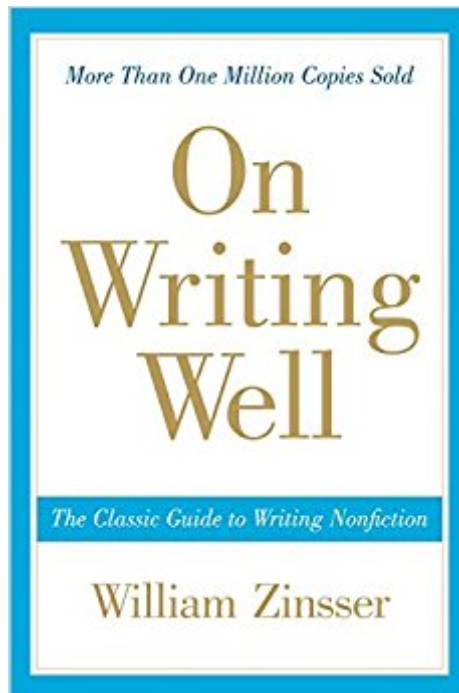




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On Writing Well: The Classic Guide To Writing Nonfiction



Synopsis

On Writing Well has been praised for its sound advice, its clarity and the warmth of its style. It is a book for everybody who wants to learn how to write or who needs to do some writing to get through the day, as almost everybody does in the age of e-mail and the Internet. Whether you want to write about people or places, science and technology, business, sports, the arts or about yourself in the increasingly popular memoir genre, On Writing Well offers you fundamental principles as well as the insights of a distinguished writer and teacher. With more than a million copies sold, this volume has stood the test of time and remains a valuable resource for writers and would-be writers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

William Zinsser is a writer, editor and teacher. He began his career on the New York Herald Tribune and has since written regularly for leading magazines. During the 1970s he was master of Branford College at Yale. His 17 books, ranging from baseball to music to American travel, include the influential *Writing to Learn* and *Writing About Your Life*. He teaches at the New School in New York.

The most damaging (but fair) criticism I've heard of this book came from reviewer D. Fineman who said, "He generalizes egregiously about topics that are enormous. ... He feels free to judge -- for instance scientists -- outside his field." I agree that Zinsser does these things, but I disagree that it is

a problem. In fact, if I have one criticism of the book it is exactly the opposite: that the lessons are even more generalizable and broadly applicable than Zinsser gives them credit for. For instance, if you skip the travel writing chapter, or if you read it thinking that it only applies to travel writing, then you will miss two golden and persuasive arguments that ought to apply to *any* writer: 1) The things that come to the writer easiest -- cliché, excessive detail, syrupy and vague language -- are the things that keep the reader bored/detached/passive. 2) Your main task as a writer is to distill the essence of whatever you're writing about -- to find its central idea, to describe its distinctive qualities using precise images. In other words, your main task is to work excruciatingly hard. The goal of any writer (yes, any) ought to be to transform the reader from a passive observer into an ally. It's excruciatingly hard to do, but once you realize that that's the goal, and once you realize that the parts that come easiest are what's getting in the way of that goal, then you can start writing well. Zinsser knows these things, and he articulates them beautifully. It is one of the most persuasive books I have read, on any subject. But I hate that the lessons are hidden within topic-specific chapters. Please read with that in mind.

This book is one of the finest books ever written on the subject of nonfiction writing. I've written about 30 books that have sold more than five million copies and I can tell you that those books would never have been written, or written as well, had I not stumbled upon this book some 20 years ago. From this book I learned the value of brevity. I learned the value of simplicity. And more than anything else, I learned to trust myself and the concept that, in the end, people don't love a book because they are in love with the subject, they love a book (and stick with it regardless of topic) because they like the author. I also learned, very importantly, that your teachers were all wrong when they told you not to write in the first person: Mr. Zinsser convinced me that writing in the first person is the best -- often the only -- way to write. If you don't trust yourself and don't trust your ideas, why on Earth are you writing anything? I also learned from this book that humor and surprise are necessary elements of most nonfiction writing. Be yourself, talk directly to the reader, be funny, be human, be a tiny bit clever -- and you may even surprise yourself with what a good writer you are. Trust yourself, and trust simplicity.

“Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life.”
E.B. White “Writing is the geometry of the soul.”
Plato
In *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser writes an easy-to-follow no-nonsense approach into the core

essentials of writing. Providing a smattering of meticulous examples, *On Writing Well* does a lucid job of clearing up some of the confusion writers might have about style, methods, leads, endings, et al., while setting the foundation for a stronger individual repertoire. In fact, regarding this, Zinsser speaks about the importance of everyone to have good writing skills given today's newfound environment where a lot of communication takes place through the emails, the internet and so on. This is crucial since most of us employ the tool of writing in a daily fashion. Zinsser urges individuals to seek to sharpen their skill set in order to become better communicators simply by employing tenets in this book. As hinted to before, Zinsser also makes incisive use of many salient examples throughout the book by breaking them down and suggesting some writing tips in cogent fashion. Within these examples the author covers people, places, science and technology, writing within a job, writing about sports, and more. Broken down into four parts, the book covers [1] Principles, where notions such as clutter and style are covered, [2] Methods, where leads and endings are covered, [3] Forms, where various forms of nonfiction are explored at length and [4] Attitudes within writing, which is self-explanatory. All parts offer ample insights, many of which would be useful to nearly all individuals nowadays, especially if you have to write anything on a daily basis, whether it is emails, memos, etc. and are new to writing. To accomplish sound things in life, one needs an ironclad scaffolding upon which to set oneself in. Writing well is no different. The insights provided by this book will help those that employ them. Couple the tenets in this book with those of those within *The Elements of Style*, and one has the recipe for success. Both have helped me quite a bit, as I hope they help you.

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