

Writing

Some Thoughts

by

Dave Metcalf

A. Quotes

1. “We asked to be obsessed with writing,
and we were.”

Robert Lowell
For John Berryman
From: Day by Day (1977)
(Pulitzer Prize & National Book Award)

2. “Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.”

Seamus Heaney
Digging
From: Death of a Naturalist (1966)
(Nobel Prize in Literature – 1995)

3. “Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”

Strunk & White, The Elements of Style

4. “Let thy words be few . . . [A] fool’s voice is known by a multitude of words.”

Ecclesiastes 5:3

5. “We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (DNA). This structure has novel features which are of considerable biological interest.”

James Watson & Francis Crick

Nature (1953)

[The greatest scientific discovery of our time – the structure of DNA – was described in this article. It is one page long.]

6. “Ink, the most fecund of liquids.”

David Mitchell, The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet

(Random House 2010).

7. “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter -- ‘tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.”

Mark Twain

8. “He never disguised the difficulties, as lazy judges do who win the game by sweeping all the chessmen off the table: like John Stuart Mill, he would often begin by stating the other side better than its advocate had stated it himself. At times, to those of us who knew him, the anguish which had preceded decision was apparent, for again and again, like Jacob, he had to wrestle with the angel all through the night; and he wrote his opinion with his very blood.”

Judge Learned Hand

(describing Justice Benjamin Cardozo).

9. “Revise! Revise! Revise! Revision is what separates the men from the boys. Sooner or later, you’ve got to learn to revise.”

Interview with Wallace Stegner, Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist in the Paris Review, “The Art of Fiction No. 118) (Summer 1990)

10. “Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

~Anton Chekhov

11. Substitute "damn" every time you're inclined to write "very;" your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.

~Mark Twain

12. “An old racetrack joke reminds you that your program contains all the winners' names. I stare at my typewriter keys with the same thought.”

~Mignon McLaughlin, The Neurotic's Notebook, 1960

13. “Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.”

~Author Unknown

Examples

Keep it Concise

“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Michael Pollen, *In Defense of Food*

The Telling Detail

“He ran the diner for 25 years. When it came time to retire, he could not find the key to lock the place up. There had never been a need to lock the door because the diner never closed.”

The Perfect Word

“Johnny Mercer hailed from a wealthy, established family in Savannah, Ga., and he arrived in New York City with a broad geographical palette. Until Rodgers and Hammerstein discovered gold in the hills of Oklahoma, the New Yorkers’ idea of the country looked like the famous Saul Steinberg cartoon. When Lorenz Hart wrote a “western” song, it was about West End Avenue (“Git along little taxi, you can keep the change / I’m riding home to my kitchen range”). Mercer rambled more widely than they did, “from Natchez to Mobile / From Memphis to Saint Joe.” He seemed comfortable across the entirety of America, and said as much in song: “Any place I hang my hat is home.” But he always kept up his connection to the South, which provided him with the inspiration for much of his best work. In one memorable instance, it provided him with a single word.

“‘Moon River’ flows along pleasantly, an exercise in Mercer’s tight craftsmanship, until the end, when the phrase ‘my huckleberry friend’ turns the song into something more than it had seemed to be. ‘Huckleberry’ leaps out, evoking Mark Twain, the Mississippi, the South, vagabondage, companionship, the fond nostalgia of one’s youth. Henry Mancini, the composer of the music, got chills when he heard it. Mercer’s wife, Ginger, used it in the title of her own book. It was, Mercer said simply, ‘the right word’ (though perhaps not for the posh

Audrey Hepburn, who introduced ‘Moon River’ in ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’). The other great lyricists had many ear-bending adjectives in their quivers. But none of them ever came up with a more perfect word for a song than Johnny Mercer did when his Southern unconscious gave him the gift of ‘huckleberry.’”

Barry Gewen, Editor - NY Times Book Review

Changing Complex to Simple

[Here is an exercise in describing a complex situation simply. Try to sum up the Battle of Gettysburg and Lincoln’s Gettysburg address – adding some brilliant analysis – in 3 paragraphs. Find it difficult? Let’s see how Pulitzer Prize winning author Garry Wills – perhaps our most prominent philosopher/historian – does it.)]

“Not all the gallantry of General Lee can redeem, quite, his foolhardiness at Gettysburg. When in doubt, he charged into the cannon’s mouth – by proxy. Ordered afterward to assemble the remains of that doomed assault, George Pickett told Lee that he *had* no force to reassemble. Lee offered Jefferson Davis his resignation.

Nor did General Meade, Lee’s opposite number, leave Gettysburg in glory. Though he lost as many troops as Lee, he still had men and ammunition to pursue a foe who was running, at the moment, out of both. For a week, while Lincoln urged him on in an agony of oblitative hope, Meade let the desperate Lee lie trapped by a flooded Potomac. When at last Lee ghosted himself over the river, Lincoln feared the North would not persevere with the war through the next year’s election. Meade, too, offered his resignation.

Neither general’s commander-in-chief could afford to accept these offers. Jefferson Davis had little but Lee’s magic to rely on for repairing the effect of Lee’s folly. (Romantic Southern fools cheered Lee wherever he rode on the day after his human sacrifice at Gettysburg.) Lincoln, on the other side, could not even vent his feelings by sending Meade the anguished letter he wrote him. A reprimand would ravel out the North’s morale in long trains of recrimination. Both sides, leaving fifty thousand dead or wounded or missing behind them, had reason to maintain a large pattern of pretense about this battle – Lee pretending

that he was not taking back to the South a broken cause, Meade that he not let the broken pieces fall through his fingers. It would have been hard to predict that Gettysburg, out of all this muddle, these missed chances, all the senseless deaths, would become a symbol of national purpose, pride, and ideals. Abraham Lincoln transformed the ugly reality into something rich and strange – and he did it with 272 words. The power of words has rarely been given a more compelling demonstration.”

From Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg, The Words that Remade America* at pp. 19-20. [He won a Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction for this book]

Writing for On-Screen Readers

The skills for writing change depending on the medium in which the document is read. Wayne Scheiss, a professor at UT-Austin, has written a review of Robert Dubose's *Legal Writing for the Rewired Brain: Persuading Readers in a Paperless World* (2010). Scheiss summarizes the characteristics of the person who is e-reading:

- On-screen readers get impatient and tend to spend less time on a screen document than they would on a printed document.
- On-screen readers skim a lot -- perhaps even more than when reading a printed document.
- On-screen readers show a top-left preference: they focus more on text at the screen's top and left and less on text at the bottom and right. The preference is called the F-pattern because the on-screen reader's eyes move in a pattern that resembles an uppercase F.

To deal with these tendencies of the modern reader, Schiess says, Dubose's advice boils down to four things that should be happening in legal writing anyway:

- ✓ Be brief
- ✓ Provide summaries
- ✓ Use headings and subheadings
- ✓ Left align headings and make them stand out.



My house burned down.

Now I can better see
the rising moon.

Matsuo Basho

All along this road
Not a single soul -
Only autumn evening.

Matsuo Basho