
How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One

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A Review

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We all think we can write a sentence, right? But, can we write a sentence that adds *elegance* to the writing? That is a different matter and raises the stakes. Writing a sentence, or sentences, is something everyone does—perhaps “practice” is the better word—no matter the discipline. Thus, Stanley Fish has written a compact book that should be of interest writers of every stripe. He argues that “What we know of the world comes to us through words, or, to look at it from another direction, when we write a sentence, we create a world, which is not *the* world, but the world as it appears within a dimension of assessment” (39). We therefore construct our world the way we see it, and we, in part, construct it through the way we write. Writing a good sentence, therefore, is our expression of something, however, personal, however public.

Fish asks, “What is it that we can add to those words that causes them to form something we recognize as a sentence? The answer can be given in one single word, and that word is ‘relationships’” (17). He also argues that “context” should be paired with “purpose.” He says, “People write or speak sentences in order to produce an effect, and the success of a sentence is measured by the degree to which the desired effect has been achieved. . . . The first thing to ask when writing a sentence is ‘What am I trying to do?’” (37). That is a good question to ask. The writer must always consider audience, but more especially the intention of the work

But, let’s get back to that basic sentence. Kenneth Koch writes in his poem “Permanently”:

And one day the Nouns were clustered on the street.
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty
The Nouns were struck moved, changed.
The next day a Verb drove up, and created the Sentence (qtd. in Fish 17)

Fish gives much good advice about crafting a sentence. A simple exercise is to begin with three words and then add to them. To add complexity to the exercise, Fish explains subordination, “hypotaxis” from Richard Lanham’s definition as “an arrangement of clauses or phrases in a dependent or subordinating style” (qtd. in Fish 51). An example Fish uses is Dr. Martin Luther King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* in which a several hundred words long sentence contains the subordinating word “when.”

. . . when you have seen vicious mobs . . . when you have seen hate-filled policemen . . . when you suddenly find your tongue twisted . . . when you have to contact an answer for a five-year-old son . . . when you take a cross-country drive . . . when your first name . . . when you are harried . . . when you are forever fighting . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. (53)

Another exercise, the additive, or “parataxis” is “a coordinate, rather than a subordinate, construction” (62) that Morris Croll defines as “connected with each other by only the slightest of ligatures, each one carrying a stronger emphasis . . . than it would have if it were more strictly subordinated” (qtd. in Fish 62). To add even more interest to the sentence, the additive style may break conventional rules as an “organic pattern of life [that] does not develop; it just grows, and representation so often frustrate those who want to travel a straight line” (66). J. D. Salinger uses the word “and” to describe Holden Caulfield’s life:

. . . where I was born, and . . . and how my parents . . . and all that David Copperfield kind of crap . . . [and ends with] but I don’t feel like going into it. (qtd. in Fish 67)

The point, explains Fish, is that we should “know what makes a sentence more than a random list, practice constructing sentences and explaining what you have done, and you will know how to make sentences forever and you will know too when what you are writing doesn’t make the grade because it has degenerated into a mere pile of discrete items” (33).

The best part of *How to Write a Sentence*, however, is praise Fish gives to the “wow” sentence. He says that this is the kind of sentence that stands out as extraordinary, as something catchy, sentences that “take your breath away” (3). This is the one section of Fish’s treatise that should give the reader pause and look inward to one’s own “wow” sentence experience.

And because everyone's list is different, and although Fish cites a long list of "wow" sentences from novels, films, and student essays, I have my own favorites, the sentences that have stuck with me for years.

Consider Huck Finn traveling down the Mississippi with his friend Jim. This is Twain at his best, and the reader can feel him- or herself on that raft on the "big muddy" and know to the bone how much Mark Twain loved his river: On that river, there was "Not a sound, anywheres--perfectly still--just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe" (Twain 135). Or, The Mississippi "was a monstrous big river down there--sometimes a mile and a half wide. . . .We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened" (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 135-36).

Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" is another fine example of "wow" sentences. "The other bank was in the white mist. The grass was wet and cold as he knelt on the bank and dipped the canvas bucket into the stream. It bellied and pulled hard in the current. The water was ice cold" (*The Nick Adams Stories* 185). Or, "His trousers were soaked with the dew as he walked. After the hot day, the dew had come quickly and heavily. The river made no sound. It was fast and smooth" (182).

Of course, the most elegant "wow" sentence is $E=mc^2$. This "sentence" contains the universe in a manner of speaking, and I will leave my mathematician friends to explain it more fully. However, its "wow" feature is not lost on me, nor the power it contains to change the way we think about the universe.

Fish concludes that "the expression of content is what writing is for" (135). Writing is not only a human way to communicate, but to do it effectively. Fish adds, "Hence the formula 'sentence craft equals sentence comprehension equals sentence appreciation'" (135).

This little book causes us to think about the joy of constructing good sentences that create meaning, beginning with the lowly yet powerful sentence. How we construct sentences are at once unique for our own "fingerprint" of expression as well as a social act. As I tell my students, good, clean writing is a top priority. Once expression is clear, the rest will follow. Task yourself and task your students to write in such a way that creates pride and confidence in writing.