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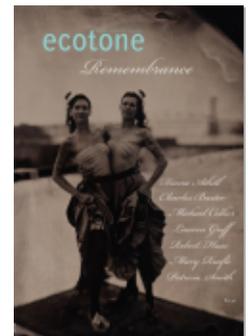
Several Short Sentences About Writing

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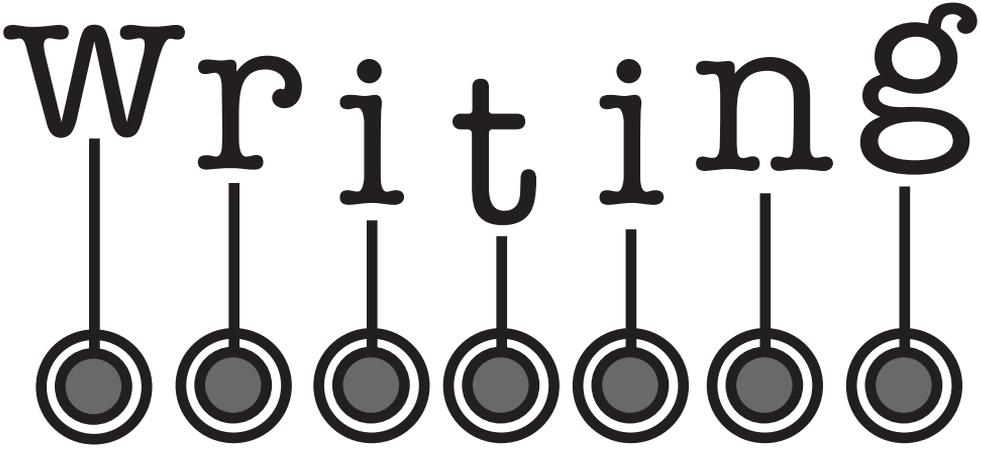
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NONFICTION

Several

short sentences about



Verlyn Klinkenborg

The central fact of your education is this:

You've been taught to believe that what you discover by thinking,

By examining your own thoughts and perceptions,

Is unimportant and unauthorized.

As a result, you fear thinking,

And you don't believe your thoughts are interesting

Because you haven't learned to be interested in them.

There's another possibility:

You may be interested in your thoughts,

But they don't have much to do with

anything you've ever been asked to write.

The same is true of what you notice.

You don't even notice what you notice,

Because nothing in your education has taught you that what you notice is important.

And if you do notice something that interests you,

It doesn't have much to do with anything you've ever been asked to write.

But everything you notice is important.

Let me say that a different way:

If you notice something, it's because

it's important.

But what you notice depends on what you allow yourself to notice

And that depends on what you feel authorized, permitted to notice

In a world where we're trained to disregard our perceptions.

Who's going to give you the authority to feel that what you notice is important?

It will have to be you.

Being a writer is an act of perpetual self-authorization.

Only you can authorize yourself.

You do that by writing well, by constant discovery.

★

Most people have been taught that what they notice doesn't matter,

So they never learn how to notice,

Not even what interests them.

Or they assume that the world has been completely pre-noticed,

Already sifted and sorted and categorized

By everyone else, by people with real authority.

And so they write about pre-authorized subjects in pre-authorized language.

Why do I say this?

When students are free to write anything they want

What they write first are pieces they hope look like something they saw published somewhere

About subjects they believe are pre-authorized

Because someone has already written about them

In pieces they hoped looked like something they saw published somewhere.

A first piece of that kind is a tacit way of taking shelter under the authority of someone else's perceptions.

It's also a way of saying, "I know you're not really interested in what I think or notice."

But that's the very thing the reader *is* interested in

If your sentences allow him to be.

★

In the outline and draft model of writing—the one taught in school—thinking is largely done up front.

Outlining means organizing the sequence of your meanings, not your sentences.

It derogates the making of sentences.

It ignores the suddenness of thought,

The surprises to be found in the making of sentences.

It knows nothing of the thoughtfulness you'll discover as you work.

It prevents discovery within the act of writing.

It fails to realize that writing comes from writing.

The standard model wastes the contemplative space of writing.

Can you think all the good thoughts in advance?

Outlining has at least as much to do with rescuing the writer from himself

As it does with planning the shape of the piece.

It's meant to free you from thinking as you write.

It provides a catwalk across the open spaces in your mind

To keep you from falling into rumination as you write.

The purpose of an outline is also to conserve your material, to distribute it evenly so that *meaning* discloses itself near the end.

Here's a better approach.

Squander your material.

Don't ration it, saving the best for last.

You don't know what the best is.

Or the last.

Use it up.

There's plenty more where that came from.

You won't make new discoveries until you need them.

What writers fear most is running out of material.

The sound of a writer's fears is the sound of nothing—

No typing, no clicking, no scratching of the pen.

But you can only run out of material

If you haven't been thinking or noticing.

★

How do you begin to write?

Look for a sentence that interests you.

A sentence that might begin the piece.

Don't look too hard.

Just try out some sentences.

You're holding an audition.

Many sentences will try out.

One gets the part.

What makes the first sentence interesting?

Its exact shape and what it says

And the possibility it creates for another sentence.

A beginning needs no *éclat*, no cleverness, no tricks,

No coyly hidden awareness of where the piece will take us.

The opening sentence is only creating an opening for the next sentence.

But there's also nothing incidental about that first sentence.

You—your role as a writer, the role you construct, your presence to the reader—you and your first sentence begin together.

You want to *begin* the piece, not *introduce* it, which is the difference between a first sentence already moving at speed and a first sentence that wants to generalize while clearing its throat.

The beginning is one sentence long.

It leads to the next sentence and is largely indistinguishable from other sentences leading to the next sentence.

So many writers stumble by making the first sentence try to do too much

And end up making every sentence try to do the same.

Out of all the possibilities created by the first sentence,

Make a second sentence, full of more possibilities, even disconnected ones.

See if you can write the sentence that *arises* from the first sentence,

Not the sentence that *follows* from it.

Don't look farther ahead than two or three sentences.

And don't *plan* those sentences.

Resist the temptation to rush ahead

to see where they're pointing.

What matters isn't where they're pointing

But what interests you in the sentence you're making,

Which you may have to discover as you make it.

Every sentence is optional until it proves otherwise.

Imagine sentences instead of writing them.

Keep them imaginary until you're happy with them.

An imaginary sentence somehow feels less *bound* than one you've written down.

Making sentences soon ceases to be a separate act

And becomes part of the process of thinking.

★

Your job as a writer is making sentences.

Your other jobs include fixing sentences, killing sentences, and arranging sentences.

If this is the case—making, fixing, killing, arranging—how can your writing possibly flow?

It can't.

Flow is something the reader experiences, not the writer.

A writer may write painstakingly,

Assembling the work slowly, like a mosaic,

Fitting and refitting the sentences and paragraphs over years.

And yet to the reader the writing may seem to flow.

The reader's experience of your prose has nothing to do with how hard or easy it was for you to make.

You're not writing for a reader in the mirror whose psychological state reflects your own.

You have only your own working reality to consider.

The reader reads in another reality entirely.

So why not give up the idea of "flow" and accept the basic truth about writing?

It's hard work, and it's been hard work for everyone all along.

The idea of writer's block, in its ordinary sense,

Exists largely because of the notion that writing should flow.

But if you accept that writing is hard work,

And that's what it feels like while you're writing,

Then everything is just as it should be.

Your labor isn't a sign of defeat.

It's a sign of engagement.

For the writer, the word "flow" is a trap.

So is any word that suggests that writing is a spontaneous emission.

Writing doesn't flow, unless you're plagiarizing or collecting clichés or enlisting volunteer sentences.

You'll experience certain kinds of suddenness as you work:

The illusion that time is passing quickly,

An episode of unusual mental clarity,

An almost unnoticed transition from one mood to another.

The piece you're working on may take a jump forward,

And you notice the jump instead of the hours and days of thinking that enabled it.

Everything may flow when you're setting thoughts down on paper.

But that's jotting, not writing.

"Flow" means effusion, a spontaneous outpouring of sentences.

What matters isn't how fluidly the sentences are emitted.

Only how good they are.

It's easy to believe in "flow" if you can't feel the difference between a dead sentence and a living one.

★

What lurks behind "flow?"

Above all, the idea of naturalness.

"Natural" is a word that invites suspicion.

It should always present itself in quotation marks,

A sign that its meaning is slippery.

Humans can justify almost anything by calling it natural.

Naturalness is the pervasive myth—the one to root out of your head.

There's nothing natural about writing except the tendency to assume that it's natural,

Thanks to a false analogy with talking.

The connection between talking and writing is nearly as complex as the connection between reading and writing.

You probably don't remember learning to talk as a child.

You probably do remember learning to shape letters and spell words.

Talking is natural.

Writing is not.

Most children can say words before they're two and speak in sentences before they're three.

They can sing the alphabet song almost as soon as they can sing.

But they can't write the alphabet until they can hold an instrument of writing.

It may seem strange to think that the manual dexterity needed to hold a pencil—or use a keyboard—comes later than the lingual and mental dexterity needed to speak.

But it does.

In writing, there's always an artificiality, a separateness,

The sense of manipulating a tool for producing words at arm's length,

Out there at the ends of your fingers,

Unlike speaking, which arises invisibly from within, like thought and breath.

In writing, there's a psychological separateness too,

The sense of watching yourself think and thinking about it as you do,

Humans can
justify almost
anything
by calling it
natural.
Naturalness is
the pervasive
myth—the one
to root out of
your head.

A self-consciousness that interrupts
the movement of your thoughts

If you experience it while talking.

Humans have a language instinct

But not necessarily a writing instinct.

The difference between talking and
writing

Is the difference between breathing
and singing well.

“Natural,” like flow, is also an effect
in the reader’s mind.

It doesn’t describe the act of writing.

It describes the effect of writing.

And like “flow,” “natural” is one of
the words behind writer’s block.

So let’s suppose there’s no such thing
as writer’s block.

There’s loss of confidence

And forgetting to think

And failing to prepare

And not reading enough

And giving up on patience

And hastening to write

And over-visualizing your audience

And never really trying to understand
how sentences work.

Above all, there’s never learning to
trust yourself

Or your capacity to learn or think or
perceive.

People will continue to believe that
writing is natural.

This harms only writers who believe
it themselves.

And yet good prose often sounds
spoken,

As if the writer—or the reader reading
aloud—were *saying* the sentences.

(This isn’t the same as sounding colloquial.)

But the arc of education—and the arc
of emulation—is usually

Away from spokenness and toward
the unspeakable,

Toward longer, more convoluted
sentences

Using more elaborate syntax and
more jargon-like diction.

There’s nothing natural about making
sentences that sound spoken,

No matter how natural they sound.

What are their characteristics?

They’re fairly short.

They’re rhythmic, often with the
rhythms of actual speech.

The diction is simple—very few
multi-syllabic words.

So is the construction—almost
no suspended phrases or dependent
clauses.

This simplicity makes the rhythm
more perceptible.

There’s also an acute awareness of the
listener’s attention and understanding,

A sense of contextual alertness and a
vivid sense of the unspoken.

These are all qualities worth building
into your prose.

They must be created, discovered,
revealed, constructed.

They don’t appear “naturally.”

It’s always worth asking yourself if
you can imagine *saying* a sentence

And adjusting it until you can.

When your prose begins to stiffen
and your thoughts get stuffy,

It’s sometimes worth reworking the
piece you’re writing as if it were

A letter or a long e-mail to a friend,

Someone who knows you well but
hasn’t seen you in a while.

What happens?
The prose relaxes, the sentences grow more informal.
You remember to use contractions,
Even the words grow shorter.
Suddenly things are clearer and simpler and more direct, as if they were being spoken.
But something else happens too.
There's suddenly a wider variety of tone, an emotional latitude,
A sense that the reader will be able to fill in the gaps,
Even the possibility of humor.
Why the difference?
It isn't the change in genre.
It's the change in the reader.
You're writing to someone who knows you, who understands your allusions,
Your patterns of speech, who's quick and empathetic
In reading your thoughts and feelings, whether they're spoken or unspoken.
What makes this reader valuable is a sense of connection and kinship,
An intuitive grasp of what you say and don't say.
You can make any piece feel like an informal letter
By using the generic characteristics of an informal letter.
But it's far easier to get that feel
By writing to the reader you imagine reading it.
The reader you construct in your imagination
Changes the way you write almost without your noticing it.
Behind "flow" there's something else,

Even something ecstatic—
The priority of thoughts over sentences.
Thoughts leaping ahead, words barely keeping up,
A hectic chase.
Or the other way around,
Sentences spinning out of each other, one after the next,
Phrase eliciting phrase, words—if not sentences—rushing ahead of thought.
It feels like inspiration.
We've all had these moments.
They're enticing.
The mistake is overvaluing them.
You have an effusion one day.
It spawns a piece.
As the piece evolves, you try to protect those original, effusive sentences.
Only to realize, at last, that what you're writing won't come together until they've been removed or revised.
What were you trying to protect?
The memory of the excitement you felt when those words "came to you."
(Where did they "come" from?)
You were protecting the memory of the excitement of really concentrating,
Of paying close attention to your thoughts and, perhaps, your sentences,
The excitement of feeling the galvanic link between language and thought.
That excitement matters, and the memory of it is worth preserving,
Even if those sentences aren't.
Concentration, attention, excitement will be part of your working state.
Daily.
Flow, inspiration—the spontaneous emission of sentences—will not.
That distinction is worth keeping in mind.

The workings of your unconscious mind,

The current of your subterranean thoughts and intuitions,

The flickerings of insight and instinct—

These will always surface, if you learn how to let them.

But they're only some of the tools of your daily work,

Which is making sentences.

The most damaging and obstructive cluster of ideas you face as a writer are nearly all related to the idea of "flow."

Like "genius."

And "sincerity."

And "inspiration."

Distrust these words.

They stand for cherished myths, but myths nonetheless.

"Inspiration" is what gets you to the keyboard,

And that's where it leaves you.

Inspiration is about the swift transitions of thought,

Sudden realizations,

Almost all of them carefully prepared for by continuous thinking.

Inspiration has nothing to do with the sustained effort of making prose.

You'll have many serendipitous moments while writing.

You'll learn to expect them.

But "inspiration," as it's commonly used, is just another word for "flow."

★

Think of all the requirements writers imagine for themselves:

A cabin in the woods

A plain wooden table

Absolute silence

Autumn

Spring

A favorite pen

A favorite ink

A favorite blank book

A favorite typewriter

A favorite laptop

A favorite writing program

A large advance

A yellow pad

A wastebasket

A shotgun

The early light of morning

The moon at night

A rainy afternoon

A thunderstorm with high winds

The first snow of winter

A cup of coffee in just the right cup

A beer

A mug of green tea

A bourbon

Solitude

Sooner or later the need for any one of these will prevent you from writing.

Anything you think you need in order to write—

Or be "inspired" to write or "get in the mood" to write—

Becomes a prohibition when it's lacking.

Learn to write anywhere, at any time, in any conditions,

With anything, starting from nowhere.

All you really need is your head, the one indispensable requirement. ●