

**Book Review: The Writing Gods Will See You Now**

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**The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century!** Steven Pinker. Penguin Books, 2014. 359 pp. \$17 paperback.

Most writers fear the gnawing doubts that arise when trying to detangle one's gnarled thoughts into crisp lines of text. Is this the right word? Could that sentence be grammatically flawed? And does this paragraph even make sense?

Steven Pinker answers such questions, and more, in *The Sense of Style* — assuming you can muster the courage to get through the book without dissolving into a puddle of despair upon the realization of your many linguistic misconceptions. Young padawans, beware. Pinker cautions that the book is neither a reference manual nor “a remedial guide for badly educated students who have yet to master the mechanics of a sentence” (p. 7).

Rather, *The Sense of Style* is for writers who view their craft as a lifelong pursuit. On that path, Pinker is glad to be your unassuming (if occasionally sharp-tongued) sherpa.

The journey, like any, will require leaving some baggage behind. If you thought Strunk and White were infallible, Pinker dispels your illusions on page 2. Among other things, the famous writing guide misdefines phrases and participles. It also misidentifies passive voice, as in “There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.” Former students, whom I have failed to warn of these flaws, please accept my apologies!

I found some memorable statements in the prologue, which offers impassioned arguments for the importance of good style. Because Pinker loves language, he sets it free by defining it as “a wiki that pools the contributions of millions of writers and speakers” (p. 3). His appreciation comes with stern judgment for those who soil language by violating its internal logic. In the words of a tech executive cited by Pinker: “If it takes someone more than 20 years to notice how to properly use *it's*, then that's not a learning curve I am comfortable with” (p. 9).

An even more extended gaze at the savory beauty of language awaits you in chapter 1. Like chefs who love to eat, Pinker suggests, writers must be voracious readers. Many textbooks advise “show, don't tell,” but they usually skip over how much reading is necessary to learn this trick: “A writer, like a cinematographer, manipulates the viewer's perspective on an ongoing story, with the verbal equivalent of camera angles and quick cuts” (p. 21).

The next two chapters will also ring familiar to journalism educators. Write about tangible things, not abstractions (chapter 2). More importantly: Get out of your head (chapter 3). Assume your readers know little or nothing about your subject — even if you are

an expert writing for other experts. Being the Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, Pinker has no shame admitting he had to google an obscure term found in an academic paper from his field. The shame is totally on the writer.

But the rest of the advice will surprise you. If you are keen on sentence diagramming, chapter 4 is a how-to. Be warned that Pinker does not see diagramming as a writer's cure-all; one can be an expert diagrammer *and* a lousy writer. Rather, his goal is to demonstrate the graceful ways in which English syntax both “convey[s] who did what to whom” and “determines the sequence of early-to-late processing in the reader's mind” (p. 83).

Some folks might be horrified by Pinker's tradition-bending streak. For example: Forget about conjunctions. He calls them subordinators and coordinators and suggests they do not belong to a common category. Further, he argues that many alleged conjunctions are actually prepositions. If you would correct “Rose is smarter than him” to “Rose is smarter than he is,” you are wrong because in this case, Pinker argues, “than” is a preposition “that takes a clause as a complement” (p. 233). The same can apply to “before,” “after,” “like,” and “as.”

Masters of sentence-level writing can go for the black belt in chapter 5, which outlines the anatomy of crisp paragraphs. Given how few educators, students, and even professional writers follow the good old “one-idea-per-paragraph” rule, please make copies of this chapter and hand them to everyone in your building. Be aware that Pinker is not satisfied by simple rules. He expects a passage to have an “arc of coherence” (p. 139). It must be “held together by connectors that tie one proposition to the next” (p. 186) and be free of pathetic negations, such as Nixon's famous “I am not a crook” (p. 172).

For more fun jabs at pedantry, consider chapter 6. The gods of grammar won't strike you if you stop saying “Hi, honey, it's I!” (p. 222) when you get home. Also feel free to drop “sand among my toes” (p. 251) and “one fewer thing to worry about” (p. 254). Yes, some prepositions really do belong at the end of the sentence. And stop fuming over “hopefully” (p. 266).

*The Sense of Style* is thought-provoking and entertaining, though one needs a certain nerdiness to appreciate it. It is neither an easy nor a fast read. I would not assign this book in an undergraduate course but would highly recommend it to educators and scholars because good style can “enhance the spread of ideas” and “add to the beauty of the world” (p. 304). Your gnawing doubts about writing may never go away, but the journey is worth it.