

On Writing Well



**THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO
WRITING NONFICTION**

25th Anniversary Edition

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INTRODUCTION



When I first wrote this book, in 1976, the readers I had in mind were a relatively small segment of the population: students, writers, editors and people who wanted to learn to write. I wrote it on a typewriter, the highest technology then available. I had no inkling of the electronic marvels just around the corner that were about to revolutionize the act of writing. First came the word processor, in the 1980s, which made the computer an everyday tool for people who had never thought of themselves as writers. Then came the Internet and e-mail, in the 1990s, which completed the revolution. Today everybody in the world is writing to everybody else, keeping in touch and doing business across every border and time zone.

To me this is nothing less than a miracle, curing overnight what appeared to be a deep American disorder. I've been repeatedly told by people in nonwriting occupations—especially people in science, technology, medicine, business and finance—that they hate writing and can't write and don't want to be made to write. One thing they particularly didn't want to write was letters. Just getting started on a letter loomed as a chore with so many formalities—Where's the stationery? Where's the envelope? Where's the stamp?—that they would keep putting it off, and when they finally did sit down to write they would spend the entire first paragraph explaining why they hadn't written sooner.

In the second paragraph they would describe the weather in their part of the country—a subject of no interest anywhere else. Only in the third paragraph would they begin to relax and say what they wanted to say.

Then along came e-mail and all the formalities went away. E-mail has no etiquette. It doesn't require stationery, or neatness, or proper spelling, or preliminary chitchat. E-mail writers are like people who stop a friend on the sidewalk and say, "Did you see the game last night?" WHAP! No amenities. They just start typing at full speed. So here's the miracle: All those people who said they hate writing and can't write and don't want to write *can* write and *do* want to write. In fact, they can't be turned off. Never have so many Americans written so profusely and with so few inhibitions. Which means that it wasn't a cognitive problem after all. It was a cultural problem, rooted in that old bugaboo of American education: fear.

Fear of writing gets planted in American schoolchildren at an early age, especially children of scientific or technical or mechanical bent. They are led to believe that writing is a special language owned by the English teacher, available only to the humanistic few who have "a gift for words." But writing isn't a skill that some people are born with and others aren't, like a gift for art or music. Writing is talking to someone else on paper. Anybody who can think clearly can write clearly, about any subject at all. That has always been the central premise of this book.

On one level, therefore, the new fluency created by e-mail is terrific news. Any invention that eliminates the fear of writing is up there with air conditioning and the lightbulb. But, as always, there's a catch. Nobody told all the new e-mail writers that the essence of writing is rewriting. Just because they are writing with ease and enjoyment doesn't mean they are writing well.

That condition was first revealed in the 1980s, when people began writing on word processors. Two opposite things happened. The word processor made good writers better and bad

writers worse. Good writers know that very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time or the fifth time. For them the word processor was a rare gift, enabling them to fuss endlessly with their sentences—cutting and revising and reshaping—without the drudgery of retyping. Bad writers became even more verbose because writing was suddenly so easy and their sentences looked so pretty on the screen. How could such beautiful sentences not be perfect?

E-mail pushed that verbosity to a new extreme: chatter unlimited. It's a spontaneous medium, not conducive to slowing down or looking back. That makes it ideal for the never-ending upkeep of personal life: maintaining contact with far-flung children and grandchildren and friends and long-lost classmates. If the writing is often garrulous or disorganized or not quite clear, no real harm is done.

But e-mail is also where much of the world's business is now conducted. Millions of e-mail messages every day give people the information they need to do their job, and a badly written message can cause a lot of damage. Employers have begun to realize that they literally cannot afford to hire men and women who can't write sentences that are tight and logical and clear. The new information age, for all its high-tech gadgetry, is, finally, writing-based. E-mail, the Internet and the fax are all forms of writing, and writing is, finally, a craft, with its own set of tools, which are words. Like all tools, they have to be used right.

On Writing Well is a craft book. That's what I set out to write 25 years ago—a book that would teach the craft of writing warmly and clearly—and its principles have never changed; they are as valid in the digital age as they were in the age of the typewriter. I don't mean that the book itself hasn't changed. I've revised and expanded it five times since 1976 to keep pace with new trends in the language and in society: a far greater interest in memoir-writing, for instance, and in writing about business and science and sports, and in nonfiction writing by women and by newcomers to the United States from other cultural traditions.

I'm also not the same person I was 25 years ago. Books that teach, if they have a long life, should reflect who the writer has become at later stages of his own long life—what he has been doing and thinking about. *On Writing Well* and I have grown older and wiser together. In each of the five new editions the new material consisted of things I had learned since the previous edition by continuing to wrestle with the craft as a writer. As a teacher, I've become far more preoccupied with the intangibles of the craft—the attitudes and values, like enjoyment and confidence and intention, that keep us going and produce our best work. But it wasn't until the sixth edition that I knew enough to write the two chapters (21 and 22) that deal at proper length with those attitudes and values.

Ultimately, however, good writing rests on craft and always will. I don't know what still newer electronic marvels are waiting just around the corner to make writing twice as easy and twice as fast in the next 25 years. But I do know they won't make writing twice as good. That will still require plain old hard work—clear thinking—and the plain old tools of the English language.

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