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STANLEY FISH

HOW TO WRITE A SENTENCE

and

HOW TO READ ONE

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CHAPTER 1

WHY SENTENCES?

In her book The Writing Life (1989), Annie Dillard tells the story of a fellow writer who was asked by a student, “Do you think I could be a writer?” “Well,” the writer said, ‘do you like sentences?’” The student is surprised by the question, but Dillard knows exactly what was meant. He was being told, she explains, that “if he liked sentences he could begin,” and she remembers a similar conversation with a painter friend. “I asked him how he came to be a painter. He said, ‘I like the smell of paint.’” The point, made implicitly (Dillard does not belabor it), is that you don’t begin with a grand conception, either of the great American novel or a masterpiece that will hang in the Louvre. You begin with a feel for the nitty-gritty material of the medium, paint in one case, sentences in the other.
But wouldn’t the equivalent of paint be words rather than sentences? Actually, no, because while you can brush or even drip paint on a canvas and make something interesting happen, just piling up words, one after the other, won’t do much of anything until something else has been added. That something is named quite precisely by Anthony Burgess in this sentence from his novel *Enderby Outside* (1968):

> And the words slide into the slots ordained by syntax, and glitter as with atmospheric dust with those impurities which we call meaning.

Before the words slide into their slots, they are just discrete items, pointing everywhere and nowhere. Once the words are nestled in the places “ordained” for them—“ordained” is a wonderful word that points to the inexorable logic of syntactic structures—they are tied by ligatures of relationships to one another. They are subjects or objects or actions or descriptives or indications of manner, and as such they combine into a statement about the world, that is, into a meaning that one can contemplate, admire, reject, or refine. Virginia Tufte, whose book *Artful Sentences* (2006) begins with this sentence of Burgess’s, comments: “It is syntax that gives the words the power to relate to each other in a sequence . . . to carry meaning—of whatever kind—as well as glow individually in just the right place.” Flaubert’s famous search for the “mot juste” was not a search for words that glow alone, but for words so precisely placed that in combination with other words, also precisely placed, they carve out a shape in space and time.

Here is Dillard again: “When you write you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it and it digs a path you follow.” And when you come to the end of the path, you have a sentence. Flaubert described himself in a letter as being in a semi-diseased state, “itching with sentences.” He just had to get them out. He would declaim them to passersby.

I wish I had been one of them. Some people are bird watchers, others are celebrity watchers; still others are flora and fauna watchers. I belong to the tribe of sentence watchers. Some appreciate fine art; others appreciate fine wines. I appreciate fine sentences. I am always on the lookout for sentences that take your breath away, for sentences that make you say, “Isn’t that something?” or “What a sentence!” Some of my fellow sentence appreciators have websites: Best Sentences Ever, Sentences We Love, Best First Sentences, Best Last Sentences. Invariably the sentences that turn up on these sites are not chosen for the substantive political or social or philosophical points they make. They are chosen because they are performances of a certain skill at the highest level. The closest analogy, I think, is to sports highlights; you know, the five greatest dunks, or the ten greatest catches, or the fifteen greatest touchdown runbacks. The response is always, “Wasn’t that amazing?” or “Can you believe it?” or “I can’t for the life of me see how he did that,” or “What an incredible move!” or “That’s not humanly possible.” And always the admiration is a rueful recognition that you couldn’t do it yourself even though you also have two hands and feet. It is the same with sentences that do things the language you use every day
would not have seemed capable of doing. We marvel at them; we read them aloud to our friends and spouses, even, occasionally, to passersby; we analyze them; we lament our inability to match them.

One nice thing about sentences that display a skill you can only envy is that they can be found anywhere, even when you’re not looking for them. I was driving home listening to NPR and heard a commentator recount a story about the legendary actress Joan Crawford. It seems that she never left the house without being dressed as if she were going to a premiere or a dinner at Sardi’s. An interviewer asked her why. She replied, “If you want to see the girl next door, go next door.” It is hardly surprising that Joan Crawford had thought about the importance to fans of movie stars behaving like movie stars (since her time, there has been a sea change; now, courtesy of paparazzi, we see movie stars picking up their laundry in Greenwich Village or Brentwood); what may be surprising is that she could convey her insight in a sentence one could savor. It is the bang-bang quickness of the short imperative clause—“go next door”—that does the work by taking the commonplace phrase “the girl next door” literally and reminding us that “next door” is a real place where one should not expect to find glamour (unless of course one is watching Judy Garland singing “The Boy Next Door” in Meet Me in St. Louis).

A good sentence can turn up in the middle of a movie where it shines for an instant and then recedes as the plot advances. At one point in The Magnificent Seven (1960), the bandit leader, played by Eli Wallach, explains why he isn’t bothered much by the hardships suffered by the peasant-farmers whose food and supplies he plunders:

*If God didn’t want them sheared, he would not have made them sheep.*

The sentence is snapped off, almost like the flick of a whip; it has the form of proverbial wisdom (a form we shall look at later), and the air of finality and certainty it aspires to is clinched by the parallelism of clauses that also feature the patterned repetition of consonants and vowels: “didn’t want” and “would not have,” “sheared” and “sheep.” We know that “sheep” is coming because of “sheared” and when it arrives it seems inevitable and, at least from one perspective, just. Not bad for a bandit.

Even children can produce a good sentence. My mother-in-law, Lucille Reilly Parry, was a grade-school teacher and she recalled a day when a large box was delivered to the school. No one knew where it had come from or what it was, and she gave her fourth-grade students the assignment of writing something about it. One student began her essay with this sentence:

*I was already on the second floor when I heard about the box.*

What is noteworthy about this sentence is its ability to draw readers in and make them want more. It is a question of what we know and don’t know. We know that the writer was
in the middle of something ("I was already") but we don’t know what; neither do we know how she learned about the box or what effect (if any) the fact of it had on what she was in the course of doing. And so we read on in the expectation of finding out. Many practiced writers would kill for a first sentence that good.

I found another of my favorite sentences while teaching the last big school-prayer case, Lee v. Weisman (1992). Mr. Weisman brought a cause of action against Nathan Bishop Middle School in Providence, Rhode Island (the same school I attended many decades ago), because a thoroughly secular prayer had been read at his daughter’s graduation. Weisman regarded the prayer as a breach of the First Amendment’s prohibition against the state’s establishing of a religion. A majority of the Supreme Court justices agreed with him and reasoned that even though the prayer had no sectarian content and made no demands on the students, who were free to ignore it, its very rehearsal was an act of “psychological coercion.” This was too much for Justice Scalia, who, after citing a fellow jurist’s complaint that establishment clause jurisprudence was becoming so byzantine that it was in danger of becoming a form of interior decorating, got off this zinger:

*Interior decorating is a rock-hard science compared to psychology practiced by amateurs.*

The sentence is itself a rock thrown at Scalia’s fellow justices in the majority; it is a projectile that picks up speed with every word; the acceleration is an effect of the two past participles “compared” and “practiced”; their economy does not allow a pause or a taking of a breath, and the sentence hurtles toward what is both its semantic and real-life destination: the “amateurs” who are sitting next to Scalia as he spits it out.

The pleasure I take in the sentence has nothing to do with the case or with the merits of either the majority’s or the dissent’s arguments. It is the pleasure of appreciating a technical achievement—here the athletic analogy might be to target shooting—in this case, Scalia’s ability to load, aim, and get off a shot before his victims knew what was happening. I carry that sentence around with me as others might carry a precious gem or a fine Swiss watch. I pull it out and look at it. I pull it out and invite others (who are sometimes reluctant) to look at it. I put it under a microscope and examine its innermost workings.

That sounds, I know, rather precious, as if sentences were “one-off” performances, discrete instances of what Walter Pater sought in art, experiences of brilliant intensity that promise “nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass and simply for those moments’ sake” (quite a sentence itself, and we shall return to Pater). But, in fact, sentences promise more. They promise nothing less than lessons and practice in the organization of the world. That is what language does: organize the world into manageable, and in some sense artificial, units that can then be inhabited and manipulated. If you can write a sentence in which actors, actions, and objects are related to one another in time, space, mood, desires, fears, causes, and effects, and if your specification of those relationships is delineated with a precision that
communicates itself to your intended reader, you can, by
eextrapolation and expansion, write anything: a paragraph, an
argument, an essay, a treatise, a novel. “There is nothing in
discourse,” Roland Barthes once said, “that is not to be found
in a sentence” (Image Music Text, 1977). A discourse of any
size, he added, “is a long sentence . . . just as a sentence is
a short discourse.” Years ago, when I was in the beginning
stages of mapping out a book, my department chair, Hugh
Kenner, gave me this advice: “Just get the first sentence right,
everything else will follow.” He meant that if my first sentence
were written with a full comprehension of the twists and turns
in the journey it introduced (which would make it in effect
the last sentence), following its lead would guide me to the
right order of my arguments and examples. He was right.

A sentence is, in John Donne’s words, “a little world made
cunningly.” (Donne is speaking of the human body, but that
is just another composition.) I want to bring you into the little
worlds made cunningly by as many writers as I can cram into
a short book. My motives are at once aesthetic and practical.
I hope that you will come to share the delight and awe I feel
when reading and contemplating these sentences, and I hope
that by the time you finish you will be able to write some
fine, if not great, sentences yourself. So I promise to give you
both sentence pleasure and sentence craft, the ability to ap-
preciate a good sentence and the ability to fashion one. These
skills are sometimes thought of as having only an oblique re-
lationship to one another, but they are, I believe, acquired in
tandem. If you learn what it is that goes into the making of a
memorable sentence—what skills of coordination, subordina-
tion, allusion, compression, parallelism, alliteration (all terms
to be explained later) are in play—you will also be learning
how to take the appreciative measure of such sentences. And
conversely, if you can add to your admiration of a sentence an
analytical awareness of what caused you to admire it, you will
be that much farther down the road of being able to produce
one (somewhat) like it.

And there is a third benefit: practice in the analyzing and
imitating of sentences is also practice in the reading of sen-
tences. In general, of course, reading is easier than writing.
Almost anyone can read with pleasure the sentence in which
John Updike tells us what it was like to see Ted Williams—
the Kid, the Splendid Splinter—hit a home run in his last
at bat in Fenway Park on September 28, 1960:

It was in the books while it was still in the sky.

But it takes a little bit more to talk precisely about what
makes the sentence so effective. The fulcrum of the sentence
is “while”; on either side of it are two apparently very dif-
fent kinds of observations. “It was in the books” is meta-
phorical. Updike imagines, correctly, that this moment will
be memorialized in stories and at the Baseball Hall of Fame
in Cooperstown, New York, and he confers that mythical
status on the moment before it is completed, before the ball
actually goes out of the park. Indeed, in his sentence the ball
never does get out of the park. It is “still in the sky,” a phrase
that has multiple meanings; the ball is still in the sky in the
sense that it has not yet landed; it is still in the sky in the sense
that its motion is arrested; and it is still in the sky in the sense that it is, and will remain forever, in the sky of the books, in the record of the game’s highest, most soaring achievements. On the surface “in the book” and “in the sky” are in distinct registers, one referring to the monumentality the home run will acquire in history, the other describing the ball’s actual physical arc; but the registers are finally, and indeed immediately (this sentences goes fast), the same: the physical act and its transformation into myth occur simultaneously; or rather, that is what Updike makes us feel as we glide through this deceptively simple sentence composed entirely of monosyllables.

How hard is it to write a sentence like Updike’s? Well, let’s try. What you need is a hinge word that ostensibly separates distinct temporal states, but actually brings them together to the point where there is no temporal distance between them. Here is my (relatively feeble) attempt: “It was in my stomach before it was off the shelf.” Now, I’m not going to make any great claims for my sentence, but I will say that it is a game attempt to approach Updike’s art by imitating it, by arranging clauses in somewhat the same way he does in order to achieve a somewhat similar, if decidedly minor, effect. And once you get the hang of it—of zeroing in on a form that can then be filled with any number of contents—you can do it forever. “She was enrolled at Harvard before she was conceived.” “He had won the match before the first serve.” “They were celebrating while the other team was still at bat.”

Part of my thesis, as I have already suggested, is that the exercise of analyzing Updike’s sentence and then trying to match it will have a payoff when you go back and read it. Understanding how it is that he produced a complex effect will make that effect more available to you as a reader. You might have a sense of how good it is before you take it apart, but taking it apart will give you an enhanced understanding of just what kind of goodness it performs. My wife is a serious painter. When she and I go to a gallery we might both be impressed by the same painting, but she will be able to tell me, in analytical detail, what makes it impressive, how the painter did it. So it is with writing: the practice of analyzing and imitating sentences is also the practice of learning how to read them with an informed appreciation. Here’s the formula:

Sentence craft equals sentence comprehension equals sentence appreciation.

My last sentence uses the word “sentence” three times, and in this sentence I have now done the same. Indeed a large number of the sentences I have written so far have the word “sentence” in them; and yet I have not answered or even asked the basic question: What is a sentence, anyway? It is to that question that we now turn.
CHAPTER 2

WHY YOU WON'T FIND THE ANSWER IN STRUNK AND WHITE

STRUNK AND WHITE'S The Elements of Style (1959, 2000) long ago attained the status of a classic. Millions of copies sold, countless accolades, including this one from the Boston Globe: "No book in shorter space, with fewer words, will help any writer more than this persistent little volume"; and this one from the St. Paul Dispatch: "This excellent book, which should go off to college with every freshman, is recognized as the best book of its kind we have." No doubt this praise is deserved if the person using the book already knows how to write; already knows, that is, what a sentence is. For then advice like "Do not join independent clauses with a comma" and "The number of the subject determines the number of the verb" will be genuinely helpful. But if you're not quite sure
what a sentence is (and isn’t) and you understand the words “number,” “subject,” and “verb” but couldn’t for the life of you explain how they go together or what an independent clause is, Strunk and White’s instructions will make no sense.

In short, Strunk and White’s advice assumes a level of knowledge and understanding only some of their readers will have attained; the vocabulary they confidently offer is itself in need of an analysis and explanation they do not provide. And this is true too of the other guides that promise improvement in a short time, like the guide that tells you on the first page that “a sentence is the building block of verbal and written communication” (true; but how is the building done and when does it add up to communication?), and then announces magisterially, but unhelpfully, that sentences “are built with eight different kinds of words called the parts of speech” (Joanne Kimes and Gary Robert Muschla, Grammar Sucks: What to Do to Make Your Writing Much More Better, 2007). The eight parts duly follow (“noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection”), and all at once the terms the reader doesn’t understand have multiplied by eight. With each part of speech comes a list of errors you can, and probably will, make while trying to deploy it; obscurity of reference (what are these things, anyway?) is joined by fear, and the goal of being comfortable with the task of writing recedes into the distance. The very thought of putting pen to paper, an anachronism I find hard to let go of, is enough to bring on an anxiety attack.

I have just reproduced one of the standard arguments against learning to write by studying forms. For decades re-

searchers have been telling us that “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or . . . even a harmful effect on the teaching of writing” (Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition, 1963). I agree if by “the teaching of formal grammar” is meant memorizing the parts of speech or rehearsing the distinction between dependent and independent clauses or listing the uses of the subjunctive. That kind of rote knowledge is merely taxonomic. It explains nothing; students who acquire it have learned nothing about how to write, and it is no surprise when research demonstrates its nonutility.

The conclusion to be drawn, however, is not that focusing on forms is irrelevant to the act of composing, but that the focus one finds in the grammar books is on the wrong forms, on forms detached from the underlying (or overarching) form that must be in place before any technical terms can be meaningful or alive. That underlying form is the sentence itself, and even though it might seem to go without saying, let me say it again: If it is your goal is to write well-constructed sentences, it makes sense to begin by asking the basic and, one would have thought, obvious question “What is a sentence, anyway?” The writing guides certainly offer answers to that question; they say, variously, “a sentence is a complete thought” or “a sentence contains a subject and a predicate” or “sentences consist of one or more clauses that bear certain relationships to one another” (Anita K. Barry, English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior, 2002). But, far from being transparent and incisive, these declarations come wrapped in a fog; they seem to skate on their own surface and simply don’t go deep enough.
And what can I offer that will go deeper? Well, my bottom line can be summarized in two statements: (1) a sentence is an organization of items in the world; and (2) a sentence is a structure of logical relationships. The first statement is insufficiently helpful because it is overbroad: lists, dictionaries, encyclopedias, library card catalogues, bedroom bureaus, and file cabinets also organize items in the world. What is distinctive about the organization a sentence performs? The answer is given in statement (2); it is a logical organization, an assertion that is also overbroad, but one that can be refined and narrowed with the help of an exercise. Look around the room you are now in and pick out four or five items. Then add a verb or a modal auxiliary (would, should, could, must, may, might, shall, can, will). Finally, make a sentence out of what you have. (You will of course have to add words.) My list is “pen,” “chair,” “garbage can,” “printer,” and “shall,” and my first try at a sentence is “Before using the printer I shall remove the pen from the chair and throw it in the garbage can.” Other sentences might be, “I shall move the garbage can so that I can pull the chair up to the printer and have access to my pen,” or “I shall set the printer on the chair and get my pen out of the garbage can.”

Notice first that the number of sentences that could be made out of these components is theoretically infinite. Or, to put it another way, any number of contents (little stories or narratives) can be fashioned out of these meager materials. We shall return to the question of content—what exactly it is and what its relationship to form is—but first I want to pose an apparently simple question: What is it that we make a sentence out of a random collection of words? What is it that we add to those words that causes them to form something we recognize as a sentence? The answer can be given in a single word, and that word is “relationships.” In my third sentence—“I shall set the printer on the chair and get my pen out of the garbage can”—each of the words in the original list now exists in a logical relation to the others. “Shall” is now joined to a verb, “set,” to form an action; “printer” is now the object of that action, which is performed by “I”; “chair” is now part of a prepositional phrase (a phrase temporally and spatially relating objects to one another)—“upon the chair”—which names the place where the action of setting occurs. “And” introduces a sequence that is, structurally, a mirror image of what precedes it. “Pen” is the object of “shall get” and “out of the garbage can” names the place where and the manner in which the pen has been gotten. No word floats without an anchoring connection within an overall structure.

A poem by Kenneth Koch captures the exercise, its requirements, and its point:

One day the Nouns were clustered in the street.
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty
The Nouns were struck, moved, changed.
The next day a Verb drove up, and created the Sentence.
(“Permanently,” 1960)

Alone a word is just a word, a part of speech clustered in a category; it looks over at other words it would like to have a relationship with (it’s almost a dating situation) but has no way
of connecting with them. And then a verb shows up, providing a way of linking up noun to adjective, and suddenly you have a sentence, a proposition, a little world. “Beautiful Joan sighed.” “John was angry.” “I am proud.” “Crucial decisions await.” And on and on forever.

It is important to understand that the relationships that form the sinews and relays of sentences are limited. There is the person or thing performing an action, there is the action being performed, and there is the recipient or object of the action. That’s the basic logical structure of many sentences: X does Y to Z. (Sentences can also come without objects, as in “Joe walks.”) “Simon bought the car.” “The government raised taxes.” “The corporation gives bonuses.” “Heat parches lawns.” The instances are infinite, although the form remains the same (this is a key point, and I shall return to it): doer, doing, done to.

It’s not the number of words that renders these and millions of other sentences structurally interchangeable, but the relationships between the words. That is why “Simon drinks slowly” doesn’t fit the pattern: “slowly” isn’t the object of the action “drink”; rather it gives information about the act of drinking; it says how the drinking is done; it is done slowly. That is what words and phrases that don’t point to a sentence’s main components do; they give information about them. In the sentence “Before using the printer I shall remove the chair and throw it into the garbage can,” “Before using the printer” gives information about when the action of removing occurred, and “into the garbage” gives information about where the action of throwing ends up. In the sentence “Arriving at the house, I opened the car windows,” “Arriving at the house” gives information about the actor “I.” Who am I? I’m the one arriving at the house. In the sentence “Determined to win, he laid down a hard body block,” “Determined to win” gives information about the person who lays down the block. “Hard” gives information about the body block. What kind of body block is it? A hard body block.

Now of course you can give these words, phrases, and clauses technical names. You can call them “prepositional phrases,” as I did in the previous paragraph; you can call them past or present participles; you can call them adverbs; you can call them nouns; you can call them adjectives. And you can subdivide these terms and produce ever finer distinctions. But to what end? You can know what the eight parts of speech are, and even be able to apply the labels correctly, and still not understand anything about the way a sentence works. Technical knowledge, divorced from what it is supposed to be knowledge of, yields only the illusion of understanding. It’s like being able to reel off the locations on a baseball field—first base, second base, third base, home plate, left field, right field, center field, pitcher’s mound—without having the slightest clue as to how they function in a game. You can talk the talk, but you can’t walk the walk.

Not only is that kind of abstract knowledge unhelpful, it is often misleading, for it deceives those who possess it into thinking they know more than they do. Nine times out of ten when I ask someone to pick out the verb (the designator of the action) in the sentence “Helping old ladies cross the street prevents accidents,” the first answer I will hear is “Helping”
and the second I will hear is “cross.” And were I to ask what is the sentence’s subject (an unhappy grammatical term because it suggests theme or content), the answer most likely would be “old ladies.” People make these mistakes because they think that whenever something they recognize as a noun turns up, it must be the subject of the sentence, or that whenever they recognize a verbal form, it must be the sentence’s main verb. They confuse a taxonomy of the parts of speech with an analysis of a sentence’s logical structure. The two are entirely distinct. You can’t tell anything about the function a word plays in a sentence by identifying it as a noun or a verb. “Old ladies” is certainly a noun (or more precisely a noun phrase), and “Helping” and “cross” are certainly verbal forms, but the subject of the sentence is whatever performs its action, and in this case it is the compound phrase “Helping old ladies cross the street”; the main verb of the sentence is whatever action is being performed, and in this case it is the action “prevents.”

A little while back I observed that many people are put off writing because they fear committing one or more of the innumerable errors that seem to lie in wait for them at every step of composition. But if one understands that a sentence is a structure of logical relationships and that the number of relationships involved is finite, one understands too that there is only one error to worry about, the error of being illogical, and only one rule to follow: make sure that every component of your sentences is related to the other components in a way that is clear and unambiguous (unless ambiguity is what you are aiming at). And how do you do that? Not by learning rules, but by coming to know the limited number of rela-

tionships your words, phrases, and clauses can enter into, and becoming alert to those times when the relationships are not established or are unclear: when a phrase just dangles in space, when a connective has nothing to connect to, when a prepositional phrase is in search of a verb to complement, when a pronoun cannot be paired with a noun.

These are all errors catalogued in traditional grammar texts, but the catalogue really has only one entry marked “doesn’t link to anything” or “has too many possible links” or “is off in a corner by itself,” or “stands outside the sentence’s logic” or “undoes the sentence’s logic.” What happens when a sentence goes out of control or was never under control in the first place is that it ceases being a sentence and returns to the state when its parts made up nothing more cohesive than a random list. The exercise I introduced a few paragraphs ago—grab five items out of the air and make them into a sentence—can be reversed and is reversed whenever the components of the sentence you are trying to write seem to be independent of one another. (Hey, I’m an adjective, but I don’t have anything to modify; can anyone help me?) The achievement of organization has been undone, and what is left is (once again) just a collection of unrelated words, like the words standing isolated on a street corner at the beginning of Kenneth Koch’s poem.

How can you tell when that is happening? Just ask. Scrutinize every part of your sentence and ask, “What does it go with?” or “What does it support?” or “What information does it give about some other part?” or “What is it referring to?”—all variations of the master question, “How does it fit
HOW TO WRITE A SENTENCE

into the sentence’s logical structure?” If at any point you can’t come up with an answer, you know you’re in trouble and you know what the trouble is or at least where it is located, and you can begin to go about addressing it.

Of course this advice can be followed only if you are sensitive to the presence of a problem, if you sense that something has gone wrong. How is that sensitivity acquired? By performing exercises that hone it, like the exercise of making a sentence out of a random list of words. Everyone can do it. The hard part—and the part that will firm up your sense of the logical structure of sentences—is explaining what it is that you have done. The general answer is that you have inserted the words into a structure of relationships. But the general answer is too general to be useful. If the exercise is to be helpful beyond the moment of its performance, you have to step back reflectively and specify what role each word or phrase you have added to the list plays in the formation of a logical structure. You have to be able to say (if only to yourself) things like, “When I added this verb, I made this previously random and stand-alone word into the object of an action,” or “When I added this prepositional phrase I located the action in a particular space.” Turning this corner will be difficult; it’s a lot easier to form sentences than to produce an analysis of your ability to do so. But after a little while and a lot of practice, you will have internalized a grammatical “sixth sense” that enables you first to sense that something has gone wrong and then to zero in on it, and finally to correct it.

As with any skill, this one develops slowly. You start small, with three-word sentences, and after you’ve advanced to the

WHY YOU WON’T FIND THE ANSWER IN STRUNK AND WHITE

point where you can rattle off their structure on demand, you go on to the next step and another exercise. Take a little sentence (“Bob collects coins” or “John hit the ball”), whose ensemble of relationships you are now able to explain in your sleep, and expand it, first into a sentence of fifteen words and then into a sentence of thirty words, and finally, into a sentence of one hundred words—all the while never losing contact with the “doer-doing-done to” structure you began with. And then—here comes the hard part again—tag every added component with an account of how it functions to extend and maintain the set of relationships that holds the sentence, however mammoth or unwieldy it becomes, together.

Here, for example, is the sentence “John hit the ball” pumped up into something unreadable but perfectly formed:

In the middle of the sixth inning of a crucial game in the pennant race, John, the league leader batting third, weakly but precisely hit on the nose the ball pitched with great velocity by the sure-to-be Hall of Fame hurler who had won his last five starts in an overwhelming fashion while going the whole nine innings and who therefore presented an intimidating image to anyone facing him, especially as the shadow lengthened over the mound, obscuring the mechanics of his delivery and rendering it difficult even to see the spheroid as it curved its sinuous way toward the plate, behind which were the umpire, ready to say “ball” or “strike,” and the catcher, prepared for whatever was about to happen.

Constructing this monster is easy, and I have found that
freshman students have no trouble doing something similar with the three-word sentences of their choice. Giving an analytical account of how the construction was accomplished takes more work, and would require, for example, coming to see (and explaining) that everything following the word “ball” is a modification of it. What ball is it? It is the ball “pitched with great velocity by the sure-to-be Hall of Fame hurler who.” Everything from “who” to “anyone facing him” modifies or describes or characterizes the hurler (who, we must remember, has been brought in to further specify what ball it is that has been hit). Everything from “especially” to the end of the sentence modifies or fleshes out the intimidating image the hurler presents. And everything remains tethered to the word “ball,” the object of “hit,” the action performed by John, whose biography precedes his appearance in the sentence. Within the overall structure there are all the smaller units, like “as the shadows lengthened over the mound,” and they too have their own internal structure that must also be explicaded. (A full analysis of this sentence would fill many pages.)

The more times you perform this exercise, always with different three-word sentences as the base, the easier it becomes, and the easier it becomes, the more practiced you will be in spotting the structure of relationships that gives sense and coherence even to verbal behemoths like this one.