Slate Magazine
How To Write a (Good) Sentence
Adam Haslett on Stanley Fish.
By Adam Haslett
Posted Sunday, Jan. 23, 2011, at 1:36 AM ET

In 1919, the young E.B. White, future New Yorker writer and author of Charlotte's Web, took a class at Cornell University with a drill sergeant of an English professor named William Strunk Jr. Strunk assigned his self-published manual on composition titled "The Elements of Style," a 43-page list of rules of usage, principles of style, and commonly misused words. It was a brief for brevity. "Vigorous writing is concise," Strunk wrote. "When a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter." Half a century later, when preparing his old professor's manuscript for publication, White added an essay of his own underlining the argument for concision in moral terms. "Do not overwrite," he instructed. "Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating." Strunk & White, as the combined work came to be known, was issued in 1959 and went on to become a defining American statement of what constituted good writing, with 10 million copies sold, and counting. Its final rule summoned the whole: "Prefer the standard to the offbeat."

Though never explicitly political, The Elements of Style is unmistakably a product of its time. Its calls for "vigour" and "toughness" in language, its analogy of sentences to smoothly functioning machines, its distrust of vernacular and foreign language phrases all conform to that disciplined, buttoned-down and most self-assured stretch of the American century from the armistice through the height of the Cold War. A time before race riots, feminism, and the collapse of the gold standard. It is a book full of sound advice addressed to a class of all-male Ivy-Leaguers wearing neckties and with neatly parted hair. This, of course, is part of its continuing appeal. It is spoken in the voice of unquestioned authority in a world where that no longer exists. As Lorin Stein, the new editor of the celebrated literary magazine the Paris Review, recently put it to me: "It's like a national superego." And when it comes to an activity as variable, difficult, and ultimately ungovernable as writing sentences, the allure of rules that dictate brevity and concreteness is enduring.

The trouble with the book isn't the rules themselves, which the authors are sage enough to recognize "the best writers sometimes disregard," but the knock-on effect that their bias for plain statement has tended to have not only on expositional but literary prose. In this, admittedly, Strunk & White had a few assists, in particular Hemingway. If the history of the American sentence were a John Ford movie, its second act would conclude with the young Ernest walking into a saloon, finding an etiolated Henry James slumped at the bar in a haze of indecision, and shooting him dead. The terse, declarative sentence in all its masculine hardness routed the passive involutions of a higher, denser style. (James, from "The Altar of the Dead": "He had a mortal dislike, poor Stransom, to lean anniversaries, and loved them still less when they made a pretence of a figure"; Hemingway, from "A Way You'll Never Be": "These were the new dead and no one had bothered with anything but their pockets.") As a result, pared-down prose of the sort editor Gordon Lish would

later encourage in Raymond Carver became our default "realism." This is a real loss, not because we necessarily need more Jamesian novels but because too often the instruction to "omit needless words" (Rule 17) leads young writers to be cautious and dull; minimalist style becomes minimalist thought, and that is a problem.

* * *

This question of how forms of writing produce forms of thought is one that the literary critic and legal scholar Stanley Fish has been wrestling with most of his career. He first came to prominence in the late 1970s with his theory of "interpretative communities." This held that all readings of literary texts are inescapably bound up with the cultural assumptions of readers, an uncontroversial proposition now but one that quickly earned him the sloppy epithet of "relativist." In the late 1980s and early 1990s he turned the Duke University English department into the headquarters of the then-burgeoning "theory" industry before, in 1999, surprising the academic world by moving to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he set himself the task of trying to renovate undergraduate education in basic skills like writing. Though he doesn't mention that experience in his new book, How To Write a Sentence and How To Read One, it's not far offstage. The problem with Strunk & White, in Fish's view, is that "they assume a level of knowledge and understanding only some of their readers will have attained," that is, the Cornell kids whose secondary education did at least a halfway decent job of teaching them the basics.

Fish's aim is to offer a guide to sentence craft and appreciation that is both deeper and more democratic. What, at base, is a sentence? he asks, and then goes on to argue that the standard answer based in parts of speech and rules of grammar teaches students "nothing about how to write." Instead, we should be examining the "logical relationships" within different sentence forms to see how they organize the world. His argument is that you can learn to write and later become a good writer by understanding and imitating these forms from many different styles. Thus, if you're drawn to Jonathan Swift's biting satire in the sentence, "Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse," then, Fish advises, "Put together two mildly affirmative assertions, the second of which reacts to the first in a way that is absurdly inadequate." He offers, "Yesterday I saw a man electrocuted and it really was surprising how quiet he became." Lame, and hardly Swift, as Fish is the first to admit, but identifying the logical structure does specify how satire functions at the level of the sentence and, if you want to employ the form, that's a good thing to know.

Fish is a sentence connoisseur who describes his enthusiasm as akin to a sports fan's love of highlights, and relishes the craft of everyone from the endlessly refined Victorian critic Walter Pater ("To such a tremulous wisp constantly reforming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense of it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our lives fines itself down") to Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia ("Interior decorating is a rock-hard science compared to psychology practiced by amateurs"). You won't come away with dictum such as, "Avoid the use of qualifiers"

(Sec V, Rule 8, Strunk & White) but Fish's catholic taste in prose offers a far richer introduction to the capacities of English language sentences.

Why is this important? Because the form and rhythm of sentences communicate as much meaning as their factual content, whether we're conscious of it or not. In 1863, when Gen. Grant took the city of Vicksburg, Miss., the last hindrance to free passage of Union supplies along the river, President Lincoln wrote in a letter to be read at a public meeting: "The father of waters again goes unvexed to the sea." It's a poem of a sentence, "The father of waters" and "unvexed to the sea" perfectly balanced on the unexpected pivot of "again goes" rather than "goes again," and all in the service of a metaphor that figures the Union as an inevitable force and the Confederacy as a blight on nature, without mentioning either. If cadence had no content, "Union supply lines are now clear" would have the same power. And what is obvious in rhetoric is true in literature, as well.

Take the first sentence of David Foster Wallace's story, "The Depressed Person": "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror." By mixing heightened feeling and unrelenting repetition ("pain," "pain," "pain") with a Latinate, clinically declarative voice ("component," "contributing factor"), Wallace delivers his readers right where he wants them: inside the hellish disconnect between psychic pain and the modern means of describing it. The rhythm of the sentence is perfectly matched to its positive content. Indeed, from a writer's point of view the two aren't separate. If we could separate meaning from sound, we'd read plot summaries rather than novels.

Wallace's anxious, perseverating sentences are arguably the most innovative in recent American literature. But take a writer who couldn't be further from his self-conscious showmanship—William Trevor—and listen to a sentence early in his story "A Day". "It was in France, in the Hotel St.-Georges during their September holiday seven years ago, that Mrs. Lethwes found out about her husband's other woman." Here, the barely perceptible aural effect is all about sequence. Mrs Lethwes may be the subject of the sentence but Trevor weighs her down under the qualifying weight of time before she ever appears to then discover her fate. He does this over and over in the story. The reader may never notice it, but when we talk about Trevor's elegiac tone, this is what we mean. Not simply that he writes sad stories but that the pathology of his characters has been worked down into the rhythm of his sentences.

That ability—to graft theme into syntax—is what makes great writing a pleasure to listen to. The German expat novelist, W.G. Sebald, became a literary hero for his unclassifiable books The Emigrants, The Rings of Saturn, and Austerlitz not long before his early death 10 years ago. He offers a splendid example of what Fish calls "the subordinate style," in which time and causality are organized into clear hierarchies at the sentence level. His ruminative, meandering sentences ("After I had made an appointment to meet Austerlitz the next day Pereria, having inquired after my wishes, led me upstairs to the first floor and showed me into a room containing a great deal of wine-red velvet, brocade, and dark mahogany furniture, where I sat until almost three in the morning at a secretaire faintly

illuminated by the street lighting—the cast-iron radiator clicked quietly, and only occasionally did a black cab drive past outside in Liverpool Street—writing down, in the form of notes and disconnected sentences, as much as possible of what Austerlitz had told me that evening") are almost too long to quote here. Sebald's themes, like Proust's, are memory and loss. What makes his books remarkable is that he reproduces the experience of having memories and losing them in the course of single sentences, like the one above, which often seem to forget their origins, slide off into an associative drift, and then attempt to recoup themselves, just as we attempt to hold together the memories and narratives that make up our sense of self. He's a maximalist whose prose would drive Strunk & White to distraction (when they wrote, "Make the paragraph the unit of composition," they didn't have in mind 400-page paragraphs).

As Paul Harding, who won last year's Pulitzer for his own peripatetic sentences in his novel Tinkers, puts it: "The criteria for caloric prose is that it be nutritious. Getting at essence isn't always a matter of stripping away length. That's part of the modernist myth of de-mythification." When the high-modernist poet Ezra Pound wrote in his 1913 manifesto "A Few Don'ts" that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol," Hemingway listened, and together they lent artistic force to the notion that the truth is necessarily concise. A generation later in Britain, George Orwell reinforced this notion but with a new political emphasis in his 1946 essay "Why I Write," in which he stated: "Good prose is like a windowpane." A lack of political purpose, Orwell wrote, had "betrayed [him] into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally." Elaborateness came to be associated with false rhetoric and the aesthetic indulgences of a bygone world between the two wars.

Geoff Kloske, the head of Riverhead Books, publisher of George Saunders and Aleksandar Hemon, thinks current stylistic variety makes it impossible to claim we are in either a minimalist or maximalist period. "More, I fear, there is a flaccidity and casualness of style that has come from writing habits born out of e-mail and social media." A kind of death of the sentence by collective neglect. Kloske is right that the incessant dribble of mini-messaging has made most people's daily use of written language brutally factual in character, more private ad copy than prose. I'm old enough to have written letters to friends when I was younger, which took time and a bit of thought. Like most people, I don't do that anymore, and e-mail hasn't replaced the habit. The writing of complete sentences for aural pleasure as well as news is going the way of the playing of musical instruments—it's becoming a speciality rather than a means most people have to a little amateur, unselfconscious enjoyment. This isn't the end of the world for literature. In a sense, it only intensifies its role as the repository of our linguistic imagination. But it's a pity nonetheless; there's a difference between pure spectatorship and semi-participatory appreciation. The latter is much warmer. It creates more room for fellow feeling and a bit less for the glare of celebrity and the correlative abjection of envy and fandom.

Fish's book doesn't reach this far. We get no analysis of Japanese cell-phone novels or the best of the blogosphere. But for those, and I would count myself among them, who fell in love with literature not by becoming enthralled to books they couldn't put down but by

discovering individual sentences whose rhythm and rhetoric was so compelling they couldn't help but repeat them to anyone who would listen, it is a blessed replacement to that old Strunkian superego forever whispering in your ear—cut, cut, cut.