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**GOOD PROSE**

*The Art of Nonfiction*



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well's terms—that there is something about one's own time that demands response. But what response, and how to make it? One can only say it is possible that writers live most fully when their work moves beyond performance, beyond entertainment or information, beyond pleasing audience and editor, when it does all that and yet represents their most important beliefs.

## THE PROBLEM OF STYLE

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*H. W. Fowler's Modern English Usage belongs on every writer's shelf, and there it was on mine, but the book became a real presence in my life only when William Whitworth took over as the eleventh editor of The Atlantic Monthly. Whitworth had no connection with New England. He grew up in Arkansas and still had the soft accent of the region, and he had previously worked as a senior editor at The New Yorker, but in a way he was more Boston than Boston itself, proper and punctilious. Before Whitworth, most of the editors concentrated on politics, foreign affairs, literary trends, and long lunches, not always in that order. The finer points of grammar and punctuation were handled on another floor. But under Whitworth, commas became everybody's business. He quickly became known for his acute, if sometimes demoralizing, marginal comments on proofs. He wrote with a mechanical pencil in a tiny but astonishingly legible hand. Most maddening of all was his occasional apology—"I'm reading fast"—appended to an observation that most editors could not have made if they had taken all day. His comments often concerned subtle grammatical violations, and after noting one, such as "a possessive can't be an antecedent," he might add, "See Fowler." "See Fowler" became a popular sotto voce mutter among the temporarily traumatized staff.*

*We had not thought ourselves in need of reform, but a reformer was upon us.*

Kidder ran afool of Whitworth's pencil more than once. He (that is, Kidder: a possessive can't be an antecedent, remember?) submitted his first manuscript of the new regime on "corrasable bond," the thin paper that once made life easy for erring typists. "Never again this paper, please," said the tiny handwriting, darker and more emphatic than usual and suggestive of strong feeling. Kidder, no doubt encouraged by my grumblings, had already formed a low opinion of the interloper who was threatening the clubhouse good spirits of the magazine where we had both been trying to make our mark. Kidder did not take this rebuff well.

The Atlantic was to publish an excerpt, actually a condensation, of his forthcoming book, *The Soul of a New Machine*. This was logical—not only was it an *Atlantic Monthly* Press book, but it had virtually been written in the offices of the magazine—and it was also good news for the book's prospects. By this time, the book had been copyedited, but it still had to go through the magazine's own routine. Kidder's galley's now faced Whitworth's scrutiny.

A number of issues came up, but the one I remember best had to do with an indelicate quote. A computer engineer was quoted as saying of the new machine he was designing that it would go "as fast as a rapid ape." Whitworth struck the line on grounds that it was vulgar, which, of course, it was. But was that sufficient reason to deny the writer the use of it, given the distancing effect of quotation marks? And (my immediate concern) how was Kidder going to react to this proposition?

There are two kinds of dog. One will drop a stick at your foot. The other will clamp down harder on the stick the more you try to pry it

out of his mouth. Reporters tend to be the second kind of dog. Kidder is ordinarily quite open to suggestion, but it was clear that he did not want to let go of his quote, and he resented the assumption that he would do so.

I was caught in the middle. On the one hand, one would not want to lose one's life or job, or even a night's sleep, defending the phrase "raped ape." On the other hand, this was my writer, and the quote was the quote and it was only a quote, and to lose it would leave a hole in the scene. It did seem to me that the dignity of the magazine could survive our printing the distasteful words.

Whitworth was so exercised on the point that he had devoted a long sardonic marginal note to imagining the sort of person who would use the phrase. He said among other things that it sounded like a college sophomore who had bongo drums in his room and fake African tribal masks on his wall (admittedly a telling argument).

But we were not the people who used it, I argued.

But by implication we were, Whitworth countered. Our use of it, he said, was "endorseive."

What does he mean by that? said Kidder, in a more emphatic way. Where did he come up with that word?

In the end the quote did not survive. Whitworth showed no sign of yielding and Kidder, though not convinced, stopped insisting. Was the right thing done? It's certainly true that Whitworth was trying to protect the elegance of his new magazine's pages. But he also had a point, which we might have seen more clearly had antler bashing not been involved. Out of curiosity I recently looked back at the passage in question. It was one in which Kidder describes his subject in a way that was clearly meant to make the engineer sound interesting to the reader.

If the reader thought the author was impressed with the wit of "roped ape"—well, that would indeed have been "endorseive," and bad news for the author.

This miniature moment suggests the varieties of ways in which the style of a piece of writing is formed—the choice of a quote, a single word, the honoring or dishonoring of a grammatical nicety. We think of an author's style as if it were some sort of fixed identity, but it is made up of an accumulation of granular decisions like this one. I remember once in those early days giving Kidder some advice about style. I said in effect, "Look, you are not always the calmest and most reasonable person in the room, and there is no need to be. But you admire such people. Why don't you just pretend to be a reasonable man in your prose?" I think it was useful advice, actually, but it's not as if a style is a one-time discovery. It is created and re-created sentence by sentence, choice by choice.

Whitworth and Kidder ultimately made their peace and became friends. One day years later, in a different situation, Kidder and I found ourselves wondering without irony if the use of another questionable quotation sounded "endorseive." Meanwhile, *The Atlantic* under Whitworth's direction went on to become what was, at least at the level of sentence and paragraph, the best-edited magazine in America.

A couple of H. W. Fowler's more eloquent pronouncements appear in this chapter. Perhaps they will win some more converts. Really, every writer who doesn't already have one should buy a copy of *Modern English Usage*. Note that I said "buy," however, and not "purchase." No one who has read Fowler on "gentleisms" will ever again use "purchase" as a verb.

—RT

"Omit needless words" goes the advice from *Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White, and no one would disagree. On the other hand: How do you recognize a needless word? Should Lincoln have written not "Four score and seven" but "eighty-seven"? In King Lear's dying speech—"Never, never, never, never, never"—which word would you cut?

The familiar rules about writing turn out to be more nearly half-truths, dangerous if taken literally. They are handy as correctives, but not very useful as instruction. The authorities say to avoid the verb "to be" and the passive voice, and to write with active verbs instead. Sit down at a desk declaring, "Today I write with active verbs," and you will likely end up in parody or parody. But notice that a paragraph depends too much on the verb "to be," and you may open a route to revision.

The verb "to be" and the passive voice are unfairly maligned. God invented both for a reason. Just turn to the Bible: "In the beginning was the word, . . . and the word was God." No one would accuse that verb of weakness. Or Shakespeare: "There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood . . ." (the verb "to be" and the passive both). Occasionally the supposed weakness of a verb can accentuate the nouns around it. Hemingway demonstrates this throughout his work. Any writer should use "to be" forms without apology when defining, or naming, or placing something. Consider the passive voice when the thing done is more important than the doer. Don't lean on these usages, but don't contort your prose to avoid them, either.

"Never use a five-dollar word when a fifty-cent word will do" said Mark Twain, and this advice seems to be universally accepted. True, there is no faster way to make a passage impene-

trable than to accumulate long Latinate words. But much of the force of English derives from the conquests and invasions that gave it multiple sources. It is almost impossible to write prose in English without blending short, blunt Anglo-Saxon with more formal Latinate words, and the way you blend them matters. It is a little-noted fact that a reader's eye, just glancing at a page, can tell something about the contents simply by registering its texture. The mere look of your prose can invite readers to go on, or can warn them off before they read a word.

Great writers across the centuries have found their own ways to exploit the great variety of sounds available in English. Take for instance these lines of Emily Dickinson:

Presentiment is the long shadow on the lawn—

Indicative that suns go down—

Notice to the startled grass—

That darkness is about to pass.

A vigorous hybrid diction enforces the natural rhythms of English. So do be wary of an abundance of Latinate words, but don't automatically favor shorter words.

Although many are simplistic, all rules of writing share a worthy goal: clear and vigorous prose. Most writers want to achieve that. And most want to achieve something more, the distinction that is called a style. It's an elusive goal, but the surest way to approach it is by avoiding the many styles that offer themselves to you. The world brims over with temptations for the writer, modish words, unexamined phrases, borrowed tones, and the habits of thought they all represent. The creation of a

style often begins with a negative achievement. Only by rejecting what comes too easily can you clear a space for yourself.

Some modes of writing are so familiar that they fall easily into categories. Let's take four of them, starting with the language in which so many writers have begun their professional education:

#### JOURNALESE

Daily journalism offers invaluable lessons in the venality of human nature and in the universal logic of politics, and also skills of great value to all nonfiction writers: getting facts right, saying no more than facts support, and writing fast. But reporting the news, especially on tight deadlines, is a specialized form of expression, a style of its own that finds its way into kinds of writing where it doesn't belong.

It's as if the world of news is governed by special physical laws. Things *skyrocket* or *soar*, or they *plummet* or *plunge*. They *slam into* other things (airplanes into mountainsides, hurricanes into shores). If many journalistic clichés are dramatic, others are unnecessarily cautious. In journealese, events seldom cause one another; they tend to happen *in the wake of* other events. Sometimes events simply happen *amid* other events, "amid widespread charges of corruption" or "as corruption charges *swirl*." These clichés get used for a good reason: that cardinal virtue of journalism, of not overstepping one's bounds. But the writer unbound by newsroom conventions can avoid such stale evasions.

It is a premise of newswriting that "space is tight." Sometimes

it is, sometimes not, but by convention it always is, and so methods for compressing language have become conventional, too. Possessives replace prepositional phrases: "Chicago's O'Hare," "New York's Central Park." Nouns are used as adjectives: "Novelist William Faulkner" (or "Nobel Prize-winning novelist William Faulkner"). Similar identifiers become slightly absurd: "Motorist Rodney King," "Missing Mom Susan Powell," "Two-time Grammy nominee . . ." Many writers outside of newsrooms have adopted this construction, maybe in an effort to seem official or urgent.

There is no need to rush. Give everything the time it deserves. Here is a very slow sentence from an article by Janet Malcolm in *The New Yorker*, a magazine that has long stood watch against journalese: "On the second day of David Souter's appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee, in September, 1990, Gordon Humphrey, a Republican senator from New Hampshire, with something of the manner of a boarding school headmaster in a satiric novel, asked the nominee, 'Do you remember the old television program *Queen for a Day*?'"

This sentence doesn't have much urgency. In fact, it has a studied leisure, but one senses that the author is up to something. Here is the sentence rewritten in journalese: "*Do you remember the old television program Queen for a Day?*" asked headmasterly New Hampshire Republican senator Gordon Humphrey of then nominee David Souter at his September 1990 Senate Judiciary Committee confirmation hearings." That's about half the words of the original, and with the pertinent information up front. The facts are all there, but the tone is gone. And if you

listen to these sentences, you realize that the original has the motion, let's say, of a woman bending over gracefully to pick something up, while the other is more like a woman falling down stairs.

That's the real problem with these sentences filled with nouns as adjectives—not that they violate a grammatical rule, but that they violate normal rhythms of speech. Good readers and good writers use both eyes and ears. And for a reader who hears the words, the shorter sentence actually takes longer to register. It is hard to hear, and thus the reader resists it. Sometimes longer is shorter.

The habit of compression, along with the exigency of a deadline, can lead a reporter to insert information into a sentence randomly, as if tucking in loose shirttails. Let's say you're writing a story about a drug bust that involves a young mother from Indiana. In the lead you establish that the woman, named Polly Wabash, is being held for possession somewhere in Ohio and that she denies the charges. But you look back and see that you didn't give her age. So in the next paragraph, when you quote her, you make a small addition: "*I have no idea how that stuff got into my car*," said the twenty-eight-year-old.

Or, if you've forgotten something else: said the twenty-eight-year-old Indiana native.

Shirttail tucking can happen in a small way, with the use of an adjective to convey information that might otherwise require a sentence. The sports reporter, instead of saying that a certain player is injured, compresses the information to the injured Gronkowski. Similarly: the vacationing Smiths, the breakaway re-

*public*, or even the very common *in nearby Park Ridge*. None of these usages is wrong, and yet they all subtly lower the tone of a sentence.

Such alterations can get very subtle indeed, as in the following made-up passage: *A forty-year-old New York man was held today on charges of public indecency. Henry Hudson was arrested while buying a pair of shoes in a midtown department store. By convention we know that "the New York man" is one and the same as "Henry Hudson."* But nothing in the syntax says that. Logically, we would be justified in thinking that we were reading about two different people.

It is possible to be a journalist without sounding like a newspaper.

#### THE NEW VERNACULAR

Writing in the vernacular has produced some of the glories of American prose. "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*," said Hemingway, celebrating that distinctive strain in our writing that makes the diction and rhythm of common speech into art. From Huck to Holden Caulfield and beyond, the vernacular has been the expression of youthfulness, both literally and in the broader sense of freshness and impatience with convention.

Of course the unconventional can become conventional, and quickly too, and that seems to have happened in the new vernacular. An aggressive informality infects contemporary prose. The Internet has helped to spread it; informality is the natural

voice of the blogger. Here is an example from a blog much loved by solvers of the *New York Times* crossword, *Rex Parker Does the NY Times Crossword Puzzle*. In this quotation, Rex is away and his friend "PuzzleGirl" sits in:

Well hi there! And Happy New Year! Bet you didn't think you'd be seeing PuzzleGirl again so soon, did you? Neither did I. It's a long story and it's not very interesting so I won't bore you with it. I'll just say that it involves Rex becoming unsure about which day it was yesterday. It actually sounded a *little* like some kind of alcohol-induced confusion but I don't really have anything to base that on. Total speculation. Absolutely no facts.

This is fun and highly readable. Like its antecedents, the new vernacular represents a democratic impulse, an antidote to vanity and literary airs. It's friendly, it's familiar. But familiar in both senses. The new vernacular imitates spontaneity but sounds rehearsed. It has a franchised feel, like the chain restaurant that tells its patrons "You're family."

In part this is just a matter of cliché. Some writers try to casualize their prose with friendly phrases such as "you know" or "you know what?" Or even "um," as in "um, hel-lo?" The op-ed columnist, repeating a point for emphasis, says, "Oh, and did I mention?" The blogger's beloved initialisms, such as "OMG," "LOL," "OTOH," now find their way off the screen and into type. "Whatever" serves to dismiss an argument. Or maybe just "Duh."

The new vernacular writer is studiously sincere. Sincere even

when ironic, ironically sincere. Whatever its other goals, the first purpose of such prose is ingratitude. Of course, every writer wants to be liked, but this is prose that seeks an instant intimate relationship. It makes aggressive use of the word "you"—"bet you thought"—and even when the "you" is absent, it is implied. The writer works hard to be lovable.

The new vernacular prose is studded with amiably self-questioning qualifiers, such as the all-purpose "kind of," especially useful as a modifier of otherwise extravagant remarks. Things aren't wrong, they are "kind of heinous." Things aren't good, they are "really sort of magnificent."

These last usages are, far from being street talk, the vernacular of a branch of the intelligentsia. The late David Foster Wallace entitled an essay on contemporary fiction "Certainly the End of Something: One Would Sort of Have to Think." Wallace was both a supple and complicated thinker, and a master of the self-effacing mode, his busy mind darting easily from slang to hermeneutics. In fact, a writer in *The New York Times*, Maud Newton, traced the origin of "the whole thing," a favorite phrase of his, to Wallace. The problem with "the whole thing," she allows, lies not with the brilliant Wallace but with his imitators, who mimic his tics but lack his intellect. And they are legion.

Breeziness has become for many the literary mode of first resort, a ready-to-wear means to seeming fresh and authentic. The style is catchy, and catching, like any other fashion. Writers should be cautious with this or any other stylized jauntiness—especially young writers, to whom the tone tends to come easily. The colloquial writer seeks intimacy, but the discerning reader,

resisting that friendly hand on the shoulder, that winning grin, is apt to back away.

#### INSTITUTIONALESE

To those who weigh in on styles of American English prose, the archvillain is the anticolloquial mode, the megaphone of The Organization. If the person behind the colloquial style sounds a little too perky, there appears to be no person at all behind institutional prose, typically the language of concealment and pomposity. Its characteristics are well known, much maligned, and therefore, one would incorrectly think, generally avoided.

Institutionalese tends to obscure responsibility for what is being said, or to locate it in a heavenly source. One hears that old bugaboo, the passive voice: "Mistakes were made"; "Actions will be taken." Everyone recognizes the phenomenon. Why does it continue? The skeptical reader will credit the offending writer not with ineptitude but with a positive talent for obfuscation. The annual report writer declares, "Year-end results were negatively impacted by seasonal downward profit adjustments, consistent with global trends, insufficiently offset by labor force reductions." It's not that the guy doesn't know how to say, "We lost money last fall, fired some people, but it was a tough year all around." He either doesn't want to say that, or, more likely, would get fired if he did. Sometimes people simply have to give the appearance of saying something without the risks that come with doing so. Then prose becomes dowdy clothing, concealing more than it reveals.



One expects this kind of prose from governments and corporations, but the academy produces some wondrous examples too, prose that is opaque unto incomprehensibility. Here is a sentence from a highly respected literary scholar, published in the journal *Diacritics*:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

This is not a parody, just an extreme example of its type. The passage, published several years ago, achieved a certain immortality when it won first prize in a "bad writing" contest sponsored by another journal, *Philosophy and Literature*. The sentence is notable for its reliance on academic jargon, but even without understanding its meaning, one can sense that revision would help. Indeed you want to save the sentence from itself, to suggest, perhaps, that the writer shorten the distance between the first subject and its predicate (thirty-three words). Often one of the most helpful things an editor can say to a writer is, "Make

this two sentences." In this case the answer would probably be more like five. Not that one would want to put a word limit on sentences. Some great writers (Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, for instance) have spun them out at impressive length. But clarity can sometimes be achieved simply by giving every idea a sentence of its own.

Much overstuffed prose reflects a desire to bully, to impress, or to hide. And yet it must be granted that some writers in this mode do not really find themselves in the morass by choice. Some are actually trying to be clear, even literary. What makes them fail? Inflation of language is sometimes not a boast but a cosmetic for insecurity. It takes some confidence to write clearly. Certain constructions attract writers in hiding. One, at least, is old enough for Fowler to have given it a name: "the sentry clause." He describes it under the heading "PARTICIPLES. 4. Initial participle &c." The passage reads in part:

Before we are allowed to enter, we are challenged by the sentry, being a participle or some equivalent posted in advance to secure that our interview with the C.O. (or subject of the sentence) shall not take place without due ceremony.

A contemporary example of the sentry clause might go something like this: *A longtime student of history, he entered politics as a state representative at age thirty-five*. There is nothing grammatically wrong with this sentence, but it betrays a desire on the part of the writer to sound serious or literary at the expense of clarity. It is unlikely that the writer would ever speak such a sen-

tence in conversation. But to the uncertain stylist, simple declarative sentences sound insufficiently important.

The initial dependent clause is a dubious construction under the best of circumstances. A sentence built on it is usually weaker than a straightforward declarative sentence. *A devoted husband, he bought her a diamond bracelet.* The usual problem is that the reader expects the clause to be logically connected to the statement that follows, but the nature of the logic is fuzzy. Do diamonds suggest devotion, or does the guy have something to hide?

Things get worse when the two parts of the sentence don't connect at all: *An avid duck hunter, he likes opera and soft porn. An Indiana native, Polly is the mother of three.* Does the writer mean to suggest that Hoosiers are naturally fertile? Obviously not. Readers aren't supposed to think anything. It only sounds as if they are. The ghost of logic haunts these constructions. They have been around for a long while, but tradition does not validate them.

The nervous writer is also likely to exhibit a morbid fear of repetition. Here is a recent candidate for the presidency, Governor Rick Perry of Texas, struggling for gravitas: "Even if someone is attracted to a person of the same sex, he or she still makes a choice to engage in sexual activity with someone of the same gender."

In cases like this, the effort to avoid repetition only calls attention to itself. Here, too, Fowler can be helpful, with his term "elegant variation," which sounds like a compliment but isn't. Fowler writes of this error with evangelical feeling, both excessive and splendid:

It is the second-rate writers, those intent rather on expressing themselves prettily than on conveying their meaning clearly, and still more those whose notions of style are based on a few misleading rules of thumb, that are chiefly open to the allurements of elegant variation. . . . There are few literary faults so widely prevalent, and this book will not have been written in vain if the present article should heal any sufferer of his infirmity.

What is elegant variation? Suppose you are writing about housing prices in Boston and you say, "Houses on Beacon Hill without exception list above seven figures, but the occasional residence in Back Bay can be found for under a million dollars." Expressing "a million" in two different ways isn't confusing, but the careful reader might well wonder whether you are making a distinction between "houses" and "residences." The second word stands out because the reader suspects it is there only to avoid being the first. But the reader can't be sure. You could be fudging the statistics, for instance, to include lower-priced apartments as "residences."

Finally—finally at least for a short list—the pompous but self-doubting writer has a penchant for overfamiliar metaphor, sometimes for multiple familiar metaphors. *We need to grease the skids if this project is ever going to catch fire and take us to the Promised Land.* When metaphors are fresh they are a form of thought, but when they are stale they are a way to avoid thought. *Tip of the iceberg* offends the ear as a cliché, and it offends reason because it is imprecise, if not spurious—just as when people say, "And the list goes on," and one knows that they have actually

run out of examples. Often the writer will try to excuse the cliché by acknowledging it ("the proverbial cat that ate the canary") or by dressing it up ("the icing on the marketing cake"). These gambits never work. A cliché is a cliché. Orwell took a hard line on tired metaphor. In "Politics and the English Language" he wrote, "Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print." One wouldn't want to forbid writers from using the occasional ancient phrase—a *dog in the manger* or *the boy who cried wolf*—but on the whole, Orwell gives sound advice. The mind that relies on cliché does not really know what it is saying.

But read the pompous writer with sympathy! A scared and a confused creature lurks behind the self-important drone of that voice. He is hiding things from the reader but also, in all likelihood, from himself. And if you should find yourself sounding that way, ask yourself what you are trying to avoid.

#### PROPAGANDA

Ever since Orwell's novel *1984*, the world has had a keener ear for the manipulation of vocabulary in the service of ideology or of the state. It is not unusual in any political contention to hear one side or another accuse the opponent of "Orwellian" language, the blatant distortion of meaning to benefit one's position. Ongoing debates are framed in self-serving terms, and these terms are depressingly effective at preventing discussion. Early in the game, the abortion controversy froze into a dualism: "right to life" vs. "freedom to choose." In 2011, the debate over marginal

tax rates created two loaded ways of characterizing rich people: "America's most fortunate" vs. "job creators." If you feel passionately about one side or the other in such debates, fine; only you must not succumb to the language that seeks to persuade merely by naming.

The most dangerous propaganda is that which one fails to recognize—the language that insinuates itself into the general consciousness, language that seems to represent consensus but, on a closer look, obscures differences. This is the language that truly blocks understanding.

Let's take a single word much with us in early-twenty-first-century America: "terrorism." Objecting to a word is usually a fool's game. There are no bad words, only bad contexts. The most vulgar obscenity can be made tender by lovers; the worst racial epithet can be tamed by its victims. But since the destruction of the World Trade Center, "terrorism" has come about as close to a bad word as the American language contains. Bad in its imprecision, its unexamined premises, its power to confuse, its unique ability to demonize.

"Terrorism." This big, capacious, amorphous word, big enough for everyone's hatreds and fears, has been used by so many people for so many ends that writers simply have to know what they mean when they use it, and somehow make that meaning plain to their readers.

The economy of words is a wondrous system. Language is free and available to all in limitless quantities, an utterly democratic commodity. But as soon as you help yourself to this bounty you can begin to trade in your own identity. A great deal of the common language is borrowed without much thought from a

part of the culture that may or may not represent the writer, a culture with which the writer may or may not want to be allied. Use enough words wantonly and you disappear before your own eyes. Use them well and you create yourself. This is why writers must own their language. Own your language or it will own you.

When quoting great writers we tend to use the present tense, even if they died centuries ago: "Milton reminds us . . ." "As Shakespeare says . . ." The literary convention recalls the truth that must have inspired it. Writers we revere feel like colleagues and confidants, as if they were speaking to us directly. This communion of strangers, living and dead, derives from the rather mystical quality called "voice."

The term "voice" appears constantly in criticism today. Sometimes people use it interchangeably with "style," but usually it is supposed to mean more, often nothing less than the writer's presence on the page. The term indeed may soon buckle under the weight it is asked to bear. Certainly it has become discomfiting to hear writers speak about their own voices. You cannot, must not, try to design and create a voice. The creation of voice is the providential result of the writer's constant self-defining and self-refining inner dialogue. When it happens, let someone else tell you, and be grateful.

Yet it is undeniable that good writing must have a human sound. Maybe that is the more modest word to keep in mind: sound. You try to attune yourself to the sound of your own writing. If you can't imagine yourself saying something aloud, then

you probably shouldn't write it. That is not the same as saying, "Write the way you talk." If we all did that, civilization would be in even worse shape than it is. This is closer: Write the way you talk on your best day. Write the way you would like to talk.

Sometimes it will happen, in the middle of a difficult piece of writing, that one morning you wake up with a sentence in mind, and the sentence contains a sound that seems to unlock the problem for you. Speak to no one, go and write that sentence down. The sound can be more useful than a multipage outline. It is the sketch that precedes an architect's blueprints, the writer's equivalent of a vision.

So listen to yourself. And it helps to keep one's ear tuned to the great voices that have preceded us, not to copy them but to be inspired by them. Hunter Thompson once said that he taught himself to write by typing out *The Great Gatsby*. This seems touchingly innocent—and Thompson's choice of models is odd, given the turns that his own style took. But probably he wasn't so naive as to think he was going to write like F. Scott Fitzgerald. Perhaps he knew that we all need writers from whom we learn lessons that go deeper than mannerism. Listen to yourself, and listen to those writers who are so great that they cannot be imitated.