This is a book of first steps. Their meaning will change as your experience changes. This book contains the bones of many arguments and observations—a vertebra here, a mandible there—but the whole skeleton is what you make of it. You'll find as much about thought and perception here as you will about language. There are no rules, only experiments.

The premise of this book is that most of the received wisdom about how writing works is not only wrong but harmful. This is not an assumption. It's a conclusion.

Like most received wisdom, what people think they know about writing works in subtle, subterranean ways. For some reason, we seem to believe most strongly in the stuff that gets into our heads without our knowing or remembering how it got there. What we think we know about writing sounds plausible. It confirms our generally false ideas about creativity and genius. But none of this means it's true.

What I've learned about writing I've learned by trial and error, which is how most writers have learned. I had to overcome my academic training, which taught me to write in a way that was useless to me (and almost
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everyone else). Unlearning what I learned in college—teaching myself to write well—is the basis of what I know. So is a lifetime of reading and a love of language. The rest comes from years of writing and teaching writing. The ideas and suggestions in this book have been tested again and again, by me, by my students, and by writers who have figured these things out for themselves.

A couple of cautions before you begin. This book isn’t meant to replace the received wisdom. “Received” means untested, untried, repeated out of habit. Everything in this book is meant to be tested all over again, by you. You decide what works for you. This is perhaps the most important thing I have to say. There’s no gospel here, no orthodoxy, no dogma. Part of the struggle in learning to write is learning to ignore what isn’t useful to you and pay attention to what is. If that means arguing with me as you read this book, so be it.

This is a book full of starting points. Perhaps they’ll help you find enough clarity in your own mind and your own writing to discover what it means to write. I don’t mean “write the way I do” or “write the way they do.” I mean “write the way you do.”

Here’s a starting point. You may have no idea what way you write. I hope this book will help you find out.

Note: I use the word “piece” a lot. It means whatever you’re writing, whatever the genre, whatever the length.

Several Short Sentences About Writing
Here, in short, is what I want to tell you.
Know what each sentence says,
What it doesn’t say,
And what it implies.
Of these, the hardest is knowing what each sentence actually says.

At first, it will help to make short sentences,
Short enough to feel the variations in length.
Leave space between them for the things that words can’t really say.

Pay attention to rhythm, first and last.

Imagine it this way:
One by one, each sentence takes the stage.
It says the very thing it comes into existence to say.
Then it leaves the stage.
It doesn’t help the next one up or the previous one down.
It doesn’t wave to its friends in the audience
Or pause to be acknowledged or applauded.
It doesn’t talk about what it’s saying.
It simply says its piece and leaves the stage.

This isn’t the whole art of writing well.
It isn’t even most of it.
But it’s a place to begin, and to begin from again and again.
SEVERAL SHORT SENTENCES ABOUT WRITING

Short sentences aren't hard to make.
The difficulty is forcing yourself to keep them short.

There are innumerable ways to write badly.
The usual way is making sentences that don't say what
you think they do.
Which can the reader possibly believe? Your sentences
or you?

The only link between you and the reader is the sen-
tence you're making.
There's no sign of your intention apart from the sen-
tences themselves,
And every sentence has its own motives, its own
commitments,
Quite apart from yours.
It adheres to a set of rules—grammar, syntax, the his-
tory and customs of the language, a world of echoes
and allusions and social cues—that pay no heed to your
intentions,
If you don't heed those rules.

It's hard to pay attention to what your words are actu-
ally saying,
As opposed to what you mean to say or what you think
they're saying.
Knowing what you're trying to say is always important.
But knowing what you've actually said is crucial.
It's easier to tell what you're saying in a short sentence.

You've been taught to believe that short sentences are
childish,
Merely a first step toward writing longer sentences.
You'd like to think your education has carried you well
past short sentences.
But you've been delivered into a wilderness of false
assumptions and bad habits,
A desert of jargon and weak constructions, a land of
linguistic barbarism,
A place where it's nearly impossible to write with clari-
ty or directness,
Without clichés or meaningless phrases.
True, you can sound quite grown-up, quite authorita-
tive, in the manner of college professors and journalists
and experts in every field.
(You may be a college professor, a journalist, or
an expert in some field.)
How well do they write?
How much do you enjoy reading them?

You'll make long sentences again, but they'll be short
sentences at heart.
Sentences listening for the silence around them.
Listening for their own pulse.

Here's an experiment:
Pay attention to all the noise in your head as you go
about writing.
Much of it is what you already know about writing, which includes:
The voices of former teachers, usually uttering rules.
Rules like, "Don't begin sentences with 'and.'"
(It's okay. You can begin sentences with "and.")
The things everybody knows or assumes about writers and how they work,
Whether they're true or not.
The things you feel you must or mustn't do, without really knowing why.
The things that make you wonder, "Am I allowed to...?"
(Yes, you're allowed to. Not forever and always, but until you decide for yourself what works and what doesn't.)

Write these things down—the contents of the noise in your head as you write.
You can't revise or discard what you don't consciously recognize.

These assumptions and prohibitions and obligations are the imprint of your education and the culture you live in.
Distrust them.

What you don't know about writing is also a form of knowledge, though much harder to grasp.
Try to discern the shape of what you don't know and why you don't know it,
Whenever you get a glimpse of your ignorance.
Don't fear it or be embarrassed by it.
Acknowledge it.
What you don't know and why you don't know it are information too.

Let's make a simple list from the preceding lines:

1. What you've been taught.
2. What you assume is true because you've heard it repeated by others.
3. What you feel, no matter how subtle.
4. What you don't know.
5. What you learn from your own experience.

These are the ways we know nearly everything about the world around us.
Keep them in mind, especially when you begin to think about what to write and how to write about it.

Let's think about what you already know.

In your head, you'll probably find two models for writing.
One is the familiar model taught in high school and college—a matter of outlines and drafts and transitions and topic sentences and argument.
SEVERAL SHORT SENTENCES ABOUT WRITING

The other model is its antithesis—the way poets and novelists are often thought to write. Words used to describe this second model include “genius,” “inspiration,” “flow,” and “natural,” sometimes even “organic.”

Both models are useless. I should qualify that sentence. Both models are completely useless.

Loosely linked to these models are two assumptions:

1. Many people assume there’s a correlation between sentence length and the sophistication or complexity of an idea or thought—even intelligence generally. There isn’t.

2. Many people assume there’s a correlation between the reader’s experience while reading and the writer’s experience while writing—her state of mind, her ease or difficulty in putting words together. There isn’t.

You can say smart, interesting, complicated things using short sentences. How long is a good idea?

Does it become less good if it’s expressed in two sentences instead of one?

Learn to distrust words like “genius,” “inspiration,” “flow,” “natural,” and “organic” when you think about your work. (Don’t use them when you talk about it either.) They have nothing to do with writing. And everything to do with venerating writers.

Why short sentences? They’ll sound strange for a while until you can hear what they’re capable of. But they carry you back to a prose you can control. To a stage in your education where your diction—your vocabulary—was under control too. Short sentences make it easier to examine the properties of the sentence.

(Learn to diagram sentences. It’s easy.) They help eliminate transitions. They make ambiguity less likely and easier to detect.

There’s nothing wrong with well-made, strongly constructed, purposeful long sentences. But long sentences often tend to collapse or break down or become opaque or trip over their awkwardness. They’re pasted together with false syntax. And rely on words like “with” and “as” to lengthen the sentence.
SEVERAL SHORT SENTENCES ABOUT WRITING

They're short on verbs, weak in syntactic vigor, Full of floating, unattached phrases, often out of position. And worse—the end of the sentence commonly forgets its beginning, As if the sentence were a long, weary road to the wrong place.

Writing short sentences restores clarity, the directness of subject and verb. It forces you to discard the strong elements of long sentences, Like relative pronouns and subordinate clauses, And the weak ones as well: Prepositional chains, passive constructions, and dependent phrases.

Writing short sentences will help you write strong, balanced sentences of any length. Strong, lengthy sentences are really just strong, short sentences joined in various ways.

You don't have to write short sentences forever. Only until you find a compelling reason for a long sentence That's as clear and direct as a short sentence. You'll be tempted to say, “But short sentences sound so choppy.” Only a string of choppy sentences sounds choppy. Think about variation and rhythm,

The rhythm created by two or three sentences working together, Rhythm as sound and echo but also rhythm as placement. Learn to use the position of a sentence, the position of a word— First? last?—as an intensifier, an accent in itself. Can a short sentence sound like a harbinger? An adumbration? Can it sound like a reprise or a coda? Listen.

 equal

How short is short? That depends on the length of the sentences you're used to writing. One way to keep sentences short is to keep the space between them as empty as possible. I don't mean the space between the period at the end of one sentence and the first word of the next. I mean the space between the period and the subject of the next sentence. That space often gets filled with unnecessary words. Most sentences need no preamble—or postlude.

It's perfectly possible to make wretched short sentences. But it's hard to go on making them for long because they sound so wretched And because it's easy to fix them. Making them longer is not the way to fix them.