



Mark Waldman's

## Six Figure Book Camp

### **IMPROVING YOUR WRITING** **Plus excerpts from *The Oxford Guide to Writing***

Each time we write or revise, our skills improve, but only if we *consciously* focus on writing better. What is good writing? Teachers have been debating this question for centuries, and the stereotypical answer is “You’ll know it when you see it.”

There’s truth to this, and to make matters worse, we – as authors – are often the worst judges of our own writing. Writing well requires immersion in the story, and we must suspend our critical voice when we write.

Even when we’ve finished writing, it’s difficult to judge the quality of our work. As one famous author said, “You should never praise nor condemn your writing, for there are many others who will be more than happy to do that for you!”

Then there’s the problem with critics and coaches: they can always find flaws in your writing, and there’s just no end to it. For example, I would write an opening page for a book I was working on, and I’d send it to my publisher and friend, Jeremy Tarcher. He always complimented my writing, and he’d always offer suggestions to improve it. I’d follow his suggestions and send it back to him, but he’d do the same thing: compliment me, and then suggest an improvement. I started to drive him nuts because I would always send him another draft.

One day I asked him if he complimented me because he really thought I was a good writer, or because I was a weak writer who needed encouragement. After all, nothing’s more painful to an author than rejection. He shocked and delighted me when he said, “Mark, I honestly don’t know!”

Here’s what I learned from that experience: the only person I want to criticize my writing is my agent, my coauthor, and the editor who is working on my manuscript. No one else, and in my personal opinion, friends and family are the worst. So for me, the only voice that matters is the person who is interested in publishing my book.

But it begs the question, “How does one improve their writing skills?” Neither practice, nor professional criticism, is enough. You also need to read books on writing, especially the essays by famous authors and poets. But of all the books I’ve collected on writing well, none of them – with the exception of one – address the craft of creating rhythm, variation, and mood. *The New Oxford Guide to Writing*, by Thomas S. Kane, is the exception. Unfortunately, the chapter that is most important violates the very rules it teaches! At the end of this section, I’ve included 39 pages that I want you to carefully study. It addresses four key elements to structuring a well-written sentence: being *concise*, bringing *occasional* emphasis to specific words or phrases, creating *variation* by changing the length and pattern of each sentence in a paragraph, and most important, creating a pleasing *rhythm* that the person will “hear” while reading.

Rhythm: I can’t over-emphasize the importance of this writing element. The simplest way to describe it is to analyze a favorite poem or a famous passage from a literary master. For example, when I sit down to write, I often speak aloud the sentence I’m composing. I listen to the pauses, the cadence, the tone of voice, and the way each syllable rolls off my tongue as I type my words onto the page. Then I’ll reread



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everything aloud, and tweak each sentence, taking out unnecessary words that interfere with the flow. I'll change the length of sentences so that I don't generate monotony for the reader. And sometimes – *maybe* – I'll overly emphasize a word or phrase. This is what I actually did when I consciously constructed this paragraph. With practice, it will become second nature to you.

Then I'll put my writing away for a day, a week, or even a month. Then, when I read it cold, I'll revise again, expanding areas to "paint" a larger picture for the reader. Take your time explaining everything. In other words, make it easy for your reader. Don't toss out two complex ideas in the same paragraph, or even in the same page. The moment you become too detailed, your chapter will begin to sound professional or academic. That turns the general readership off, and these are the people who will recommend your book to others.

If you want to hire me for an hour to critique your writing style, I can help you identify both the strengths and weakness of your prose. This is what every editor pays attention to, and it's essential that you create a concise but beautifully rhythmic opening to every chapter you write, and to the opening paragraphs in your nonfiction book proposal. But be careful: easy to go overboard and create what critics call purple prose – flowery language that uses too many descriptive words. See my essay on Mark Twain's writing secrets.

Study the opening paragraphs of the most popular nonfiction books that reached the *New York Times* bestseller list. If your writing remains problematic, consider coauthoring your book with a person who has a proven track record (i.e., publication credits) in writing articles, essays, fiction, creative nonfiction, or who has ghostwritten *successful* books for others.

### First Sentences

If I were to recommend just one other book that exemplifies the best writing of the past 2000 years, it would be *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, by Phillip Lopate. From Seneca to Thoreau, to Gore Vidal and Annie Dillard, you'll find great titles and riveting opening paragraphs, any of which will intuitively teach you how to write a better proposal and book.

Here are some of the nonfiction titles and opening phrases that, even today, would capture the interest of any publisher or agent. Imagine what kind of book could be crafted from these beginning words, and if you create such opening sentences for the various sections of your book proposal, you may have a bestseller on your hands:

"I cannot for the life of me see that quiet is as necessary to a person...as it is usually thought to be. Here I am with a babel of noise going on all about me." *On Noise*, by Seneca, c. 50 A.D.

"One is in a hurry to leave, but one's visitor keeps chattering away." *Hateful Things*, by Sei Shonagon, 10<sup>th</sup> Century Japan.



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“What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realize I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head.” *Essays on Idleness*, by Kenko, c. 1340 A.D.

“On the twenty-ninth of July, in 1945, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born.” *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin, 1955.

“There is a mistaken idea, ancient but still with us, that an overdose of anything from fornication to hot chocolate will teach restraint by the very results of its abuse....Craving—the actual and continued need for something—is another matter. *Once a Tramp, Always....*, by MFK Fisher, 1969.

“For about 15 minutes I have been sitting chin in hand in front of the typewriter, staring out at the snow. Trying to be honest with myself, trying to figure out why writing this seems to me so dangerous an act, filled with fear and shame, and why it seems so necessary.” *Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity*, by Adrienne Rich, 1986.

“My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he never quit drinking but because he quit living.” *Under the Influence*, by Scott Russell Sanders, 1989.

Now, I want you to do a little experiment. Read each of the previous passages aloud as you pay attention to the rhythm, cadence, and flow from one word to the next. This is what I want you to build into your own writing as you construct the overview and chapter summaries for your book proposal.

Here's another tip: Try your own hand at writing a brief essay. Then submit it for publication in a small magazine. A well-written essay contains all of the essential elements that you can leisurely expand into a book. Remember: a popular book takes one great concept and examines it from ten different perspectives. Those perspectives are the chapters for that book.

### **First Paragraphs**

Another book that I found personally helpful was *First Paragraphs: Inspired Openings for Writers and Readers* by Donald Newlove. It inspired me to teach an entire course at Esalen during the week of September 11, 2001. Here is what I wrote:

First paragraphs: we can all learn something from the past. From Aristotle to Twain, from Freud to Faulkner and Oates – our teachers are hiding in the first few pages



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of their books. Take, for example, the opening lines from a letter that was written to a young poet:

You are so young; you stand before beginnings. I beg of you, dear friend, to have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms, or books written in a foreign language. Do not look for the answers now. . . . you need only to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.

Thus wrote Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letter to a Young Poet*, over a hundred years ago. And the poet with whom he was corresponding? He had written to Rilke in hopes that he might answer a question that haunts the minds every person who desires to write a book: “*Should I trust my impulse to write?*” Rilke responds:

Go within. Search for the cause, find the impetus that bids you to write. Put it to this test: Does it stretch out its roots in the deepest place of your heart? Can you avow that you would die if you were forbidden to write? Dig deep into yourself for a true answer. And if it should ring its assent, if you can confidently meet this serious question with a simple, “I must,” then build your life upon it. . . .Go within and scale the depths of your being from which your very life springs forth. At its source you will find the answer to the question, whether you must write....Then accept that fate; bear its burden, and its grandeur, without asking for the reward.

The reward that Rilke spoke of is the reward of publication, of seeing one’s words in print. First sentences, first paragraphs. Craft them carefully from your heart, for when you do, it will shine like a friend, an inspirational light for others to savor and grow. Write because you have to write, and write because you want to write, because nothing will stimulate your inner growth more than sharing your words with the world. That is the true reward, and not the money you may receive.

### **The Well-Written Sentence**

I cannot teach you the *art* of writing – no one can – but examples of exceptional writing are easy to find. Just open your favorite book and read a sentence or paragraph that makes you shiver or smile or cry.

Examples of *bad* sentences are easy to identify: they sound clumsy, especially when read aloud. They confuse rather than illuminate. They are dull, unexpressive, and essentially meaningless. If deleted from the paragraph, nothing would be missed.

Good writing is more than a sequence of grammatically placed phrases. Good writing *transcends* the words on the page to capture some nuance, some feeling, some ineffable truth that intuitively – not *logically* – makes sense. Take, for example, these three words: “agreed,” “finally,” and “we.” You can arrange them in many ways, like this: *We agreed. Finally.*



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Notice how the feeling sense is different from these arrangements of the same three words:

We finally agreed.    Finally, we agreed.    We agreed, finally!

By turning these three words into two sentences, greater emphasis is created. In other words, when a fragment is carefully and sparingly interjected into a paragraph or page of text, tension is created - literally - in the reader's brain. It makes you stop, reflect, and reconsider. Only a second may pass, but it awakens the reader's interest.

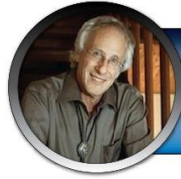
Such fundamental tips are hard to find in books and courses that teach you how to write. But one book stands out from the crowd: *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing*. Within this book are nuggets of wisdom that can inspire, even transform, an ordinary sentence into a work of art. Within the pages of this book you'll discover seven qualities that can make good writing great:

1. Clarity
2. Conciseness
3. Variety
4. Novelty
5. Emphasis
6. Rhythm
7. Sound

### **Excerpts from *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing* By Thomas S. Kane (1988, pages 200-239)**

In speech we achieve emphasis in a variety of ways: by talking loudly (or sometimes very softly); by speaking slowly, carefully separating words that ordinarily we run together; by altering our tone of voice or changing its timbre. We also stress what we say by nonvocal means: a rigid, uncompromising posture; a clenched fist; a pointing finger; any of numerous other body attitudes, gestures, facial expressions.

Writers can rely upon none of these signals. Yet they too need to be emphatic. What they must do, in effect, is to translate loudness, intonation, gesture, and so on, into writing. Equivalents are available. Some are merely visual symbols for things we do when talking: much punctuation, for example, stands for pauses in speech. Other devices, while not unknown in speech, belong primarily to composition. Some of these we shall look at in this chapter.



First, though, we need to distinguish two degrees of emphasis — total emphasis, which applies to the entire sentence, and partial emphasis, which applies only to a word, or a group of words, within the sentence. As an example of total emphasis, consider these two statements:

1. *An old man sat in the corner.*
2. *In the corner sat an old man.*

Sentence (1) is matter of fact, attaching no special importance to what it tells us. Sentence (2), however, like a close-up in a film, suggests that the fact is important. Now this distinction does not mean that the second version is superior to the first: simply that it is more emphatic. Whether or not the emphasis makes it better depends on what the writer wants to say.

By their nature strong sentences (that is, those having total emphasis) cannot occur very often. Their effectiveness depends on their rarity. Writing in which every sentence is emphatic, or even every other, is like having somebody shout at you.

Partial emphasis (emphasis within the sentence), however, is characteristic of all well-written sentences. Usually one word (or phrase or clause) is more important than the others. Consider these two variations of the same statement:

1. *It suddenly began to rain.*
2. *Suddenly, it began to rain.*

If we suppose that the writer wished to draw our attention to "suddenly," sentence (2) is better. By moving it to the opening position and isolating it with a comma, the writer gives the word far more weight than it has in sentence (1). Again there is no question of an absolute better or worse. Each version is well-suited to some purpose, ill-suited to others.

## **The Fragment**

A fragment is a construction which, like a sentence, begins with a capital and ends with full-stop punctuation, but which



does not satisfy the traditional definition of a sentence. While they are often serious grammatical faults, fragments can be used positively as a means of emphatic statement, drawing attention because of their difference:

*What do baseball managers really do? Worry. Constantly. For a living.*

### **The Short Sentence**

Short sentences are inherently emphatic. They will seem especially strong in the context of longer, more complicated statements. Often the contrast in length reinforces the contrast in thought:

*The man was naturally and quietly eloquent. So he was electrocuted.*

*Don't believe that contraception is a natural, a healthy thing for human beings to do, just because animals do it. It isn't.*

### **The Imperative Sentence**

At its simplest the imperative sentence is a command:

*Come here!*  
*Listen to me!*

Its distinguishing feature — usually — is that it drops the subject and begins with the verb, although some commands use a noun of address or an actual subject:

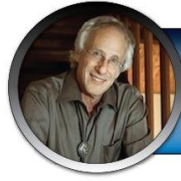
*John, come here!*  
*You listen to me!*

While commands are rare in composition, imperative sentences can be emphatic in other ways:

*Insist on yourself; never imitate.* [Emerson]

*Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails.* [Thoreau]

*Consider, for example, those skulls on the monuments.* [Huxley]



Aside from being strong, imperative sentences also link writer and reader. Emerson does not say "men and women must insist on themselves"; he addresses you. Thoreau urges you to participate in a new way of life, and Huxley invites you to look with him at the statuary he is examining. Huxley's sentence also illustrates another use of the imperative: moving readers easily from one point to another.

### **Negative-Positive Restatement**

Here emphasis is achieved by stating an idea twice, first in negative terms, then in positive:

*Color is not a human or personal reality; it is a political reality.*

*This is more than poetic insight; it is hallucination.*

### **Rhythm and Rhyme**

Rhythm — primarily a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables — is an inevitable aspect of prose, though rarely as regular or as obvious as in poetry. Since rhythm of some sort is inescapable, good writers are aware of it and make it work for them. Probably the most common ways in which rhythm conveys emphasis are by clustered stresses and metrical runs.

A stressed syllable is spoken relatively loudly, an unstressed one more softly:

*The Big Bull Market was dead.*

*He speaks and thinks plain, broad, downright, English.*

Done skillfully, as in the examples above, rhythm endows an idea with considerable importance. It can also contribute to meaning in subtle ways. For example, the rhythm of the first sentence, above, reinforces the sense of unalterable finality conveyed by "dead."

### **Metrical Runs**

A metrical run consists of a number of stressed and unstressed syllables recurring in a more or less regular pattern. This, of





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course, is common in poetry, but much less so in prose.

*For one brief moment the world was nothing but sea — the sight, the sound, the smell, the touch, the taste of sea.*

The rhythmic regularity of that sentence not only makes it memorable but also enhances the emotional intensity of the experience. Metrical runs cannot be maintained for very long or employed very often. Otherwise prose begins to sound awkwardly poetic.

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that such passages have no place in prose, that prose must avoid any rhythmic effects at all. Rhythm is always there, but it should be unobtrusive, directing a reader's response, but without drawing attention to itself.

### **Rhyme**

Rhyme, the repetition of identical or very similar sounds, is, like rhythm, a technique we associate more with poetry than with prose. When it does occur in prose it is usually a way of emphasizing particular words within the sentence. Occasionally, however, rhyme serves to unify and emphasize an entire sentence:

*Reason will be replaced by Revelation.*

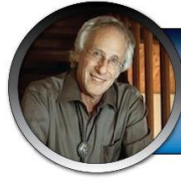
Emphatic sentences are only occasionally needed. But it is usually necessary to establish appropriate emphasis upon particular words within the sentence. Good writers do this subtly. Rather than scattering exclamation points, underlinings, and capitals, they rely chiefly upon the selection and positioning of words.

Adjectives and adverbs can be made emphatic by where they are placed and how they are punctuated:

*The old woman was like a dilapidated macaw with a hard, piercing laugh, mirthless and joyless, with a few unimaginative phrases, with a parrot's powers of observation and a parrot's hard and poisonous bite.*

Adjectives may also be accumulated in groups of three or more; as in this description of an Irish-American family:

*... a willful, clannish, hard-drinking, fornicating tribe.*



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Or this one of a neighbor taking a singing lesson:

*A vile beastly rottenheaded foolbegotten brazenthroated pernicious piggish screaming, tearing, roaring, perplexing, splitmecrackle crashmegiggle insane ass... is practicing howling so horribly, that my head is nearly off.*

Passages like these are virtuoso performances in which exaggeration becomes its own end. Of course, exposition cannot indulge itself like this very often. But sobriety needs relief, and verbal exuberance dazzles and delights. They bring us into startling contact with the thoughts and feelings of the writer — that is the essence of communication.

### **Key Words**

Opening chapters or essays with key words has much to recommend it:

*Curiosity is one of the lowest human faculties.*

Putting the essential idea first is natural, suited to a style aiming at the simplicity and directness of forceful speech:

*Great blobs of rain fall. Rumble of thunder. Lightning streaking blue on the building. And so the storm began.*

The above sentences mirror the immediacy of the experience, going at once to what dominates the author's perception — the heavy feel of rain, thunder, lightning.

Beginning with the principal idea is advantageous in developing a contrast, but postponing a major point to the end of the sentence is more formal and literary. The writer must have the entire sentence in mind from the first word. On the other hand, the final position is more emphatic than the opening, perhaps because we remember best what we have read last:

*So the great gift of symbolism, which is the gift of reason, is at the same time the seat of man's peculiar weakness — the danger of lunacy.*

*We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did was*



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"illegal." [Martin Luther King]

*Marx was not only a social scientist; he was a reformer.*

Inexperienced writers often waste the final position. Consider, for instance, how much more effective is the revision of this statement:

*As the military power of Russia increases, so too does the pride that Khrushchev has.*

REVISION: *As the military power of Russia increases, so too does Khrushchev's pride.*

### **Isolation**

An isolated word or phrase is cut off by punctuation. It can occur anywhere in the sentence:

*Children, curled in little balls, slept on straw scattered on wagon beds.*

*I was late for class — inexcusably — and had forgotten my homework.*

Whether the isolated expression comes first, last, or in between, it must be set off by commas, dashes, or a colon.

### **Repetition**

In a strict sense, repetition is a matter more of diction than of sentence structure. But since it is one of the most valued means of emphasis we shall include it here.

Repetition is sometimes a virtue and sometimes a fault. Drawing the line is not easy. It depends on what is being repeated. Important ideas can stand repetition; unimportant ones cannot. When you write the same word (or idea) twice, you draw the reader's attention to it. If it is a key idea, fine. But if not, then you have awkwardly implied importance to something that does not matter very much. In the following examples, of course, we are concerned with positive repetition, involving major ideas.



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*That's camouflage, that's trickery, that's treachery, window-dressing.* [Malcolm X]

*It was a common day, one of those days that sets the teeth on edge with its tedium, its small frustrations.* [Joan Didion]

*One clings to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope — the entire possibility — of freedom disappears.* [James Baldwin]

Now and then, a writer uses an expression just so he or she can replace it with another:

*That consistent stance, repeatedly adopted, must mean one of two — no, three — things.* [John Gardner]

### **Repeating the Same Word**

This is a very effective means of emphasis and susceptible to considerable variation.

*To philosophize is to understand; to understand is to explain oneself; to explain is to relate.*

*I didn't like the swimming pool, I didn't like swimming, and I didn't like the swimming instructor, and after all these years I still don't.*

*When that son leaves home, he throws himself into the American way of life; he eats American, talks American, he will be American or nothing.*

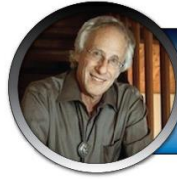
*I am neat, scrupulously neat, in regard to the things I care about; but a book, as a book, is not one of those things.*

*She smiled a little smile and bowed a little bow.*

*Their blindness was a blurring of vision; his, a blindness of spirit.*

### **Effective Rhythm**

Rhythm is effective when it pleases the ear. Even more important, good rhythm enters into what a sentence says, enhancing and reinforcing its meaning. A necessary condition of effective rhythm is that a passage be laid out in clear syntactic units (phrases, clauses, whole sentences); that these have



something in common (length, intonation, grammatical structure); and that there be a loose but discernible pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Generally the syntactic units, while showing some similarities, are very far from exactly the same. Nor are the syllables laid out in precisely repeated patterns. In this respect prose rhythm is much looser than that of traditional accented poetry, which has a much more predictable arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables. Here is an example of rhythm in prose:

*There was a magic, and a spell, and a curse; but the magic has been waved away, and the spell broken, and the curse was a curse of sleep and not of pain.*

Poor rhythm usually results from either or both of two causes: (1) the sentence is not organized so that phrases and clauses create a pattern out of which rhythm can evolve; (2) syllables are poorly grouped, being either so irregular that no pattern at all can be grasped, or so unrelievedly regular that a steady, obtrusive beat overrides everything else.

Consider this example of poor rhythm:

*Each party promises before the election to make the city bigger and better, but what happens after the election?*

It would be wiser to place the ideas in separate sentences:

*Before the election, each party promises to make the city bigger and better. But what happens after the election?*

Other improvements might be made. For instance, shortening the question to "But what happens afterwards?" would make it less repetitious and more emphatic. But just as it stands, adding no words and taking none away, our revision shows that poor rhythm can often be improved simply by rearranging the words.

Good rhythm enters into the meaning of the sentence, not only reinforcing the words but often giving them nuances they might not otherwise have.

### **Mimetic Rhythm**

Mimetic means "imitative." Mimetic rhythm imitates the perception a sentence describes or the feeling or ideas it conveys:



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*The tide reaches flood stage, slackens, hesitates, and begins to ebb.*

The flowing tide is suggested by the very movement of this sentence, which runs smoothly and uninterrupted to a midpoint, slows down, pauses (the commas), and then picks up and runs to its end. Here is a similar, somewhat longer, sentence about Niagara Falls:

*On the edge of disaster the river seems to gather herself, to pause, to lift a head noble in ruin, and then, with a slow grandeur, to plunge into the eternal thunder and white chaos below.*

Mimetic rhythm may also imply ideas more abstract than physical movement, as in this passage describing the life of peasants:

*Black bread, rude roof, dark night, laborious day, weary arm at sunset; and life ebbs away.*

### **Changing Sentence Length and Pattern**

It is not necessary, or even desirable, to maintain a strict alternation of long and short statements. You need only an occasional brief sentence to change the pace of predominately long ones, or a long sentence now and then in a passage composed chiefly of short ones:

*We took a hair-raising taxi ride into the city. The rush-hour traffic of Bombay is a nightmare — not from dementia, as in Tokyo; nor from exuberance, as in Rome; not from malice, as in Paris; it is a chaos rooted in years of practiced confusion, absentmindedness, selfishness, inertia, and an incomplete understanding of mechanics. There are no discernible rules.*

*Dave Beck was hurt. Dave Beck was indignant. He took the fifth amendment when he was questioned and was forced off the executive board of the AFL-CIO, but he retained enough control of his own union treasury to hire a stockade of lawyers to protect him. Prosecution dragged in the courts. Convictions were appealed. Delay.*