

NOTES FROM: *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser

SUMMARY: This book reads almost like a warm letter from a really good friend, someone who wanted to encourage you to follow your literary ambitions and believe in your own uniqueness, while “doing what you want to do and doing it well.” That’s what Zinsser believed was important, and that’s what this book will inspire you to do.

William Zinsser was a Yale professor and the author of 18 books, who believed that *economy* defined great writing, and that the quality of one’s prose improved in proportion to the number of things you left out of it. He was all about brevity, accuracy, and precision - saying what you mean and saying it clearly.

On Writing Well is for everybody who wants to write or who needs to do at least *some* writing as part of their work; it’s not just for novelists. And as you can see from my notes below, he didn’t waste a whole lot of words to get to the point, either, the result being a breezy, tactical, easy-to-read guide that I’ve found *incredibly* helpful to return to again and again.

“The essence of writing is rewriting.”

“If the writer conveys humanity and warmth, the reader is more likely to remain with the book, even if the subject is not one that the reader is overly interested in.”

“Clutter is the disease of American writing.”

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

“Clear thinking becomes clear writing.”

“Ask, ‘What am I trying to say?’ And then ask, ‘Have I said it?’”

“A clear sentence is no accident.”

“Examine every word you put on paper. You’ll find a surprising number that don’t serve any purpose.”

“Is every word doing new work?”

“A fundamental rule is: be yourself. No rule, however, is harder to follow. It requires writers to do two things that by their metabolism are impossible. They must relax, and they must have confidence.”

“Writers are obviously at their most natural when they write in the first person.”

“Editors and readers don’t know what they want to read until they read it. Besides, they’re always looking for something new.”

“Never say anything in writing that you wouldn’t comfortably say in conversation.”

“The only way to not be a bad writer is to care deeply about words.”

“Get curious about the slight differences between the meaning of words. If you go to the thesaurus and read ‘leader’ and ‘frontman,’ go to the dictionary and find out the specific differences.”

“Pay attention to how the sentences sound, regardless of the fact that readers read with their eyes.”

“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.”

“Don’t become the prisoner of a preconceived plan. Writing is no respecter of blueprints.”

“The function of the first sentence, and every sentence after that, is to pull at the reader’s attention until they are hooked.”

“Never say ‘In conclusion,’ or anything like that. Never repeat what you spent the whole piece explaining. Simply leave the reader with an unexpected surprise and a perfect ending, and head for the nearest exit.”

“Of the 701 words in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, 505 are one syllable and 122 are two syllables.”

“Don’t use adverbs that say the same thing as the verb. ‘Blare’ connotes loudness; you don’t have to say ‘blared loudly.’”

“Who could invent all the astonishing things that really happen?”

“The reader plays a major role in the act of writing and must be given room to play it.”

“Anyone who thinks clearly can write clearly.”

“The human brain can understand the intimate functioning of the atom, and can speculate about the greater purpose of the universe, yet can’t turn in on its own functioning.”

“Always start with too much material.”

“Write sequentially, when explaining a difficult topic, going from the simplest to the more complex ideas and concepts.”

“The tools of grammar haven’t survived so many centuries merely by chance.”

"I know that a fair chunk of the population has no sense of humor - no idea that there are people in the world trying to entertain them."

"I've used writing to give myself an interesting life and a continuing education."

"Push the boundaries of your subject and see where it takes you. A book about politics doesn't have to be just about politics."

"What do your readers want to know next? Ask yourself that question after every sentence."

"Readers should always feel that you know more about your subject than you've put into writing."

"As a nonfiction writer you must get on the plane. If a subject interests you, go after it."

"There are many good reasons for writing that have nothing to do with getting published."

"Don't look over your shoulder to see what relatives are perched there."

"The floor is often a writer's best friend."

"I always thought there was at least one person in the stands that had never seen me play, and I didn't want to let him down."