Most people know a good sentence when they read one, but *New York Times* columnist Stanley Fish says most of us don't really know how to write them ourselves. His new book, *How To Write A Sentence: And How To Read One,*is part ode, part how-to guide to the art of the well-constructed sentence.

Fish is something of a sentence connoisseur, and he says writing a fine sentence is a delicate process — but it's a process that can be learned. He laments that many educators approach teaching the craft the wrong way — by relying on rules rather than examples.

Analyzing great sentences "will tell you more about ... what you can possibly hope to imitate than a set of sterile rules that seem often impossibly abstract," Fish tells NPR's Neal Conan.

A good sentence may be easy to pick out, but learning to understand what makes it great, says Fish, will help a student become a stronger writer and a "better reader of sentences."

Just as a student of art must learn how to describe the merits of a painting, aspiring writers must be able to articulate what constitutes a well-crafted sentence.

"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," Fish explains.

Many writers think that individual words are more important than the sentences that contain them. Not so, says Fish, who titled one chapter in the book, "It's Not the Thought That Counts."

"If you just assemble a list of words," Fish says, "what you have is a list of words." A writer must think carefully about 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."

That's the crux of it, Fish says: "To understand that a sentence is a structure of logical relationships. When your sentences fall apart, they go back in the direction of being mere lists."

If you're starting to think that every sentence you've ever written has merely been a "list of words," don't be discouraged. Once "you master the form," Fish says, "then you can produce content endlessly."

But how to do it? *How To Write A Sentence* contains a number of exercises that Fish, a law professor, frequently assigns to his students. In one such exercise, he turns to Lewis Carroll's famous nonsense poem, "[Jabberwocky](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=171647)," to illustrate the importance of sentence structure. He asks students to substitute English words for the nonsense words, "which will then in combination make a certain kind of sense, even if the sense is silly," he explains.

The hard part of the exercise, says Fish, is asking the students to explain how they decided which word "would or would not go into the slot formerly occupied by the nonsense word."

The point of it all, says Fish, is that the structure of Carroll's stanza provides all the clues they need to design a sentence that makes sense. "They then begin to understand that form comes first, and content follows."

Excerpt: 'How To Write A Sentence'

by STANLEY FISH

**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 swiftness 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.

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