

William Zinsser

**On Writing Well: The
Classic Guide to Writing
Nonfiction**

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Hone your writing skills.

Have you ever sat, frozen with fear, in front of a blank page or screen? Fiddled around on social media or reorganized your spice rack in order to avoid sitting down to write? Or maybe you suspect that you have a book, an essay, or a blog post inside you, but have no idea how to begin writing it.

Writing can definitely feel intimidating. But that doesn't mean you can't become a good writer. These blinks will help you conquer fear of the blank page

by teaching you the principles of strong writing, from grammar and usage to structure and style.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- the secret to good writing;
- how to craft compelling openings and conclusions; and
- why enjoyment is key to good writing.

To write well, write simply.

Are you desirous of becoming privy to privileged information that will facilitate adept, dexterous, and proficiently written composition on your part?

Wait. Scratch that. Let's try it again.

Do you want to know the secret to good writing? Simplicity.

**The key message in this blink is:
To write well, write simply.**

Novice writers often try to impress. They reach for the

most obscure words in their vocabulary. They jam clause upon clause into their sentences. Their nouns are weighed down with adjectives and their verbs are saddled with adverbs. The end result is usually more impenetrable than impressive. Worse, it makes it difficult for the reader to . . . well, *read* the writing.

When it comes to writing, adding words, clauses, or complexity can actually detract from what you're doing. To write well, strip down each component of your sentence into its cleanest parts. Cut out words that don't perform a

function. Make long words short. Strive for simplicity.

Sounds easy enough, doesn't it? Well, there's a catch. Clear writing is only achievable through clear thinking, which is only achievable by decluttering the mind. It's possible to hide a half-baked argument with verbiage, jargon, and waffling – just listen to any politician. But clear writing that is well-thought-out leaves the writer with nowhere to hide.

To write simply and clearly, the writer must always come back to one central question: *What am I trying to say?* Answering

this question might be harder than she thinks, especially if she's still working through it. And when she's finished writing, she must ask herself another question: *Have I said what I meant to say?*

Next, she must ruthlessly clear the clutter from her pages so that nothing draws focus from her message. What constitutes clutter? Any word or phrase that isn't required or doesn't enhance the meaning of what is being written. Here are a few examples:

Redundant prepositions. Why face *up* to a challenge when you

can simply *face* a challenge?

The same goes for adjectives. Why describe a *personal* acquaintance when, by definition, acquaintances are personal?

Edit out long words and labored word clusters. Verbiage may be in vogue in corporate contexts, but there's no need to say *currently, at the present time, or even at this juncture* when a simple *now* will suffice. A clear sentence is easy to read. But it takes skill, thought, and practice to write one.

The secret to writing with style is finding your authentic voice.

The secret to good writing is simplicity. But maybe you're not interested in good writing.

You're interested in *great* writing. You want to season your sentences with a little style – an apposite adjective here, a deliciously ironic turn of phrase there.

Writing is like building a house – the stylish elements you add at the end are often the most eye-catching. But before you think about decorative flourishes, you need a firm foundation. If you

can't pour concrete, your house's foundation will quickly collapse. And if you haven't mastered clear, simple sentences, then no amount of style will save your writing.

Once you're skilled at writing simply, it's time to turn your attention to style.

The key message here is: The secret to writing with style is finding your authentic voice.

In writing, as in fashion, there's only one rule for great style: be yourself. It takes time, and perhaps a few fashion faux-pas, to find the clothes that fit and

flatter you best. Similarly, it might take some trial and error to find your authentic writing style.

To begin developing your style, simply write. Don't stare at the blank page, fixating on whether your finished piece will live up to your expectations. That's sure to make you tense. And you're much more likely to find your style when you're relaxed.

So throw down that first sentence, then the second, then the third. Sure, your first paragraph might sound stilted and robotic, like a text that's been spat out of an AI

generator. And your second paragraph might not be much better. But don't get stressed. Keep going.

By perhaps the third paragraph you'll begin to relax and find your rhythm. Instead of trying to impress with your words, you'll reach for the words that you think are fitting. You'll start to write in your voice, and discover your style.

A shortcut to finding this natural flow? Writers tend to be more relaxed when they write in the first person. You'll sound more natural and less stilted when you can write simply and plainly: "I

think,” or “I feel,” or “I believe.” Of course there are some formats in which first person is inappropriate – in a news report, for example, or an academic essay. But in emails, blog posts, feature articles, company memos, and more, using first person is freeing.

Cultivate your natural voice in your writing process and your unique style will soon reveal itself.

Words are a writer's tools, so consider word choices carefully.

A craftsperson needs to choose his tools carefully. You can't tune a piano with a wrench, or hang a picture with a crochet needle.

Well, writing is a craft. And when you write, your tools are your words. To write well, you need to choose the right words for the job, every time.

It sounds painfully obvious, doesn't it? But pick up any newspaper or magazine and you're likely to find that it's filled

with poorly selected language – clichés, hackneyed phrases, and words that are overused or incorrectly deployed.

So how do you choose words well?

Here's the key message: Words are a writer's tools, so consider word choices carefully.

To begin with, avoid cliché. Phrases like “a diamond in the rough” or “as old as the hills” are so overused that they've lost all novelty. They're also a red flag for the reader. After a few clichéd sentences, your readers will toss your article aside. They

know there will be no surprises, nor well-turned or unexpected phrases, awaiting them in your piece.

A writer looking to add variety to his language has one key resource at his disposal: the thesaurus. Look up the adjective “pale,” for instance, and you’ll find “blanched,” “sallow,” “waxen,” and “spectral.” But be careful. Don’t blindly choose the most impressive synonym you can find, unless it encapsulates the meaning you want to convey. Variety in writing is good – but precision is better.

Your word choices also affect the rhythm of your sentences. These days, the written word is rarely read aloud, but readers will still “hear” your writing in their heads. Reading is an auditory experience, so read your sentences aloud and edit them for tone, poetry, and aural effect.

When choosing words, it’s always best to steer clear of ultra-contemporary buzzwords and jargon. That doesn’t necessarily mean all *neologisms*, or newly-coined words, are out. Language is ever-evolving, and neologisms can infuse language with vitality and texture. Here’s a

good rule of thumb: Does the neologism fill a real need? If it does, use it! Words like dropout, multitask, laptop, and geek were all once neologisms. But because they each filled a linguistic gap, they've since entered common usage.

Some writers fall into the trap of using fashionable words that may be popular but *don't* necessarily fill a real need. Words like "impact," for instance. There's no need to ask someone how a decision "impacts" them, when it suffices to ask how a decision "affects" them.

Keep it focused and keep it consistent.

A beginner decides to write a piece recounting a romantic trip she and her partner just took to Italy. The subject matter is great: pizza, pasta, and the leaning tower of Pisa. What could go wrong?

The piece starts off well. The writer is personable and approachable as she recounts all the excitement and comic mishaps of her journey. But in the second paragraph, she switches tone. She relays geographical facts and

population statistics, sounding like an encyclopedia. Next, she parrots a *Lonely Planet* guidebook with information about which sights to prioritize and whether it's customary to tip in Roman restaurants.

None of these sections is necessarily bad. But as a whole they are incoherent. From one paragraph to the next, the tone and intention shift so quickly that the reader is left confused.

The key message here is: Keep it focused and keep it consistent.

To keep your writing consistent, start by asking some simple

questions:

Who's your audience? Are you writing for a general audience? Or enthusiasts of a niche topic?

How are you going to address them? Will you be formal, or casual? Humorous? Ironic? Poetic? Will you use the past tense or the present tense? First person or third person?

What point are you making? If it's about birdwatching, are you making a point about camaraderie between birders? Migration patterns? The destruction of native bird habitats?

It's important to be specific. This way, material that detracts from your main point won't make it into your article.

Also, how much do you want to cover? Limiting the scope of your piece will help focus the writing and keep it coherent. Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* is a sprawling epic. Yet, because it focuses on the story of one man and one whale, the story remains coherent.

Once you've ironed out your answers, try to stick to them. Don't switch from first person to third person halfway through your article. Don't start out

writing in a witty, ironic tone, then shift into a dry academic voice a few paragraphs in.

Of course, you should only stick to your writing plan as long as it's serving your writing. Don't fight the current. Sometimes you need to get halfway through your draft to realize that it works better in present tense, or that it should be a blog post rather than a travel guide.

Just remember: whatever writing choices you make, make them consistently!

**Want to engage your reader?
Make your beginnings and
endings count.**

First impressions are everything. A guy might have a wicked sense of humor, great looks, and a heart of gold, but prospective partners scrolling past his profile on a dating website might not be able to see beyond his purple fedora.

In writing, too, first impressions count. You can write an article filled with brilliant arguments, witty turns of phrase, and thought-provoking paragraphs, but with a limp first sentence,

your literary masterpiece might as well be wearing a purple fedora.

The key message here is: Want to engage your reader? Make your beginnings and endings count.

A lot hangs on your *lead*, or the opening of your piece. You might immediately hook your reader with a punchy first sentence, or slowly pull her in with a paragraph that leaves her intrigued and wanting more.

Whatever tactic you use, there's one thing your lead must do: show the reader what's in it for her.

What's the most appealing thing about the piece you plan to write? It could be your well-honed argument, your surprising new perspective on an issue, or even – if you're a gifted prose stylist – the sheer beauty of your writing. It could be a sense of mystery, or humor, or paradox. Whatever it is, the reader should get a taste of it in your lead.

William Zinsser, who also authored *How to Write Well*, shows how it's done! In the concise yet effective opening to his article "Block that Chickenfurter," he writes: "I've often wondered what goes into

a hot dog. Now I know and I wish I didn't.”

With an opening like that, it's hard not to keep reading. Those two sentences are funny, allude to a mystery, and foreshadow a disturbing surprise.

From your lead, each following paragraph should add more to the article. More detail, more complexity, more nuance, and more argument. The final sentence of a paragraph should act as a little springboard to the next, so craft this sentence with extra care. Try to end each paragraph in a way that keeps the reader interested – with

something unexpected, funny, or enticing. Do this, and you'll draw your reader through your piece with ease.

When it comes to endings, don't overthink it! Stop when you're ready to stop. Resist the urge to waffle or over-summarize. Once you've laid out all the facts, events, or arguments, it's time to look for the nearest exit!

Skilled writers generally polish their prose and avoid common pitfalls.

In popular culture, the writer is often portrayed as a lonesome, romantic genius. He strolls Parisian boulevards with a notebook tucked under his arm. He ducks into smoky bistros, like Hemingway, to write when inspiration strikes.

It's a lovely image. It's also completely false. Real writers know that the devil is in the details. You're more likely to find them sweating over clauses than

writing when the whim takes them.

The key message here is: Skilled writers generally polish their prose and avoid common pitfalls.

Producing polished prose takes time and practice. But avoiding some common pitfalls will help. Here are some writing traps to watch out for:

Use the active voice instead of the passive voice where possible. Writing “Harry closed the window” is cleaner and clearer than writing “The window was closed by Harry.”

Choosing the right verb gives depth to your writing. Verbs power your sentences, so make sure they're supercharged, strong, and specific. Are you saying "shone" where you could say "dazzled"? Or "hit" instead of "walloped"?

Adverbs, on the other hand, seldom do much for your sentences. In fact, the author believes most adverbs are a waste of space. For example, one doesn't need to say, "She whispered quietly." The verb "whispered" already connotes quietness and the adverb only adds clutter to this phrase.

Adjectives, too, are often unnecessary. Nouns are wonderfully resonant in and of themselves. Why describe a “steep cliff” when a cliff is generally steep? Or write “brown dirt” when dirt is generally brown? If the soil is red, then the color is worth noting. In the phrase “red dirt,” the adjective “red” does what the noun can’t do alone.

A happy side effect of weeding out weak adjectives? When you use adjectives sparingly, the ones you do use are far more powerful.

Then there are qualifiers, which are like water in vodka — they dilute its strength. A qualifier is any phrase like “a little,” “quite,” or “sort of” that qualifies another word. So saying a woman is “fairly tall” might actually imply that she’s merely average height. And don’t say you “weren’t really happy” about a bad restaurant. Don’t you mean you “were unhappy”?

Finally, whatever you write, rewrite it! Even the most experienced writers let flabby adjectives and useless adverbs slip through the first time they write something. It’s part of the professional writer’s practice to

rewrite countless times. Make it
your practice, too.

If you want to inspire your reader, start by inspiring yourself.

Which do you want first – the good news or the bad news?

The good news is that if you read extensively, write clearly and consistently, and avoid common writing pitfalls, you will absolutely be able to turn out competent texts.

The bad news is that without confidence in your abilities, it doesn't matter how competent you become – you won't *enjoy* the writing process. And if you

don't enjoy the process, you're unlikely to produce inspiring work

The key message here is: If you want to inspire your reader, start by inspiring yourself.

The odds are stacked against us as writers. From the time we start school, many of us are taught to fear writing. We don't write for enjoyment, but to get a passing grade. We're not encouraged to follow our instincts but rather to adhere to rigid criteria. School takes the fun out of writing for most people. Worse, it can create a fear of the blank page or screen.

If that happened to you, you can unlearn what you learned in school and train yourself to enjoy writing. Of course, writing won't always *be* enjoyable. Read a writer like Toni Morrison or Hunter S. Thompson and you'll feel carried along in the flow of their words. But finding that flow state as a writer takes work. Learn to persevere through moments of doubt or block, and you'll find your writing flow, too.

Remember that writing comes from living. Living adventurously, inquisitively, and open-heartedly will give you all kinds of juicy things to write about. It will also throw many interesting people

in your path. And their stories will spark stories in you.

To really enjoy your writing, follow your interests, no matter how niche or off-the-wall they may be. You'll produce better prose if you do. Passion is infectious. Most readers would far rather read an account of caterpillar migration patterns written with genuine love than a bland, broadly appealing celebrity profile.

But sometimes you're given a writing assignment that you just don't gel with. That's OK! Dig down and find some part of it that resonates with you.

Whether you're writing about economic policy or salsa music, the material won't connect with the reader unless you've connected with it as a writer.

You might not enjoy crafting every sentence, choosing every word, or analyzing every comma, but if you can cultivate enjoyment in your process, it will be reflected in your work.

Don't fixate on the finished product – embrace the process of writing!

Has this happened to you? You sit down to start working on that idea for a book you've been mulling over for years. But before you've put down the first few sentences, you're distracted by dreams of the finished product. You picture the cover. You imagine it on the shelves in your local bookshop. You can see the glowing reviews: "Dazzling!" "Brilliant!" "A tour de force!" You even draft your acknowledgments, careful not

to leave out your grandma or your third-grade English teacher.

Your dreams of the finished book are vividly fleshed out. But the book itself languishes half-written in a desk drawer.

The key message here is: Don't fixate on the finished product – embrace the process of writing!

If you've got your eye on the prize, then you're not looking at the racetrack. The fact is, the book, article, or even blog post that you *actually* write will probably be wildly different from the one you imagined writing. If you're too focused on

what you want your story to be, you can't pay attention to how your story is evolving.

One way to kill a story? Nail down the concept too quickly. Let's say you decide to write about the disappearance of traditional agriculture in Wyoming. As a concept, it's fine. As a story? Well, it's not exactly compelling, is it? With a few refinements, however, it could work. Narrow your scope so that you're writing about one farming town in Wyoming. You're getting warmer. Refine the concept again. You're writing about one Wyoming farm. One family. One human

story that gestures at broad agricultural trends. Now you have a compelling story. But to get there, you had to let go of your original concept – and refine, refine, refine.

The same logic applies to every other element of your story: including its form, its style, and its structure. Hanging on too tightly to your initial thought of how a piece should read can obscure its potential. Don't get attached to that magazine profile or essay that exists in your head. Give yourself time to grope around in search of the real story, to experiment, and to

fail, until you find the story you want to tell.

The writing process is just as important as the finished product. So try not to focus solely on the product. Lean into the process. Enjoy it! You'll become a better writer if you do.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Anyone can write well.

Remember to keep your sentences simple, trust your authentic style, and prune unnecessary words and ideas from your prose. Adhering to these basic principles will indisputably improve your writing.

Actionable advice:

No buts about it!

You've likely been taught not to begin your sentences with "but."

But that's a rule worth forgetting! "But" signals a shift in direction or mood to your reader. When a sentence shifts the direction of your piece, signposting this change with a "but" or a "yet" will help your reader follow along.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *On Writing Well* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *The Sense of Style*, by Steven Pinker

Have our blinks to *On Writing Well* inspired you to lift your writing game? Well, once you've mastered crafting clean, concise sentences in the style of William Zinsser, why not look to another expert in the field? Steven Pinker is a *New York Times* best-selling author, linguist, and dictionary consultant. The blinks to Pinker's *The Sense of Style* analyze the stylistic choices that elevate good writing to great writing. Be encouraged to experiment with your own writing style, and you'll soon be crafting stylish prose yourself.

Nice work! You're all done with this one.

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