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First, Use Plain English

The author of *On Writing Well* recalls how he taught Yale students to cut through the clutter.

March/April 2009
by William Zinsser

William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*, which has sold more than 1.3 million copies, grew out of the nonfiction writing course he originated at Yale in 1971 and taught there every year until 1979. This article about the course is adapted from his book *Writing Places* (HarperCollins), to be published in May.

I gave my writing course a plain title, "Nonfiction Workshop." I wanted to serve notice that it was a craft course and that I had no fancy aspirations; the word "postmodern" was unlikely to be heard in class, or any mention of the human condition. My aim was to teach Yale students to write clearly and warmly about the world they lived in.

The framework would be journalistic, "journalism" being defined as writing that appears in any periodic journal -- as, for example, Lewis Thomas's elegant book of science essays, *The Lives of a Cell*, first appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the book that launched the environmental movement, first ran as a series of articles in the *New Yorker*. Neither Thomas nor Carson was a "writer"; one was a physician, the other an aquatic biologist. But they knew enough about writing to make complex subjects clear and enjoyable -- and *useful* -- to ordinary readers. That's what I wanted for my students.

My course was listed in the Yale course catalogue for the 1971 winter term. It was limited by the English department to 15 students, that being the generally regarded optimum size. Teaching writing is a hands-on task. Writing can't be learned from a lecture in which grand truths are handed down. Those truths only get learned when a student's failure to observe them is pointed out in his or her writing.

But a funny thing happened on the way to registration: 170 students signed up for "Nonfiction Workshop." That came as an astonishment to the English department, which was then the high temple of "deconstruction" and other faddish studies in the clinical analysis of texts. The great writers on the Yale faculty weren't the theory-obsessed English professors. They were the history professors -- strong stylists like Edmund Morgan, C. Vann Woodward, Jonathan Spence '61, '65PhD, George Pierson '26, '33PhD, John Morton Blum, and Gaddis Smith '54, '61PhD, who understood that their knowledge could only be handed down if they imposed on the past an act of storytelling, one that had a strong narrative pull and a robust cast of characters.

Reading the student applications for my course and interviewing the applicants, I heard a hunger for reality: "Help me to organize and express my thoughts." During the permissive Sixties their high school teachers had urged them to "let it all hang out," regardless of grammar or syntax. Now they found that they had come to college deprived of the basic tools for writing expository prose.

Making the initial cut was easy -- I gave priority to seniors and juniors, whose time at Yale was running out. That still left many hard choices. I didn't want the class to be dominated by aspiring journalists: *Yale Daily News* hotshots and former editors of their high school paper. They deserved to take the course, and over the years many did. Some, like Mark Singer '72, Christopher Buckley '75, and Jane Mayer '77, became major writers of articles and books. Others became influential editors: John S. Rosenberg '75, editor of *Harvard Magazine*; Roger Cohn '73, editor of *Audubon* and *Mother Jones*; Kit Rachlis '74, editor of *Los Angeles* magazine; David Sleeper '75, founder of *Vermont*

Teaching writing is a hands-on task.

A. Z. (After Zinsser)

In the 30 years since Zinsser left, writing courses and resources have bloomed across the university. Starting with the Class of 2009, every undergraduate must take at least two of the more than 150 courses that include a focus on writing; they are offered in 45 departments, from film studies to ecology and evolutionary biology. The Law School's Law and Media Program provides courses, workshops, and events aimed both at future journalists and those who want to work in the media industry. The Graduate School and the college have writing centers where students can take advantage of tutoring, workshops, and talks by leading practitioners.

To teach courses and seminars on the craft of prose, Yale has brought on a host of eminent writers. Faculty teaching this year include *New York Times* managing editor Jill Abramson; Court TV founder Steven Brill '72, '75JD; National Magazine Award winner Anne Fadiman; Pulitzer winner Linda Greenhouse '78MSL; and Caryl Phillips, whose novel *Crossing the River* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. "Bill set the standard for what a writing class should be," says Fadiman. "Think of the thousands -- maybe millions -- of unnecessary words that

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Magazine; Kevin McKean '74, editorial director of *Consumer Reports*; Dan Denton '75, founder of several magazines in the Sarasota area; Janice Kaplan '76, editor of *Parade*, and Corby Kummer '78, senior editor of the *Atlantic* and a respected food writer. I didn't teach him anything about food -- one reason for his success.

But I also wanted generalists -- men and women majoring in a broad range of arts and sciences; I was looking for the next Oliver Sacks as much as the next Gay Talese. I accepted one senior history major, Lawrie Mifflin '73, because I was struck by her interest in sports. As a member of Yale's first contingent of women, she had been an activist for the formation of women's teams -- an idea that the administration hadn't leaped to embrace. ("Field hockey? At Yale?") I felt that sports was rich terrain for nonfiction writers; some of the country's most intractable social problems were being played out there: women's rights, drugs, steroids, racism, violence, betting, huge television contracts, the financial seduction of college athletes, and many more. I wanted those issues to be aired in the class.

I was looking for the next Oliver Sacks as much as the next Gay Talese.

As it turned out, Lawrie Mifflin would make history of her own, eventually becoming the first female sportswriter on the New York *Daily News*. She covered the New York Rangers for eight seasons, first for the *News* and then for the *New York Times*, where she later was deputy sports editor for five years. She also covered the New York Cosmos during the Pele years, and at various Olympic games she became an expert on gymnastics, diving, and horse show jumping.

Another chance discovery was a blue-eyed Irish kid named John Tierney '75, whom I met one night in 1972 at a student social hour. The freshmen of Calhoun College had been exiled to a remote annex during a renovation of the Old Campus, and fellows were encouraged to drop in and make them feel less forsaken. I got to talking with Tierney, who told me he had come to Yale to major in mathematics. But as he talked I detected a most unmathematical vein of humor. He asked what I was doing at Yale, and he said he thought that would be interesting work. Could he take my course? Maybe later, I said; he was only a freshman.

But when the next term came around I couldn't resist letting him in. The writing he did was fresh and he had a bent for science. After graduating from Yale he would become a freelance science reporter for *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone* and would write humor pieces for the *Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *Spy*, and *Outside*. In 1990 he was hired by the *New York Times* as a general-assignment reporter and later became a columnist on its op-ed page. One day in the 1990s I met him in New York at an antiques show with his parents, who were visiting from Pittsburgh. Hearing my name, his mother, a longtime schoolteacher, threw her arms around me in a hug of maternal gratitude. I had saved her son from being a mathematician.

It was the generalists who gave the class its breadth. Although they weren't journalism-bound, they were eager to learn to write well for whatever career they might pursue. One female student, Perry Howze '75, would find time among her other jobs to co-write the movie *Mystic Pizza*. A rock musician, Gary Lucas '74, said he was proud of the "discursive style and rhetorical flourishes" that had won him a writing award in high school. I showed him how to get rid of those award-winning elements and urged him to write about rock music. He did, and immediately began to sell rock reviews and articles to the *Village Voice* and various music magazines. Many years later, in New York, between European tours, he would call and invite me to one of his gigs in a downtown club. The club was not easy to find, carved out of some pitch-dark Greenwich Village cellar, nor was Gary, clad in black and enveloped in the blackness of the room. But when he played his guitar he was a man totally fulfilled in his chosen work.

A law-minded student, Roanne L. Mann '72, would become a federal magistrate judge at the United States District Court in Brooklyn. Asked to recall my class, she said: "My work as a judge requires that I communicate

I would teach mainly out of my own experience.

clearly in my written opinions. I cannot prove a direct connection between my judicial style and an undergraduate journalism course I took many years ago. Nevertheless, Bill Zinsser's class was one of the highlights of my years at Yale, and, as we say in the trade, one may

have been deleted over the decades because Bill taught his students to avoid clutter! Bill's legacy hovers benignly over all his successors, who hope against hope that we can accomplish a fraction of what he did." -- Eds.

reasonably infer that it had its intended effect."

The class met in a small room in Calhoun College. All the residential colleges had seminar rooms somewhere in their Gothic innards, many of them architecturally surprising in their homage to some long-vanished English ideal. In those rooms, I did a lot of thinking about how writing gets learned and taught and nourished.

I don't recall that I brought to the course any pedagogical scheme. I would teach mainly out of my own experience; what had worked for me as a journalist would probably work for my students. What I would teach would be good English -- not good journalism, or good science English, or good sports English, or any other kind of English. I would teach the plain declarative sentence and the active Anglo-Saxon verb. Passive verbs would be discouraged; so would Latinate nouns like "implementation." Clarity would be the main prize, along with simplicity and brevity: short words and short sentences. My favorite stylists would be invoked: the King James Bible, Abraham Lincoln, Henry David Thoreau, E. B. White, Red Smith.

On those plain precepts my little craft set sail. Every week I assigned a paper in one of the forms that nonfiction commonly takes: the interview, the technical or scientific or medical article, the business article, the sports article, the humor piece, the critical review, writing about a place. I would explain the pitfalls and special requirements of the genre, often reading one of my own pieces to demonstrate how I had tried to solve the problem, or reading passages by writers I admired who had brought distinction to a particular form: Alan Moorehead, Joan Didion, V. S. Pritchett, Norman Mailer, Garry Wills '61PhD, Virgil Thomson. I wanted my students to know that nonfiction has an honorable literature -- they were entering the land of H. L. Mencken and George Orwell and Joseph Mitchell.

Mitchell had been the most influential journalist for nonfiction writers of my generation. His long *New Yorker* articles about the New York waterfront were gems of reporting and humanity; the "ordinary" people he wrote about were never patronized or judged. But he had perversely allowed his books

to go out of print, and the students in my class had never heard of him until I brought in some passages to read. One of those young men, Mark Singer, would grow up to be Mitchell's heir in his own generation; his *New Yorker* portraits of assorted rogues and brigands and mountebanks make their point with a dry amusement, not with censure. Several years after Mitchell died in 1996, at the age of 87, Singer wrote a commemorative piece in the *New Yorker* that mentioned where he first heard about him. I like to think that in some seminar room at Yale today there's a student who will grow up to be the next Mark Singer.

Writers are one of nature's most unconfident species.

When I first taught my course I assumed that I would achieve most of my teaching with my didactic little talk explaining the form that the students had been assigned next. I sent them forth to do a travel piece or a sports piece or an interview in full confidence that they would apply all the hard-won principles I had so lucidly imparted. But when their papers came back, only about 20 percent of those principles had made it onto the page; pitfalls I had specifically warned against were repeatedly fallen into. The moral was clear: crafts don't get learned by listening. If you want to be an auto mechanic you take an engine apart and reassemble it, and the teacher points out that you have put the carburetor in wrong. I would need to get my hands dirty making sure every carburetor was properly installed.

After that I began every class by reading aloud good and bad examples from student papers of the previous week. Perpetrators of bad examples were never identified; the rest were named and praised. Writers, I learned, are one of nature's most unconfident species, in constant need of assurance that they are not doomed souls. After class I handed back the students' papers with my corrections and comments and encouragements. That's where the real work got done.

The overwhelming sin was clutter. It was in that Yale class that I became a fierce enemy of every word or phrase or sentence or paragraph in a piece of writing that wasn't doing necessary work. To this day, what my students most vividly remember was my pruning of the weeds that were smothering what they wanted to say. One of those students, Katie Leishman '76, who would become a prolific writer of medical articles, recalled many years later that

Bill Zinsser's process went beyond editing, what demanded removal was often material that a competent editor would leave untouched. The stuff wasn't always badly written; it often *sounded* great. The hitch was, it wasn't true.

Not that it was factually inaccurate. It just wasn't genuine for a particular student. Somehow Bill was able to coax us toward that self-recognition. Few editors can. Besides, it's something a writer ultimately has to realize alone.

Today I still wonder why you can never internalize the exercise, why you can't stop yourself before the nonsense is on paper. You have to see it to reject it. It's like an immune response: if it doesn't feel like you, it has to go. In Bill's vision, once the clutter (and the baloney) are gone, the writer emerges and the work acquires its force. Anything -- from African violets to nuclear physics -- can be explained to a reasonably thoughtful reader. Anything can be made interesting.

Bill showed us that good writers are inimitable, and why. It is the choice of language, of course, but it is also the use of time. He introduced us to writers who wrote an aphorism a day, and others who had a Sunday newspaper column, and still others who produced an article every five years. Writers pace themselves differently and are drawn to different subjects accordingly. That connection, he taught us, should be honored.

The Yale English department, acting with a speed wholly uncharacteristic of college English departments, saw what was happening and jumped aboard the train. As a stopgap it hired several New York editors to come to New Haven and teach courses that roughly replicated mine. Then it went about establishing its own strong program of expository writing. What all of us learned was that organizing and writing a nonfiction paper is largely untaught in American schools and colleges. (It still is.) Yale responded promptly to that dismal news, and its commitment to nonfiction writing, including a writing tutor in every residential college, has been in place ever since.

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Readers respond
Thirty years later

I first read *On Writing Well* when I was in my twenties. Now I'm in my fifties, reading the 30th anniversary edition, and enjoying it -- until I read the line "it was during George W. Bush's presidency that 'civilian casualties' in Iraq became 'collateral damage.'"

While this is correct in the literal sense that the euphemism might not have been used in previous administrations for civilian casualties *in Iraq*, "collateral damage" goes back decades, at least to the Vietnam war. It has reduced my pleasure in the current edition to know that William Zinsser could be so sloppy.

Nick Ronalds

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Zinsser taught me how to write

I was a terrible writer when I arrived at Yale in 1990. I succeeded with good ideas but rarely created a paper with a title page, much less a clever analysis of a complex subject. My first Theater Studies 101 paper earned a C- (which was generous). By sophomore year I had mastered the basics but always felt left behind by my prep-school peers. They said things in class I couldn't follow. Their writing seemed incomprehensible. It turned out that some of it was.

Desperate to do better, I found a copy of *On Writing Well*. I understood immediately that clear writing equals clear thinking, while confusing writing is either complex rhetoric or a sign of confused thinking.

I requested an extension on my final Constitutional Law paper and spent winter break trying to write as much like a "Dick and Jane" book

as possible. Short clear sentences. A, B, C logic. I wrote with *On Writing Well* open on my desk. I earned my first A- in a non-gut class, and *On Writing Well* has influenced every grant request or speech I have written on behalf of many non-profit organizations over the last 14 years.

Sam Ingersoll '94



No pain, no gain

The eminent literary theoretician Fredric Jameson once observed that clarity is a device for hurrying readers past their received opinions. Schoolmarmish fulminating against the passive voice and "Latinate nouns" may be suitable to editing a tabloid newspaper with its three-thousand-word vocabulary, but not to the formulation of serious thought.

Jeffrey L. Sammons, '58, '62PhD
New Haven, CT



Isn't it ironic?

Mr. Zinssner is pretty good at irony, too: "Passive verbs would be discouraged . . ."

Bradute W. Davenport Jr. '69
Richmond, VA



A passion for clarity

William Zinsser's article expresses the wisdom of a consummate writer. A family friend and father of my classmate John Zinsser '83, Bill has been a mentor and close personal friend since I started teaching English 26 years ago. He has visited my classes at the Hill School of Middleburg and the University of Virginia, always conveying to students and teachers his passion for honesty, unity, and clarity. *On Writing Well*, based on the class he taught at Yale, has inspired generations of teachers and students with its unpretentious eloquence. He may be known to most through his many books and articles, but in my experience Bill has always been, above all, a magnificent teacher.

Huntington Lyman '83PhD
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