

On Writing Well Summary – William Zinsser

10 MINUTE READ

[On Writing Well](#) (1976)

The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction

by [William Zinsser](#)

On Writing Well is a book so brimming with literary wisdom that it feels like you're clutching a living brain. Writing, about writing, for writers - by writer, editor, critic, teacher and captain of the craft, William Zinsser. ([336 pages](#))

Note: This **On Writing Well summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Books on Writing](#) of all time.

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On Writing Well Review

[“On Writing Well”](#) is a book so brimming with wisdom that reading it feels like you’re clutching a living brain.

This is writing, about writing, for writers, by a captain of the craft. Which – whether your medium is books, articles, reports, emails, messages, or status updates – makes [“On Writing Well”](#) a book for us all.

But it isn’t [William Zinsser’s](#) 70 years of journalism, writing, editing, criticism and teaching that makes this book so special. It’s not the plethora of practical pointers, nor the abundance of anecdotes, quotes, examples, and references that colour them along the way. It isn’t even the mini-guides on writing about people, travel, memoir, science, business, sports, arts, and humour.

What makes this book special is [Zinsser’s](#) humanity and warmth. This is writing at its best, and when you learn that Zinsser passed away just recently, aged 92, it feels oddly like losing the contact details of someone you were just getting to know.

I found it difficult to crunch [“On Writing Well”](#) and even harder to write a worthy introduction. I’ve tried to capture the major points below. In doing so I’ve omitted some of [Zinsser’s](#) more granular tips, much of the specific guidance from the mini-guides, and all of his warmth, charm, and charisma.

[“On Writing Well”](#) is a book that should be experienced first hand. But don’t read it because you’re a writer. Read it for the thrill of meeting a master at his craft. Read it because “quality is a reward of its own.”

On Writing Well Summary

Writing Well Is a Craft; Anyone Can Learn It.

Like [learning any skill](#), writing well needs the **right**: Mindset, Motivation, Practice (Quantity and Quality), and Opportunity.

Mindset: Anyone can learn to write well. But it *will* take time and effort and you *will* make mistakes. Persevere and remember: "Your only contest is with yourself".

Motivation: Write well for the reader but write about things **you** find interesting. You will find it easier to persevere with and enjoy and your energy will come across in your writing.

Practice (Quantity): "You learn to write by writing", so "[establish a daily schedule](#) and stick to it" and remember: "the man who runs away from his craft because he lacks inspiration is fooling himself. He is also going broke."

Practice (Quality): First strip your writing down, then build it back up. Practice purposefully to master the basics. Work at each component, form, and style. Work on your weaknesses and become obsessive over detail: "No writing decision is too small to be worth a large expenditure of time."

Opportunity: [Attend courses](#) and [read about learning to write](#). Seek other writers, teachers and editors. Study, note, and imitate the masters: "Find the best writers in the fields that interest you and read their work aloud" and "never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft."

Good Writing Is Clear, Simple, Concise, and Human.

Be Clear.

“Give the reader a narrative flow he can follow with no trouble from beginning to end.”

- The reader should find it easy to follow.
- The writing should be structured, linear, flowing, emphatic, and familiar.
- The writer should set a single intention, research extensively, think clearly, structure carefully and use analogies.

Be Simple.

“A simple style is the result of hard work and hard thinking; a muddled style reflects a muddled thinker.”

- The reader should find it easy to read.
- The writing should contain short and simple paragraphs, sentences, and words.
- The writer should test by reading aloud. Always remember the reader and shorten words where possible.

Be Concise.

“The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components.”

- The reader should find each point quick to understand.
- The writing should use words that are surprising, strong, and precise in their meaning.
- The writer should eliminate clutter (“Good writing is lean and emphatic.”), avoid cliché and jargon, and commit (“Don’t hedge with little timidities.”)

Be Human.

“Writing is an intimate transaction between two people... and it will go

well to the extent that it retains its humanity."

- The reader should be able to relate to both content and author.
- The writing should feel personal, energetic, specific, and concrete.
- The writer should write like a person, tell a story, use quotes, use detail to illustrate the general, and have fun.

Good Writing Grows From Good Process.

Set intention.

- "Decide what single point you want to leave in the reader's mind".
- Decide how you plan to put it there.

Research.

"Readers should always feel that you know more about a subject than you put in writing."

- Go after your research; if it interests you then "get on the plane": travel to the next town, county or country to find it.
- "Always collect more material than you will use."
- "Look for your material everywhere", not just in the obvious places.
- And follow surprises. "Surprise is the most refreshing element in non-fiction writing. If something surprises you it will also surprise – and delight – the people you are writing for."

Think.

"Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other."

- Select: Use less than you have.
- Reduce: Explain big by thinking small. Tell a story.
- Organise: Clear writing <==> Clear thinking.
- "Your subconscious mind does more writing than you think" so,

“never go to sleep without a request to [it].” — Thomas Edison

Write.

- Go easy on yourself (“The first draft of anything is shit.” — Ernest Hemmingway)
- Put yourself into the writing by always writing the first draft in the first person (then go back and remove the ‘I’s if you must).
- Trust and adapt to your material: “Don’t become the prisoner of a preconceived plan”.
- When you get stuck ask yourself “What is this piece *really* about?”

Rewrite.

- Read aloud; remove anything you wouldn’t actually say.
- Edit on paper; process the full composition with a pen, then apply edits.
- Continuously strengthen, tighten and make the language more precise.
- Repeat. Repeat. Repeat: “Rewriting is the essence of writing well; it’s where the game is won or lost.”

Defend.

- A good editor brings an “objective eye” and “can’t be thanked fervently enough”.
- But defend against direct edits to (a) style and (b) content: “If you allow your distinctiveness to be edited out, you will lose one of your major virtues.”

The Anatomy of Writing Well.

Words.

“Writing that endures consists of words that are short and strong.”

- Use short words over long words.
- Use verbs over nouns.
- Verbs: Use active verbs over passive verbs.
 - "The ground **was covered** in leaves." → "Leaves **covered** the ground"
- Nouns: Make people act, not concepts.
 - "**The first reaction is** often laughter." → "**People** often laugh."
- Use adverbs only where they change meaning. (See "How to Cleanse Clutter")
- Use adjectives only where they surprise or inform. (See "How to Cleanse Clutter")
- Use neutral over sexist or gendered language. (See "How to Side-step Sexism")
- "Get in the habit of using dictionaries" and a thesaurus*.

* If you're looking for an immediate next action: why not set up a good dictionary and thesaurus on your computer?

Sentences.

"Readers read with their eyes. But in fact, they hear what they are reading far more than you realise."

- Make sentences short and rhythmic.
 - Within: "Rhythm and alliteration are vital to every sentence."
 - Between: "See if you can gain variety by reversing the order of a sentence or by substituting a word that has freshness or oddity or by altering the length of your sentences."
- Make sentences flow.
 - Remember where you left the reader in the last sentence.
 - Indicate mood changes (e.g., now, but, later) early in the current sentence.
 - Build suspense for the next sentence.
- Make sentences unique (advance, don't restate).

- Remember: “a difficult problem in a sentence can [often] be solved by simply getting rid of it.”

Paragraphs.

“Writing is visual – it catches the eye before it has a chance to catch the brain.”

- Make paragraphs short (but not so short they interrupt a thought).
- Make paragraphs structured, linear, and flowing: “Every paragraph should amplify the one that preceded it.”
- Make paragraphs relevant to the composition’s intention (i.e., stick to the point).

The lead.

- Remember, “the most important sentence in any article is the first one.”
- First “capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading.”
- Then “tell the reader why the piece was written and why he ought to read it.”

The close.

- “Give as much thought to choosing your last sentence as you did to your first.”
- Don’t summarise or restate. Instead, “bring the story full circle – strike an echo of a note that was sounded at the beginning.”
- Remember “the perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right.”
- And don’t sell past the close: “When you’re ready to stop, stop.”

How to Conduct Interviews.

“Whatever form of non-fiction you write, it will come alive in proportion to

the number of quotes you can weave into it as you go along."

Find a subject:

- "Look for your material everywhere, not just by reading the obvious sources and interviewing the obvious people."
- Don't be afraid to ask. "Most men and women lead lives, if not of quiet desperation, at least of desperate quietness."

Before the interview:

- "Never go into an interview without doing whatever homework you can."
- "Make a list of likely questions."

During the interview:

- Use pen(cil) and paper (a recording device is usually unnecessary).
- Put the other person at ease ("Don't take your pad out right away").
- Take the best notes you can (you'll improve with time).
- Don't be afraid to ask for a moment if you need to catch up.

After the interview:

- Stay alert: "Often you'll get your best material after you put your pencil away, in the chitchat of leave-taking."
- Refresh and complete your notes as soon as possible.
- Type up your notes when you get home.

As you organise your material:

- Do: Cut, juggle and join quotes to link thoughts and improve flow.
- Don't: Fabricate quotes or surmise what you think someone said or meant.
- Instead: Call and check. Ask them to rephrase until you understand.

- If you don't get what you need the first time, go back.

When you write up the interview:

- Lead: Who is the interviewee and why should the reader care?
- Throughout: Balance your words and the interviewee's words.
- Avoid starting with "He said" or struggling for synonyms.

How to Side-Step Sexism.

Avoid "the hundreds of words that carry an offensive meaning or some overtone of judgement" e.g., words that:

- Patronise: "gal"
- Imply second-class status: "poetess"
- Imply second-class roles: "house-wife"
- Diminish: "the girls"
- Demean: "lady lawyer"
- Are deliberately sexual: "divorcée", "coed", "blonde"

Rephrase "more damaging – and more subtle- usages that treat women as possessions of the family male" e.g.,

- "Early settlers pushed west with their wives and children." → "Pioneer families..." or "Pioneer couples..."

Use alternatives for sexist nouns.

- Find other terms: "chairman" → "chair", "spokesman" → "representative"
- But avoid makeshift terms e.g., "chairman" !→ "chairperson", "spokesman" !→ "spokeswoman"

Dodge "He", "him", and "his".

- Use the plural → “they”, “them”, and “their”, but “only in small doses” as “they weaken writing because they are less specific than the singular”.
- Use “or” → “him or her” but again “only sparingly” (but never “he/she”, “the slant has no place in good English”).
- Use “we” for “he” or “our” and “the” for “his” in some styles of writing.
- Use “you” to address the writer directly in other styles of writing.

But in all cases, don't compromise “flow” for “correctness” – use “he” if there is no good alternative.

How to Cleanse Clutter.

Remove:

- Sentences that rephrase something already stated.
- Points that tell the reader something they already know or can work out themselves.
- Technical jargon.
- Clichés.

Simplify euphemisms (esp. in business and politics).

- “Depressed socioeconomic area” → “Slum”
- “Waste disposal personnel” → “Garbage collectors”
- “Volume reduction unit” → “Town dump”
- “Volume-related production-schedule adjustment” → “Plant shutdown”
- “Impacted the ground prematurely” → “Crashed”
- “A negative cashflow position” → “Insolvent”

Deflate inflated phrases.

- "Referred to as" → "Called"
- "With the possible exception of" → "Except"
- "Due to the fact that" → "Because"
- "He totally lacked the ability to" → "He couldn't"
- "Until such a time as" → "Until"
- "For the purpose of" → "For"
- "Are you experiencing any pain?" → "Does it hurt?"

Prune meaningless bloat.

- "I might add"
- "It should be pointed out"
- "It is interesting to note"
- "It will interest you" (if it is interesting, let it be interesting)
- "Surprisingly" (if it is surprising, let it surprise)
- "Of course" (if something is obvious, omit it)

Omit qualifiers.

- "A bit"
- "Sort of"
- "Very"
- "Too"
- "Kind of"
- "Rather"
- "Quite"
- "In a sense"

Get rid of redundant adjectives, adverbs and prepositions.

- "A personal friend" → "A friend"
- "A tall skyscraper" → "A skyscraper"
- "Smile happily" → "Smile"
- "Order up" → "Order"

Shorten long words.

- "Assistance" → "Help"
- "Numerous" → "Many"
- "Facilitate" → "Ease"
- "Individual" → "Man" or "Woman"
- "Remainder" → "Rest"
- "Initial" → "First"
- "Implement" → "Do"
- "Sufficient" → "Enough"
- "Attempt" → "Try"
- "Currently", "Today", "At the present time" → "Now"
- "Presently" → "Soon"

Avoid fad words.

- Paradigm
- Parameter
- Prioritise
- Potentialise
- Dialogue (as a verb)
- Interface (with someone)

On Writing Well Contents

***On Writing Well* has 25 chapters in 4 parts...**

Introduction

Part 1: Principles

1. The Transaction
2. Simplicity
3. Clutter
4. Style

5. The Audience
6. Words
7. Usage

Part 2: Methods

8. Unity
9. The Lead and the Ending
10. Bits & Pieces

Part 3: Forms

1. Nonfiction as Literature
2. Writing About People: The Interview
3. Writing About Places: The Travel Article
4. Writing About Yourself: The Memoir
5. Science and Technology
6. Business Writing: Writing in Your Job
7. Sports
8. Writing About the Arts: Critics and Columnists
9. Humor

Part 4: Attitudes

1. The Sound of Your Voice
2. Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence
3. The Tyranny of the Final Product
4. A Writer's Decisions
5. Writing Family History and Memoir
6. Write as Well as You Can

Best On Writing Well Quotes

These On Writing Well quotes come from **The Art of Living's** ever-growing central library of thoughts, anecdotes, notes, and [inspirational](#)

[quotes.](#)

"Nobody told all the new computer writers that the essence of writing is rewriting. Just because they're writing fluently doesn't mean they're writing well."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The professional writer must establish a daily schedule and stick to it... writing is a craft, not an art, and... the man who runs away from his craft because he lacks inspiration is fooling himself. He is also going broke... if your job is to write every day, you learn to do it like any other job."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not the subject being written about, but who he or she is."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what – these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The reader is someone with an attention span of 30 seconds – a persona assailed by many forces competing for attention."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"First... learn to hammer the nails, and if what you build is sturdy and serviceable, take satisfaction in its plain strength."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Writing is an intimate transaction between two people, conducted on paper, and it will go well to the extent that it retains its humanity."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Good writers are visible just behind their words."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Leaders who bob and weave like ageing boxers don't inspire confidence – or deserve it. The same thing is true of writers. Sell yourself, and your subject will exert its own appeal. Believe in your own identity and your own opinions. Writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"You are writing primarily to please yourself, and if you go about it with enjoyment you will also entertain the readers who are worth writing for."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Never say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The race in writing is not to the swift but to the original."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Make a habit of reading what is being written today and what was written by earlier masters. Writing is learned by imitation... I learned by reading the men and women who were doing the kind of writing I wanted to do and trying to figure out how they did it."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Get in the habit of using dictionaries... The Thesaurus is to the writer what a rhyming dictionary is to the songwriter – a reminder of all the choices – and you should use it with gratitude."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Readers read with their eyes. But in fact they hear what they are reading far more than you realize."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Such considerations of sound and rhythm should go into everything you write. If all your sentences move at the same plodding gait... read them aloud. (I write entirely by ear and read everything aloud before letting it go out into the world.) You'll begin to hear where the trouble lies."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"You learn to write by writing... The only way to learn to write is to force yourself to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Every successful piece of nonfiction should leave the reader with one provocative thought that he or she didn't have before. Not two thoughts, or five – just one. So decide what single point you want to leave in the reader's mind."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Take special care with the last sentence of each paragraph – it's the crucial springboard to the next paragraph."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Forget the competition and go at your own pace. Your only contest is with yourself."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Writing is like a good watch – it should run smoothly and have no extra parts."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"The longer I work at the craft of writing, the more I realize that there's nothing more interesting than the truth... The assumption is that fact and color are two separate ingredients. They're not; color is organic to the fact. Your job is to present the colorful fact."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Most men and women lead lives, if not of quiet desperation, at least of desperate quietness, and they will jump at a chance to talk about their work to an outsider who seems eager to listen."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Writing is thinking on paper. Anyone who thinks clearly can write clearly, about anything at all."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"My favourite definition of a careful writer comes from Joe DiMaggio, though he didn't know that's what he was defining... A reporter once asked him how he managed to play so well so consistently, and he said 'I always thought that there was at least one person in the stands who had never seen me play, and I didn't want to let him down.'"

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

"Quality is its own reward."

- [William Zinsser](#), On Writing Well

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Enjoyed this On Writing Well summary? You might enjoy the rest of the books on these lists of the [Best Books on Writing](#) of all time.

And in the meantime...

Here are 5 top books like On Writing Well...

1. [Politics and the English Language](#) - George Orwell
Published 1946 // 20 pages // Rated 4.3 over 5,700 reviews [on Goodreads](#)
2. [The Hero With a Thousand Faces](#) - Joseph Campbell
Published 1949 // 416 pages // Rated 4.2 over 29,100 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



3. [The Elements of Style](#) - William Strunk Jr. ([FREE Summary](#))

The Elements of Style is a short, prescriptive classic filled with good advice on writing great (American) English while omitting needless words - by professor and author William Strunk Jr.

Published 1918 // 105 pages // Rated 4.1 over 82,600 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

4. [The Power of Myth](#) - Joseph Campbell

Published 1988 // 320 pages // Rated 4.3 over 41,400 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

5. [On Writing](#) - [Stephen King](#)

A Memoir of the Craft

Published 2000 // 320 pages // Rated 4.3 over 248,200 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?

Whenever you're ready, here are four ways I can help you be more productive, find more balance and live life more on purpose...

1. **Curious? Discover how productive you really are...** Take this free, 2-minute assessment to unlock your PQ and discover the top 25 habits you need to get big things done. [Take the 2-minute quiz →](#)
2. **Overwhelmed? Get a free chapter of my book...** Let me show you how to beat procrastination, permanently, with this free sneak peek inside **TAoL**'s ultimate productivity primer. [Download your free chapter →](#)
3. **Stuck? Grab a 90-Day TRACKTION Planner...** Get the tool thousands trust to help them take control of their time, master their habits and hit goals in every part of their lives. [Order your 90-day planner →](#)
4. **Burned out? Join the TRACKTION Community...** Take the 6-week masterclass, get weekly group coaching, find accountability partners and connect with like-minded self-starters. [Get started FREE →](#)

[Arthur Worsley](#)

I founded **TAoL** to discover and share the best wisdom on how to live long and prosper. Before that I studied Psychology, Philosophy & Physiology at Oxford and consulted at McKinsey. **Still curious?** [Learn more](#) or [take my FREE productivity quiz](#).