love* symbols!" Dr. Brock exclaimed, and he described with gusto the joys of weaving them through his work.

So the morning went, and it was a revelation to all of us. At the end Dr. Brock told me he was enormously interested in my answers—it had never occurred to him that writing could be hard. I told him I was just as interested in *his* answers—it had never occurred to me that writing could be easy. (Maybe I

should take up surgery on the side.)

As for the students, anyone might think we left them bewildered. But in fact we probably gave them a broader glimpse of the writing process than if only one of us had talked. For of course there isn't any "right" way to do such intensely personal work. There are all kinds of writers and all kinds of methods, and any method that helps people to say what they want to say is the right method for them.

Some people write by day, others by night. Some people need silence, others turn on the radio. Some write by hand, some by typewriter or word processor, some by talking into a tape recorder. Some people write their first draft in one long burst and then revise; others can't write the second paragraph until they have fiddled endlessly with the first.

But all of them are vulnerable and all of them are tense. They are driven by a compulsion to put some part of themselves on paper, and yet they don't just write what comes naturally. They sit down to commit an act of literature, and the self who emerges on paper is a far stiffer person than the one who sat down. The problem is to find the real man or woman behind all the tension.

For 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 unusual scientific quest, for instance. 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 deeply involved with a writer who did.

This is the personal transaction that's at the heart of good nonfiction writing. Out of it come two of the most important qualities that this book will go in search of: humanity and warmth. Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader

reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to "personalize" the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest strength and the least clutter.

Can such principles be taught? Maybe not. But most of them can be learned.

2

Simplicity

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

Who can understand the viscous language of everyday American commerce and enterprise: the business letter, the interoffice memo, the corporation report, the notice from the bank explaining its latest "simplified" statement? What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure that describes what the costs and benefits are? What father or mother can put together a child's toy—on Christmas Eve or any other eve—from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn't dream of saying that it may rain. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur, ironically,