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## < Think You Know 'How To Write A Sentence'?

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*Heard on Talk of the Nation*text size **A** **A** **A**

January 25, 2011 - NEAL CONAN, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. Im Neal Conan in Washington.

A great sentence can come from anywhere, and it's not hard to recognize. All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking 13. Call me Ishmael.

A great sentence, however, is not as easily written. We're taught to recognize nouns and verbs, subjects and predicates, but stringing them together is a delicate process. Happily, though, it's one that can be practiced and taught.

Stanley Fish's new book is both a connoisseur's guide to the sentence, and a gentle and instructive manual. He joins us in a moment. But first, we know there are dozens of favorite sentences sailing around in your head right now. Now is the winter of our discontent. Mama died today. All this happened, more or less.

Let us know the one that struck you as really, really good - and why. Give us an example; 800-989-8255. Email us, [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org). You can also join the conversation on our website. That's at [npr.org](http://npr.org). Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Later in the program, Rob Malley on the Palestine Papers. But first, Stanley Fish, a columnist for the New York Times, a professor of law at Florida International University, and the author of 12 books just chock full of sentences. His latest is "How To Write A Sentence: And How To Read One." He's at the studios of member station WXEL in West Palm Beach, Florida. Nice to have you back on the program.

Mr. STANLEY FISH (Author, "How To Write A Sentence: And How To Read One"): It's a pleasure to be here.

CONAN: And Stanley Fish, we've asked our listeners for examples because you write that examples are much more instructive than rules.

Mr. FISH: Yes, examples of sentences that you can then analyze will tell you more about what you're reading and admiring and therefore, what you can possibly hope to imitate than a set of sterile rules, which seem - often - impossibly abstract.

CONAN: So for example, you start with the basic, three-word sentence: John hit the ball - that's four words, but go ahead.

Mr. FISH: Yeah, I talk about that basic structure because I want my students and readers to understand what's involved in it, which is the relationship between someone who does something, the action that someone does, and the object of that action.

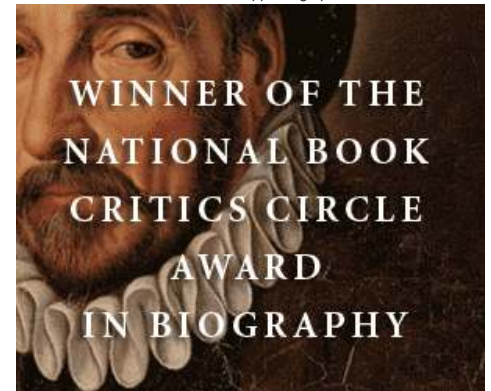


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And the point of my lesson - when I asked, let's say, 25 students to write similar sentences, and they all do: Jane bakes the cake; Charlie bought the automobile - is for them to realize that there are innumerable contents that can fill the form, but the form is one. The form is more important than the content. And if you master the form, and understand what it's doing and what can be done with it, then you can produce content endlessly. So one of my subtitled chapters is "It's Not the Thought that Counts."

CONAN: Well, you get to the thought eventually, but you say it's interesting to, for example, go through the famous Lewis Carroll poem "The Jabberwocky" - Twas brillig, and the slithy toves. Did gyre and gimble in the wabe - and just - those are sort of nonsense words, and start substituting words for his nonsense words.

Mr. FISH: Yes, that's only the first part of the exercise. You substitute, for the nonsense words, English words - which will then, in combination, make a certain kind of sense, even if the sense is silly. The hard part is when I ask students or readers: OK, what did you do? Or more precisely, how did you know what word would or would not go into the slot formerly occupied by the nonsense word?

When they begin to understand that the structure or form that is already present in the Lewis Carroll stanza will alert them to the kinds of contents they could possibly put into those forms, they then begin to understand - at least as I say it - that form comes first, and content follows.

CONAN: So - and there are many, many forms of the sentence. You go on to talk about subjunctive ones and additive ones and different variations, but the principle is the same. Once you learn the forms, then you can analyze other people's sentences: Oh, I recognize that as this kind of sentence, and I know how to imitate that.

Mr. FISH: Yeah, I have my own formula, which is sentence craft - that is, learning what it means to put a sentence together - then leads to sentence appreciation; that is, admiration for the sentences that great authors have put together; and then leads to sentence comprehension.

By becoming alert to craft, you become a greater and better reader of the sentences that you enjoy.

CONAN: You use the analogy - your wife is a painter, and when you and she go to a museum, she can tell you why this painting is really good. You just knew it was good.

Mr. FISH: I had a sense that it was good, but I couldn't analytically discuss it and therefore, my ability to talk about it is extraordinarily limited, which means that my understanding of the accomplishment is limited.

And I think with sentences, it's the same. If you can begin to understand an accomplishment in detail, and be able to talk about what makes it work, you will begin to know why your sentences work or don't work.

CONAN: And why is it that the sentence is the currency of composition, if you will? Why not the word?

Mr. FISH: Well, it could be the word if you were thinking of the sentence as analogous to painting, where you can drip paint on a surface and produce something. But if you just assemble a list of words, what you have is a list of words.

And the first exercise that I recommend to my readers is to look around the room, and just pick out of the air four or five items. I did pen, chair, garbage can, printer, and then I threw in the modal auxiliary shall. And then out of this list, build sentences using as few additional words as possible.

For example: I shall set the printer on the chair, and get my pen out of the garbage can. With that list, you can produce an extraordinary amount of sentences, and then you can ask yourself: What did I do to turn an inert list into a sentence? And the answer is that you put in the relationship between the words so that the words no longer simply exist in a list, but are now part of a large and comprehensible statement.

And that's the key, to understand that a sentence, as I put it, is a structure of logical relationships. And when your sentences fall apart, they go back in the direction of being mere lists.

CONAN: Well, we want some examples from our readers and our listeners of what sentences they think are great and why, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org.

And we have this from Lorelei(ph) in East Lansing: "Little Bee," by Chris Cleave, begins: Most days, I



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wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl.

It continues to describe the freedom with which a pound coin can cross borders, how happy people are to see a pound coin come to them, how the opposite is true of an African girl. It is a beautiful novel of a girl with a horrific past who tries to escape to Britain, only to find herself an unwelcome immigrant. The novel received the Orange Prize for Literature.

I wonder what, Stanley Fish, you think of that opening line.

Mr. FISH: I think that's an excellent opening line because the comparison invites you forward. It doesn't declare the relationship in any explicit way and therefore, it leads you into the next sentence, where you want to see the analogy elaborated - as, I take it, the author does.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get another caller on the line. This is Clancy(ph), Clancy with us from Richland in Washington.

CLANCY (Caller): Yeah, hi, Neal. Mine is "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," T.E. Lawrence: Some of the evil of my tale may have been inherent in our circumstance.

CONAN: And why do you think that's such a great sentence, Clancy?

CLANCY: Well, I think you find out 1,200 pages later, pretty much, but it catches your imagination.

Mr. FISH: Yes, that's correct. I mean, one of my chapters is about first sentences. And that's what first sentences do. I say that first sentences are content in prospect. They lead you in. And often, the promise that they give you is not redeemed until the last sentence, another important category.

CONAN: Clancy, thanks very much for the call.

CLANCY: Thanks.

CONAN: Let's go next to - this is Alex(ph), and Alex is on the line from Sacramento.

ALEX (Caller): Hi there, Neal. Thanks for hearing me today.

CONAN: Sure.

ALEX: I just wanted to say that one of my favorite lines from literature is from "The Great Gatsby," the opening line, where he talks about: In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I have been turning over in my mind ever since. And the advice that his father gave him is something that I've been turning over ever since I read the book.

But I kind of wanted to ask about what the context of different lines is, whether there's a difference between literature, political speeches and even songs, because sometimes the most impactful lines in music are really short, like one of my favorite lines of music is Grace Slick's when the truth is found to be lies. And it's a really short line, but I find it very impactful.

In literature, I like longer sentences, like that one, that have more context and substance. And in political speeches, one of my favorites is Lincoln's: You can fool some of the some of the time, you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time.

CONAN: I think that was P.T. Barnum, actually, but...

ALEX: Oh, sorry.

CONAN: That's OK. But what do you think, Stanley?

STANLEY: Well, I think that long and short sentences can appear in any of the genres that the caller named. One of my favorite sentences, and one I discuss in "How to Write a Sentence," is the first sentence of "Goodbye Columbus," by Philip Roth. It goes this way: The first time I saw Brenda, she asked me to hold her glasses.

Now, this is a little novella about a girl who is so attractive - and knows it -that young men will do anything that she asks them to do. We don't know that at the moment, but yet we do know that because the first time I saw Brenda, which is also necessarily the first time Brenda saw him, she doesn't pause for an instant in the sentence. She asked me to hold her glasses.

Of course she did, and of course he said yes. And then, of course, the tragic-comic farce that finally entangles him follows immediately.

CONAN: Alex, thanks very much for the suggestion.

ALEX: Thank you.

CONAN: Here's an email from Molly(ph) in Orinda, California: We were fractious and overpaid. From Joshua Ferris' "Then We Came to the End." It introduces the unusual, first-person plural point of view, and sets up the madcap satire to come. Would you agree?

Mr. FISH: Yes, I would, although I don't know that particular piece of work. We were fractious and overpaid. Again, sets up a question that will, I assume, be answered. Why overpaid, and what relationship, if any, did it have to being fractious?

CONAN: We're talking with Stanley Fish, the author, most recently, of "How To Write A Sentence: And How To Read One." And if you've got an idea of a great sentence that is stuck in your head, send us your suggestion by email, [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org). Or give us a call, 800-989-8255. We not only want an example, we want to know it's such a great sentence. Stay with us.

I'm Neal Conan. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION, from NPR News. I'm Neal Conan, in Washington.

Some appreciate fine art. Others appreciate fine wine. I appreciate fine sentences. That's Stanley Fish from his new book, "How To Write A Sentence: And How To Read One." Piling up words alone, he argues, will not do much of anything until something else has been added. Find out what else you need in an excerpt at our website, at [npr.org](http://npr.org).

The book is also replete with examples. We want to hear yours. What's your favorite sentence? It was a pleasure to bum - excuse me, a pleasure to burn. It's a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. And let us know the one that stuck with you, and why; 800-989-8255. Email us: [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org).

Stanley Fish, it's also interesting - you point out that there are different modes of speech. There is a formal or high speech, and you use as examples Cicero and Martin Luther King. Then there is also conversational speech, what we're doing today; and plain speech, when you're trying to get something more explanatory across.

Mr. FISH: Yes. These are ancient classifications. Cicero, perhaps, gave the most forceful and influential versions of them. And they give you stylistic options, which you can choose, and also mix and match. You can get a lot of good effects about starting off in one of those styles, and then switching to another - or having, in the middle of a high-style exercise, a familiar, colloquial phrase.

And these are, again, all things that you can practice. You can practice doing this independent of any content, so that when you do have a content that you are really committed to, you have the formal skills and ability to do something with it.

CONAN: The Martin Luther King exhortation - it's in response to why don't you wait for the changes that you've been calling for. This is a sentence that runs on for the better part of a page.

Mr. FISH: Yes, it does. And I haven't even given the entire sentence in my book. And that kind of sentence depends on the parallel repetition of a single, syntactical form, which accumulates power. But because you're staying with the single form, even as it gets longer and longer, you are not confused. Instead, you are free to experience the extraordinary pressure that that sentence exerts on its readers. It's a marvelous sentence.

CONAN: This is - well, Martin Luther King is hard to imitate. The point being, if you're going to be speaking - Cicero, a famous orator, we don't have recordings of what he sounded like; obviously, we do of Martin Luther King, an extraordinary orator - you'd better be writing for your own voice, and know how you breathe as well.

Mr. FISH: Absolutely.

CONAN: The plain speech, though, this is more difficult than you might think.

Mr. FISH: Well, yes it is, because composition, in general, is difficult and anxiety-producing for many people. And they believe that they have to wind up in some formal way before they say what they want to say.

That is why I love examples like the recent example in the movie "True Grit," where the heroine, Mattie, writing to her mother, I believe, says - she's about to set out on a dangerous venture. She says: I am in the hands of the author of all things, and I have a good horse.

That's a beautifully simple sentence, which packs an extraordinary wallop because of the disjunction, in a way, between the two - its two halves. On the one hand, she's acknowledging a providence, a godly providence that looks after her. And on the other hand, she's saying matter-of-factly - with the "and" - I have a good horse. That is, I'm also taking care of myself, at the same time that I trust God to take care of me - very simple, but absolutely effective.

CONAN: Let's go next to Steve, Steve with us from Wichita.

STEVE (Caller): Howdy. Yeah, a longtime listener; seventh-, eighth-time caller. But anyway.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: All right.

STEVE: My favorite sentence is: One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. That sums up 10 years of a nation's hopes, fears and dreams in about, what, 10 words.

CONAN: Stanley Fish - those, of course, the words of Neil Armstrong as he stepped on the moon, though apparently, radio transmission clipped some of them.

Mr. FISH: Well, I've often wondered whether or not - well, not whether. I'm sure that that was a planned speech because it is, as the caller suggested, so concise, so summing up, and so available for repetition - you know, as "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

What you're looking for at that moment is something portable that can be carried away, and then taken out and used on other occasions. And it's a question of whether or not, let's say, President Obama is going to come up with any such memorable piece of prose this evening.

CONAN: Steve, thanks very much.

STEVE: You bet.

CONAN: This from Susan in Iowa City: One of my favorite opening lines comes from Brady Udall's "The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint" - If I could tell you only one thing about my life, it would be this: When I was 7 years old, the mailman ran over my head.

What reader could resist turning the page after that opener?

Mr. FISH: That's right because the mailman running over your head usually means the end of your story. But in this case, it obviously did not. And you want to find out how and why.

CONAN: And as you analyze these sentences, that one you just gave us from "True Grit," the "I'm in the hands of providence, and I have a" - that is an example, I guess, of an additive sentence.

Mr. FISH: Yeah. It's an additive sentence, but one with a point. In a true additive sentence, there would be little or no relationship between the two clauses. For example, the one I use - make up in the - in "How to Write a Sentence" is: I had a bad semester, I read "Hamlet," and I'm going to the movies tonight.

Now, those three events might, in some narrative, be connected up, but they're not connected up in the sentence. In the sentence from "True Grit," even though the casual "and" suggests no real relationship between the two parts, there is a strong relationship between the two parts.

CONAN: And the other example you give - the other set of examples - is the subordinate sentence. And this is - we mentioned it earlier: It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of



a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

Mr. FISH: Yeah. The difference is that in a sentence like that, you are aware from the beginning that your responses are being controlled by someone who is designing your experience. It unfolds in stages, and the stages are ones that are, quite literally, set by the author.

In the other, additive style, the impression given is that the words are just tumbling out of the author's mouth or mind. And what you're watching is not a conscious effort to build a structure but instead, the actual experience of a mind in the process of thought.

CONAN: The deceptively simple is what often comes up in criticism.

Mr. FISH: Yeah, I mean, that style is, in fact, more difficult to produce than the highly structured subordinating style, because part of the art is to appear to not be artful. And that's an extremely hard thing to do.

CONAN: Let's go next to Harry, Harry with us from Portland.

HARRY (Caller): Hey, Neal. My sentence is: Isn't it pretty to think so, from "The Sun Also Rises," Ernest Hemingway.

CONAN: And why does that work for you, Harry?

HARRY: I really like that one because I think it really summarizes the themes of that book extremely well in a short, poignant way. And even now, it gives me, you know, chills to think about that sentence (unintelligible).

Mr. FISH: Oh, I would venture to say that it gives you chills because you're recalling the whole course of that novel. I discuss, briefly, that sentence in my book, "How to Write a Sentence." But I point out that as a sentence, its resonance depends on a reader who knows what came before, just as "isn't it pretty" - just in and of itself, "isn't it pretty to think so," I don't think, packs much of a wallop.

CONAN: Harry, thanks very much for the call. Let's go next to - this is Doug, Doug with us from Raleigh.

DOUG (Caller): Hi. Thank you.

CONAN: Sure.

DOUG: Favorite sentence: A screaming comes across the sky.

CONAN: And that's from?

DOUG: Thomas Pinchon, "Gravity's Rainbow."

CONAN: A screaming comes across the sky. And why does it work for you so much, Doug?

DOUG: Well, it's mysterious and concise, and I can imagine how it could be constructed in other ways where it wouldn't have nearly as much impact. And, of course, as you read the book and it unfolds, you understand that the screaming is a metaphor for, you know, three or four decades of the 20th century. So it fulfills - the book fulfills the sentence, I think.

CONAN: Stanley Fish, what do you think?

Mr. FISH: I am not crazy about that sentence, I must confess. It's a bit too mysterious. It doesn't do the forward-looking work that I believe that the best first sentences can do. But I can understand how someone who became enamored of the novel would then later return to that first sentence, and see in it everything he or she now knows.

DOUG: Yeah. That's true.

CONAN: Doug, thanks very much.

DOUG: Thank you.

CONAN: Go next to - this is Tim. Tim with us from Lawrence in Kansas.

TIM (Caller): Hi. I was struck by what professor Fish was saying earlier about a sentence being, you

know, especially good if it's a series of logical relationships. And the one that I was thinking of was from "Hamlet," where he says: I am but mad north-northwest; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. And that's especially dear to me because the name for Kansas came from a Native American word meaning people of the south wind. So it's something I like to repeat and see if anyone, you know, picks up on the association.

CONAN: Hmm.

Prof. FISH: Yeah. And that works, also, because the difference between a hawk and a handsaw, as a statement, is somewhat undercut by the fact that both words start with an H. So the sentence that he quotes - or piece of verse from Shakespeare - is also a meditation on the relationship between sameness and difference, and how closely allied they may sometimes be - which is a favorite Shakespearean theme.

CONAN: Tim, thanks very much.

TIM: Thank you.

CONAN: You also go on and talk about the uses of devices, the H - well, that would be alliteration.

Prof. FISH: Yes, yes. That is - there are lots of names given in classical rhetorical theory for all of these effects. But I don't think that you, as someone who wants either to learn how to write a sentence or how to appreciate sentences written by great authors, need learn the technical terms. What you do need to do is have a sense of the way in which sentences hang together, and the different ways in which sentences can hang together. And then, I think, you'll be on the way to making your own sentences hang together and - to quote Shakespeare again - a consummation, devoutly, to be wished.

CONAN: And you make that argument, in part, to explain why Strunk and White is not merely sufficient, that they go beyond what most readers of sentences are able to do - at least at the beginning.

Prof. FISH: It's worse than that. I think that Strunk and White are - that book is entirely useless for people who are anxious about what it means to write a sentence, and feel worried when they are given the task of composing one. If you read - as in Strunk and White - do not join independent clauses with a comma, you haven't been told anything, unless you already know in a strong way what a sentence is. That piece of advice, as I say, skates on the surface. And although it can be handed around, it's never going to help the anxious writer.

What I am trying to in this book, "How to Write a Sentence," is both help the anxious writer, and introduce the anxious writer to the glorious world of sentences that, in time, he or she may be able to enter.

CONAN: Have you ever met an entirely un-anxious writer?

Prof. FISH: No, I have not.

CONAN: Me neither.

Prof. FISH: Although I assume that there are levels of anxiety. But I'm thinking of people who speak quite well, produce sentences every day of their lives. And then when you ask them - either as a teacher or as an employer - to write something simple, they panic. And this book, I hope, will help them allay some of their panic.

CONAN: And the book is "How to Write a Sentence, and How to Read One." The author is Stanley Fish.

You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

Let's go next to Rebecca, Rebecca with us from Charleston.

REBECCA (Caller): Hi there.

CONAN: Hi, Rebecca.

REBECCA: One of my favorite sentences comes from the last line of the movie "Annie Hall," and it's: We do it because we need the eggs.

(Soundbite of laughter)

REBECCA: And Alvy, the sad-sack character, says that because he's trying to describe why we go through the heart-wrenching relationships that we go through. And he described it as: We do it because we need the eggs. So, I mean, it's an unanswerable question, and the answer makes no sense.

Prof. FISH: Well, yeah. It's a - an answer to a big question. And the way of avoiding and answering the big question at the same time is to respond to it with something apparently small and inconsequential. So it's an admonition to the audience. Don't lose yourself in the questions of what I sometimes call big think. You won't be able to get out of that territory. But meanwhile, you do need the eggs.

CONAN: Thanks very much, Rebecca.

REBECCA: Thank you.

CONAN: Let's go next to - this is Andrew, Andrew with us from Roanoke in Virginia.

ANDREW (Caller): Hi. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle from "The Sign of Four": When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

Mr. FISH: Yeah, that's great because impossible and improbable are words - very strong words, which reinforce each other, and then turn out, somewhat surprisingly, to be the road to the truth. We like to think that the truth is easy and direct. What this sentence is telling us, by making us experience the relationship between the impossible and the improbable, is that the road may not be so simple. But nevertheless, if you stay on it long enough, the truth will be waiting for you as it waits for you at the end of the sentence.

CONAN: Andrew, thanks very much. Heather in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, emails: from James Crumley's "The Last Good Kiss": When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon.

Mr. FISH: Now, is that the beginning or...

CONAN: I believe it's the beginning, yes.

Mr. FISH: Well, that's a terrific beginning because it introduces you to characters; it sets the mood - a fine spring afternoon; and also, gifts you with a certain tone, which I hope - although I don't know that piece of work - is continued throughout it.

CONAN: And I have to ask you to - you may not have a favorite; there are so many in your book. But you begin by talking about a line used by John Updike to describe Ted Williams' last at-bat in the Major Leagues.

Mr. FISH: Yeah. That's a great sentence. It goes this way - and he's speaking exactly of the moment, which he observed. He was in the stadium on that day in 1960, when the ball is hit. And here's what he says - Updike says: It was in the books while it was still in the sky.

And what makes that sentence great is, first of all, it's 10 monosyllables, and you can't get plainer than that. But it's both metaphorical and down-to-earth at the same time - in the books, in the sky. And the great word is "still." It's still in the sky. It remains there. It's still always going to be in the sky. And it's a fantastic sentence.

CONAN: Stanley Fish, "How to Write a Sentence." This is NPR News.

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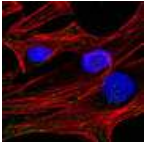
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**Don Killgallon (Donny1)** wrote:

Great to see someone who validates our life's work to help students compose better sentences like those by authors. To see what we've done, and the worktexts that we've written from kids from elementary school through college, click here: <http://userpages.umbc.edu/~killgall/>

--Don and Jenny Killgallon, teaching students to write, one good sentence at a time

Tuesday, February 01, 2011 1:29:50 PM

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**Raymond Weitzman (RayW)** wrote:

Individual words are important! Look how Professor Fish own verbal behavior was influenced by Justice Scalia's use of the word "rock."

Monday, January 31, 2011 2:13:55 PM

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**Kressel Housman (Kressel\_H)** wrote:

As a modestly published writer, I'm a bit scared that this book will block me even more than I already am. It's already too easy for me to get hung up polishing sentences. The main challenge for me is creating a plot that moves.

Monday, January 31, 2011 1:59:36 PM

[Recommend \(7\)](#)

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**Raymond Weitzman (RayW)** wrote:

In writing the sentence is king. In speech, particulary conversational speech among close friends, much of the time you have to look hard for any sentences. Why is this? Because the author has to provide the context and to do that you have to write in sentences. Take for example "The book was interesting." As Professor Fish says sentences must have a logical structure. But what is "logical" is just a conventional norm determined by the practices of the language community. Sentences are supposed to evoke certain responses in the reader or listener, but they may not evoke responses that the author hopes for, unless the author provides (in sentences) the necessary context. The value of my example sentence is determined by context, whether provided by previous verbal or non-verbal events. Otherwise, it is up to the reader or listener to try to fill in what these events were. Consider Noam Chomsky's famous sentence "Colorless green idea sleep furiously."

Monday, January 31, 2011 1:40:32 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

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**Steve Carr (Abu\_el\_Banat)** wrote:

To learn how to write sentences, go to our 16th President:

"I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution.... My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."

Sunday, January 30, 2011 9:17:16 PM

[Recommend \(5\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Steve Carr (Abu\_el\_Banat)** wrote:

Justice Scalia wrote, "Interior decorating is a rock-hard science compared to psychology practiced by amateurs."

Mr Fish comments, "The sentence is itself a rock thrown at Scalia's fellow justices in the majority; ... the "amateurs" who are sitting next to Scalia as he spits it out."

Sentences are thoughts, not rocks. Sentences are communicated, not thrown. Sentences are written out, not spat out. As a response to an argument that 'secular' prayer remains coercive, this 'precious gem' is ad hominem rhetoric and a cracked bauble.

Sunday, January 30, 2011 9:12:31 PM

[Recommend \(5\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Paul Perspectoff (perspectoff)** wrote:

This article and a great many of the comments do not adhere to rules of English. Misplaced punctuation, run-on sentences, and adverbs replaced with adjectives are commonplace. I'd wager that 99% of Americans have never even heard of the subjunctive verb tense.

When I grew up in the 1970's, the MLA Style Manual was required reading for English classes, both in grade school and high school. My kid's teachers have never even heard of the MLA Style manual. News (including online news) articles are atrocious these days.

It's great to bring attention to this, but Americans are insistent on their right to be poorly educated, a trend started by Malcolm X in the 1960's (as pointed out in an excellent analysis by Coretta Scott King).

Sunday, January 30, 2011 3:17:11 PM

[Recommend \(7\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Alex L (horsezens)** wrote:

Whether it be via lyric, prose, speech or poetry, wordplay is gorgeous. It is an artform that when done right, can be life altering. The art of sentence structure is learned. It takes thought and practice. We're kinda dumbed down at this point in society and I laud any effort to polish up our collective communicative ability. Hooray!

Sunday, January 30, 2011 12:30:59 PM

[Recommend \(8\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Erika Burton (DrEBurton)** wrote:

Being able to write begins and ends with paying attention to the meaning in words and the message they convey.

Erika Burton, Ph.D.

Stepping Stones Together, Founder

Empowering parental involvement in early literacy programs

<http://www.steppingstonesotogether.com>

Sunday, January 30, 2011 12:06:33 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**robert hill (toguf)** wrote:

Teaching "kids" to write is very different from refining language to its best. Certainly, beginning writers need to feel a sense of fluency and momentum, an opportunity to say something that appeals or matters to them. However, one of the major differences between poetry, let's say, written by earnest teenagers and that of accomplished poets is in their language, not only in the Aristotle-approved metaphor-making but also in revelations of how language works.

"Clarity" and "meaning," in and of themselves, can too readily become simplistic opinion;

skilled attention to the way sentences and words actually work will always assist a writer

toward saying more than s/he thought at first. It is no disrespect to a student's ideas or

feelings to give what I consider a high compliment, "You make good sentences."

Sunday, January 30, 2011 7:54:20 AM

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