Five Principles of Good Writing

This article in The American Scholar is from a wonderful talk that author William Zinsser gave to incoming international students at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism on how to write effectively in English. Our language, says Zinsser, is not “as musical as Spanish, or Italian, or French, or as ornamental as Arabic, or as vibrant as some of your native languages. But I’m hopelessly in love with English because it’s plain and it’s strong. It has a huge vocabulary of words that have precise shades of meaning; there’s no subject, however technical or complex, that can’t be made clear to any reader in good English – if it’s used right.”

English comes from two sources, he continues: Latin, “the florid language of ancient Rome,” and Anglo-Saxon, from the plain languages of England and northern Europe. “The words derived from Latin are the enemy,” says Zinsser. “They will strangle and suffocate everything you write. The Anglo-Saxon words will set you free.” Latin words tend to be long, pompous nouns like implementation, maximization, communication, development, fulfillment, he says – words that are frequently used by people in authority in American government, business, education, social work, and health care. “They think those long Latin words make them sound important,” says Zinsser, and cites a letter he received from a private New York club: “Dear Member: The board of governors has spent the past year considering proactive efforts that will continue to professionalize the club and to introduce efficiencies that we will be implementing throughout 2009.” Translation: They’re going to try to make the club run better.

In contrast to the bad, Latin-derived nouns, says Zinsser, are the good Anglo-Saxon nouns: house, home, child, chair, bread, milk, sea, sky, earth, field, grass, road. “When you use those words, you make contact – consciously and also subconsciously – with the deepest emotions and memories of your readers.”

Even better than these nouns, says Zinsser, are short, plain, active Anglo-Saxon verbs: “Active verbs give momentum to a sentence and push it forward. So fall in love with active verbs. They are your best friends.”

He then shares his five principles for writing good English: clarity, simplicity, brevity, humanity, and logic:

- **Clarity** – “If it’s not clear, you might as well not write it,” he says. “You might as well stay in bed.” And no more than one thought per sentence. “Readers only process one thought at a time. So give them time to digest the first set of facts you want them to know. Then give them the next piece of information they need to know, which further explains the first fact. Be grateful for the period. Writing is so hard that all of us, once launched, tend to ramble. Instead of a period we use a comma, followed by a transitional word (and, while), and soon we have strayed into a wilderness that seems to have no road back out. Let the humble period be your savior.”

- **Simplicity** – “Simple is good,” says Zinsser. “Writing is not something you have to embroider with fancy stitches to make yourself look smart.” This isn’t appreciated by many foreigners trying to impress people with their English. One Nigerian woman said that if she
wrote simple sentences, people would think she was stupid. Stupid like Thoreau, was Zinsser’s retort. Or like E.B. White. Or Abraham Lincoln. Or Barack Obama. “There’s no sentence too short to be acceptable in the eyes of God,” he says.

• **Brevity** – “Short sentences are better than long sentences,” he continues. “Short words are better than long words. Don’t say *currently* if you can say *now*. Don’t say *assistance* if you can say *help*. Don’t say *numerous* if you can say *many*. Don’t say *facilitate* if you can say *ease*. Don’t call someone an *individual* [five syllables!]; that’s a person, or a man or a woman. Don’t implement or prioritize. Don’t say anything in writing that you wouldn’t comfortably say in conversation. Writing is talking to someone else on paper or on a screen.”

• **Humanity** – “Be yourself,” advises Zinsser. “Never try in your writing to be someone you’re not. Your product, finally, is you. Don’t lose that person by putting on airs, trying to sound superior.” To become a better writer, look for models of good writing. Find writers who are direct and authentic and read their prose (*The New Yorker* is an excellent place to start, he says). “Study their articles clinically,” he urges. “Try to figure out how they put their words and sentences together. That’s how I learned to write, not from a writing course.” Does this advice apply in the new age of digital media? Absolutely, says Zinsser. Video scripts and audio scripts and websites and all the prose for the new media must be “lean and tight and coherent,” he avers, “plain nouns and verbs pushing your story forward so that the rest of us always know what’s happening.”

• **Logic** – “Sentence B must follow from Sentence A,” says Zinsser, “and Sentence C must follow Sentence B, and eventually you get to Sentence Z. The hard part of writing isn’t the writing; it’s the thinking. You can solve most of your writing problems if you stop after every sentence and ask: What does the reader need to know next?”