

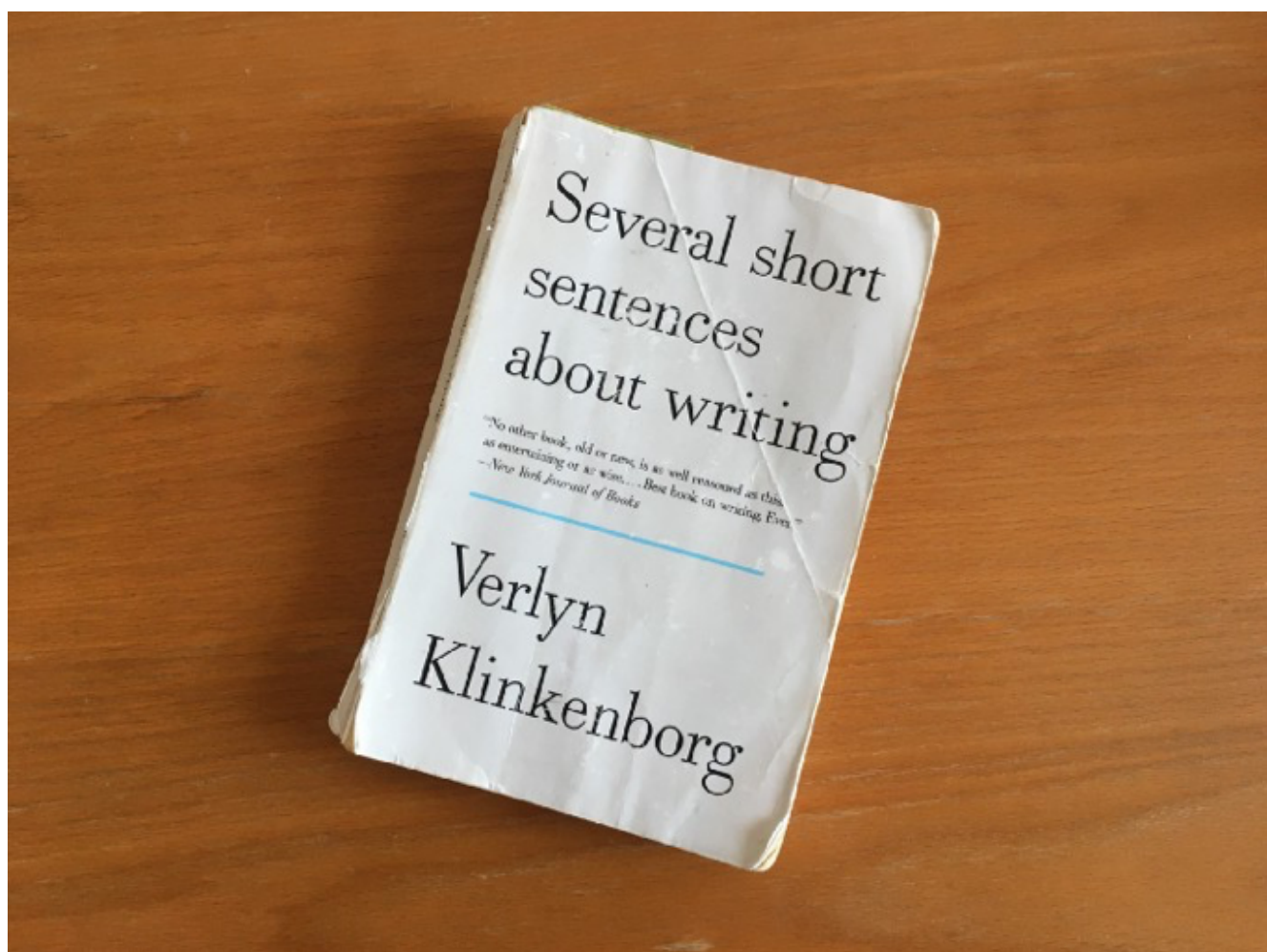
# The Only Book About Writing You'll Ever Need

I've read it 10 times

[Harris Sockel](#)

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## Writing



Six years ago, I sort of forgot how to write. I'd been publishing on the internet for a little over a year — that first, embarrassing, thrilling, bringing-a-laptop-to-parties year (I'm fun at parties) — and I'd run out of things to say.

What used to be casual, fast, easy breezy bloggy beautiful, had become... slightly boring. Slow. I'd have an idea, stare at my laptop for an hour, Command-Tab over to Gmail, and then walk four blocks to buy an overpriced panini.

So, I did what I always do: I walked into a bookstore feeling vaguely depressed, and left with something to read.

I know you just want the name of the book, so here you go: [\*Several Short Sentences About Writing\*](#) by Verlyn Klinkenborg. It's sort of a weird book, to be honest. It contains no paragraphs, just sentences stacked on top of each other in austere columns. (The whole thing sort of reads like a poem.) And yes, it's about the mechanics of putting words together, but it's also about other things: thinking, noticing, mapping the mess inside your head. Also, trusting yourself — something I have a difficult time doing.

There's a lot of writing advice out there: books, articles, quotes from dead people. Most of it isn't actually about writing. It's about scheduling (wake up at six!), preparing to write (take good notes!), having ambition (write every day... at six...), or envisioning what it will feel like to finally be done writing. Most people don't talk about the messy, often boring, sometimes excruciating and other times exhilarating process of staring at a computer and eating stale mixed nuts as you form thoughts into words.

In this book, you'll find no tips for outlining, brainstorming, scheduling, or pitching. Nothing on a thesis statement, a topic sentence, an introduction, or conclusion (spoiler: good ideas need no introduction, or conclusion!) Nothing on rituals or waiting for fictional characters to whisper in your ear. No fantasies about having a cabin in the woods with a big dog and a chunky sweater and a blank Moleskine. In fact, there's nothing in here about ~inspiration~ at all, nothing about waiting for the ideas to "just flow." (They never just flow. Sorry.)

My whole life is just going to be me rereading this book. It's sort of like I got really religious somewhere in my twenties, and this book is my Blogging Bible.

What you'll find instead are practical, even curmudgeonly, tips about grammar, rhythm, and making individual sentences. Short ones, mostly. For example:

- Keep sentences small. They're easier to work with that way.
- If something doesn't feel right, there's a problem with one or more of your sentences. Listen to that feeling. Try to pinpoint exactly which word or phrase is triggering it. Naming exactly what's wrong, in grammatical terminology or otherwise, will come later.
- Understanding a word's etymology will teach you how to use it. Words contain imprints of their histories.

- The subject of a sentence should appear as close to the beginning of a sentence as possible.
- You don't have to "grab" anyone with the first line of your story. Just write a simple sentence that says what you want it to say. It's harder than it sounds! And also very effective, if done well.
- "A writer's real work is the endless winnowing of sentences, the relentless exploration of possibilities, the effort, over and over again, to see in what you started out to say the possibility of saying something you didn't know you could."
- Noun phrases ("the realization that...") almost always sound clunky and dead. Try rewriting them as verb phrases ("realizing that...").
- Prepositions are difficult to get right, even for native English speakers.
- A reader's experience has nothing to do with a writer's. A sentence that reads "naturally" or "conversationally" to a reader may have been painstakingly assembled by a stressed-out writer who wishes they could sound more natural or conversational.

Toward the end of this book, the author diagnoses exactly what's wrong with about 50 isolated sentences written by his students. It's sort of ruthless, but fascinating. Most of these sentences sound *almost* okay, though you can feel something slightly amiss. Hearing Klinkenborg (what a name) pinpoint the specific problems

in each one — from an awkward metaphor to a misplaced pronoun — is therapeutic. It's sort of like Dr. Pimple Popper, but for dangling modifiers instead of giant cysts. I recommend reading the book just for this section.

Here's a theory: Some people (i.e. me) procrastinate and never end up publishing anything because we're fixated on the bigger Thing — the Novel, the Post, the Feature, the Investigative Whatever. We're distracted by our intentions and our aspirations. But unless you've somehow acquired a ghostwriter, none of those bigger Things are possible until you make sentences. It's tedious, but crucial. A wall is made of bricks. A story is made of sentences.

I still forget how to write sometimes, but whenever I do I know where to turn. This book calms me down. It reminds me that writing is slow and difficult because it's a technology humans invented to communicate with each other thousands of years ago — not something we do "naturally." We have to be taught to write. And we have to practice. (There's an interesting part in the middle where Klinkenborg debunks our mistaken assumption that writing is "natural." We think it should flow, easily and conversationally, thanks to a false analogy with talking. But talking and writing are *very* different, as anyone who's tried to read a podcast transcript will tell you.)

Most of all, this book encourages me to listen to what I actually think before trying to shape those thoughts into

words. It's also taught me a lot about rhythm, beginnings, endings, nerdy things like participles, and clarity. These lessons don't just apply to writing. They also apply to thinking and living.

I just finished reading it for, I think, the 10th time. (I know.) And right after I finished, I started back at page one. My whole life is just going to be me rereading this book. It's sort of like I got really religious somewhere in my twenties, and this book is my Blogging Bible. There I am, on a Saturday in the middle of a pandemic, sitting in my apartment practicing my new religion: figuring out what I'm trying to say.

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