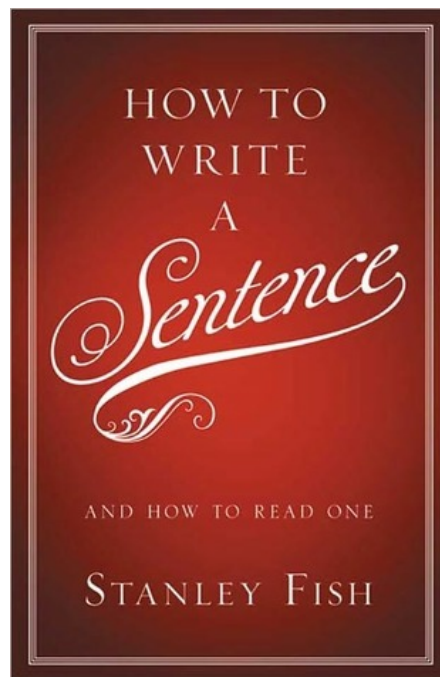




How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One

Stanley Fish

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How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One Stanley Fish

Some appreciate fine art; others appreciate fine wines. Stanley Fish appreciates fine sentences. *The New York Times* columnist and world-class professor has long been an aficionado of language: "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!'" Like a seasoned sportscaster, Fish marvels at the adeptness of finely crafted sentences and breaks them down into digestible morsels, giving readers an instant play-by-play.

In this entertaining and erudite gem, Fish offers both sentence craft and sentence pleasure, skills invaluable to any writer (or reader). His vibrant analysis takes us on a literary tour of great writers throughout history—from William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Henry James to Martin Luther King Jr., Antonin Scalia, and Elmore Leonard. Indeed, *How to Write a Sentence* is both a spirited love letter to the written word and a key to understanding how great writing works; it is a book that will stand the test of time.

How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One Details

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From Reader Review How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One for online ebook

Eric Anest says

I wanted to like this book but could not bring myself to do so. Perhaps it's pompous of me to say so, but Fish seems to be trying too hard to be clever and not hard enough to write simply, plainly, directly.

Mike says

Although an occasional worthwhile pearl sprang from the author's ponderously pedantic prose, by mid-exposition I found it so tedious to wade through the mire of words, words, words and pseudo-erudite opinions couched as fact, just to seek those few pearls, that I resorted to mere skimming of paragraphs rather than my usual preference of savoring the harmony of words put together to convey both meaning and feeling and whatever message the author intends; in fact, one could easily attain the gist of this author's thesis within the first half of the book, wherein lie the few jewels of value to the aspiring writer, whereas the second half of the book presents a tiresome succession of quotations from true literary classics - such as Milton, E.E. Cummings, and Joseph Conrad - each annoyingly parsed to death by author's personal interpretation of said sentences ad nauseam in a supercilious writing style mostly characterized by endless run-on sentences like this one; all of which made me ever so grateful to be reading his book - which I could put down whenever really bored by the relentless sophisms - and not to be suffering in his classroom, constrained to politely listen to him drone on until the rafters themselves began to weep.

Victoria Evangelina Belyavskaya says

~WRITE A SENTENCE - CREATE A WORLD~

"I belong to the tribe of sentence watchers," says Stanley Fish and I all but jump with joy for digging deeper into my love of reading. Where I was reading for story, where I was reading for characters, where I was reading to escape my world and find a new one: I am now to be trained to read for subtle joy of a string of words said smoothly or roughly: said in a way for me to stop reading and marvel at the music of sentence that I encountered in my journey through a book.

"the practice of analyzing and imitating sentences is also the practice of learning how to read them with an informed appreciation. Here's the formula: Sentence craft equals sentence comprehension equals sentence appreciation." In this finely crafted book, the author closely looks at three styles of sentences: the subordinating, the additive, the satiric, providing a way to break a sentence into a formula, following which one can easily create her own little masterpieces.

The content is not to be overlooked! Thus several chapters deal with taking a close look at many fine sentences, rolling them over and over in readers' mind for the best appreciation and understanding. The first and last sentences and the weight they carry got their own chapters, too, and made wish I noted first and last sentences of the many hundreds books I have read in my life as of today.

But of course, it is never too late to start! *"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.*" I have to say that Mr. Fish enjoys his sentences, indeed: I have swallowed this slim volume as if it was a ziplock full of homemade brownies: how lovely that a book that teaches to pay attention to the small but CORE units of speech and writing is excellent in every breath it takes!!!

Note that even though it is partly a "how-to" book, it reads more like a literary analysis, and a very refreshing, entertaining one: no need to really pause for exercises: you WANT to do them on the go; the principles stay in your head and you continue pay attention to sentences afterwords. "How to Read a Sentence" sharpened my interest in a book that I started, but dropped after first 20 pages or so: "The Tropic of Cancer" by Henry Miller. You see, I was reading for the story (none) and characters (highly disgusting to me) but the day I finished Mr. Fish's book, I picked up "The Tropic of Cancer" and breezed through 100+ pages in one sitting. The writing IS beautiful, and through it, even the characters became more tolerable...

Of course, all these wise sentences in the "How to Write a Sentence..." indulge thinking about life in general... as all the great writing and stories do... For example, this is one of my favorite quotes (and I took MANY from this book!):

"A famous sonnet by William Wordsworth begins, 'Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room; / And hermits are contented with their cells; / and students with their pensive citadels.'" Wordsworth's point is that what nuns, hermits, and students do is facilitated rather than hindered by the confines of the formal structures they inhabit; because those structures constrain freedom (they remove, says Wordsworth, "the weight of too much liberty"), they enable movements in a defined space. If the moves you can perform are prescribed and limited—if, for example, every line in your poem must have ten syllables and rhyme according to a predetermined pattern—each move can carry a precise significance. If, on the other hand, there are an infinite number of moves to perform, the significance of any one of them may be difficult to discern. (This is one of the insights of information theory.) That is why Wordsworth reports himself happy "to be bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground." It is a scanty plot because it is bounded, and because it is bounded, it can be the generator of boundless meanings."

Think about it... **"if there are an infinite number of moves to perform, the significance of any one of them may be difficult to discern"** Doesn't it make you wish to create a sort of a PLAN for the next 20 years, as they wise personal development people recommend to?...

I am absolutely thrilled to be "introduced" to Gertrude Stein, quoted abundantly through the book. She sounds like a very fine kind of writer, and a lady who appreciated sentences and had the most joy from "diagramming sentences" ever since she was a little girl: *"The great modern theorist of the additive, or coordinating, style is Gertrude Stein, who explains in an amazing sentence why she doesn't employ punctuation that carves reality into manageable units of completed and organized thought: When I first began writing I felt that writing should go on I still do feel that it should go on but when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had colons and semi-colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it what had periods to do with it what had small letters and capitals to do with it to do with writing going on which was at the time the most profound need I had in connection with writing. (Lectures in America, 1935)"*

Needless to say that this book added a good many titles on my "to read" list, and I am only happy for it: I love reading, and the only thing I love more is reading really good literature. Books like this are like compass in the vast sea of information: not only they point you in the most picturesque direction of travel but teach you to navigate on the stars in the sky and pebbles by the beaches you are to pass.

"The skill it takes to produce a sentence—the skill of linking events, actions, and objects in a strict logic—is also the skill of creating a world."

And proud I am to be one of the aspiring creators of the new worlds!

Victoria Evangelina Belyavskaya

Diane Yannick says

Oh good heavens above. This book was unbearable and this is from someone who loves to diagram sentences. Not since college have I forced myself to read such an esoteric, pompous, self righteous, condescending diatribe. I finished it wondering if it wouldn't have been more fun to read an instruction manual from Ikea.

Here's one excerpt, definitely typical of the whole freaking book (here he's talking about ONE sentence from Donne's Reflections):

"But God's literalism--the instantaneous conveyance of his intentions--is a feature of eternity where those to whom he speaks dwell within him; he is always, in a sense, speaking to himself; there is no distance to be bridged; no translation, in the root sense of being carried across space is necessary. Their perspective is limited by time and space, and because the discursive structures they employ reflect that limitation, the literalism they can achieve-- the literalism of the here and now-- is spectacularly inadequate to the literalism Donne celebrates as God's. That is why his sentence does not end with the proclamation of God's 'plain sense'; the real question is how do we get even a glimpse of that plainness when the instruments (of cognition, understanding, human language, sentences) at our disposal are actually obstructions, are in our way?"

Forrest says

I don't really read many books on writing. Some who have read my work might say it shows. Touche. I've just found very few books on writing that are actually engaging and interesting. Frankly, they bore me. Besides that, they actually keep me from writing.

So why did I pick this one up, you might ask. Well, like many good things in life, I picked this one up after hearing about it on NPR in this interview with the author, Stanley Fish. I've always appreciated a good sentence, but after listening to the interview, I felt compelled to pay closer attention to sentences, trying to find the sparkling gems amidst the long veins of narrative coal out there. But it was a long time before *How to Write a Sentence* percolated to the top of my "to read" pile because, well, I was busy writing sentences. To quote Buck Murdock from *Airplane II*, "Irony can be pretty ironic sometimes".

The work itself is divided up into ten chapters, some more instructive than others. It is a good book, theoretically speaking, but pedagogy is lacking. I would have expected more instructions but, as any good (or lazy) teacher is wont to do, Fish leaves it up to us to learn how to apply the theory herein. The author does an excellent job of taking a few representative sentences and breaking them down into what makes them so good. Yes, there are a few intellectual liberties taken, as one must expect with a work that leans more toward the academic than the popular. But, for the most part, Fish clearly identifies what makes these representative

sentences tick.

My biggest complaint was that chapter ten, on "Sentences That Are About Themselves (Aren't They All?)," should have begun on page 145 with the section on Joseph Conrad, rather than on page 133, which I felt was an indulgent exercise in intellectual olympics. That, and Fish's annoying proclivity for setting forth a theory, contradicting the theory, then telling the reader that he has contradicted himself . . . with no further explanation or closure. This one aspect gave me a strong dose of the rage I felt in graduate school when a teacher or another student would start off on an argumentative thread without ever finishing the argument. I suppose that this is meant to show off the speaker's/writer's intelligence and academic prowess. I am not impressed.

Nevertheless, this was a good book about writing, but not a great one. Definitely more worth your time than the vast majority of books on writing (many of which I've begun and tossed across the room). But wouldn't your time be better spent actually writing? Get to it!

Ellie says

If you find sentences exciting, then this book may be perfect for you. In fact, I found it fairly thrilling.

Fish (who wrote *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, another favorite of mine) takes apart sentences and puts them back together. In the first several chapters, he makes the argument for mastering form before attempting to fill it with content, like a pianist practicing scales. He discusses several sentence forms and provides exercises which I found interesting (I actually did the exercises; although, of course, one could always do more). Then, in the next few chapters, he turns around and admits that of course content is equally important and that in order to write a really powerful sentence, a person has to have something worth saying.

In the end, it is apparent that as with all writing, form and content are both critical to the success of a work—be it an entire novel, poem, or a single line and its contribution to the entire edifice.

Fish's discussion of how to construct a sentence was fascinating; his discussion of how to *read* a sentence was perhaps even more enlightening. Or maybe just more fun. He uses many wonderful sentences to examine what makes a sentence work and it was a pleasure to simply to read these sentences (a pleasure then enhanced by his discussion of what makes the sentence work so beautifully).

I could read an entire second book on this subject just for the pleasure of the sentences Fish chooses and his artful analysis of them.

I'm particularly interested in how a sentence is written (hence what attracted me to the book in the first place, this and Stein writing on how to write a sentence, also exciting) but I think anyone interested in writing, literature, or language will find this book a pleasure to read.

Kathrina says

If it weren't for goodreads, I could imagine that no one else on earth would find the near fetish-like pleasure I found in this tiny little book. I cherished this thing like a teenage boy oggles over a centerfold, privately, under the covers, with a yellow glow from my bedside lamp, deconstructing sentences like porn deconstructs

a woman's body. Fish (oh, I wish that were not your name) illustrates the finite forms of the limitless conveyor of all meaning -- the sentence, in a way that makes all great writing fresh and newly amazing. I have an urge to read the first sentence of every novel I own, a novel in itself, just to pick apart the form each author used to slice that first piece of cake. Of course Fish covers some old favorites, some Dickens, some Austen, but he also includes some amazing analysis of Martin Luther King Jr., Joseph Conrad, and Ford Maddox Ford. He even goes hip and takes a sentence from Tana French! I'm still not convinced that Gertrude Stein ever succeeded in her goal of keeping language ever in the present, each word with equal weight, but maybe that's because I don't believe that each word IS equal. I might even try a few of Fish's suggested exercises -- well, I did try in my head, but there is yet no evidence. I want to experiment on my son with one particular exercise: Write out Lewis Carroll's 'Twas Brillig, and ask him to replace the nonsense words with real ones. Will he be familiar enough with the work each word performs to know what kind of word fits where? That's part of what makes the poem so brilliant -- it uses language form to convey meaning, without loading the words themselves with any meaning at all. (Also, slithy toves are awesome.) This is required reading for every writer and every reader reading above the Grisham/Picoult threshold. I withhold one star 'cuz he started getting preachy and exalted at the end, too worked up, perhaps, in his "last sentence" chapter to make a calm landing on his own last sentence. But I forgive him. All the sentences in the middle were just great.

Roxanna Muller says

This gets 2 stars because I enjoyed the first portion of the book wherein we explore what makes a good sentence and what makes a great one. I found the exercises mentioned to be helpful and a few of the key points he made to be illuminating.

However as a whole it seemed to lack thoroughness. Fish makes a point of criticizing "The Elements of Style" for assuming the reader has a level of previous knowledge, then he proceeds to do so himself.

He even goes so far and to specify that he'll later expand on certain vocabulary words, "...coordination, subordination, allusion, compression, parallelism, alliteration (all to be explained later)..." then fails to do so. Those topics come up later, but other than "subordination" he doesn't EXPLAIN any of them. If it wasn't going to be a beginners book he shouldn't have taken time in the first and second chapters to imply it would be. It feels like he started out well meaning but at some point simply got tired of writing this book and phoned the rest of it in.

The second part of the book was also misrepresented. The title implies he'll teach us HOW TO READ A SENTENCE. He doesn't. He just spends a few chapters describing, verbosely, how HE interprets examples of skillful written sentences. He never once indicates a path we might follow to find similar conclusions while reading future texts independently.

I didn't finish the second portion of the book because it wasn't instructive in the slightest. It was just Fish masturbatorily self-congratulating his insightfulness.

Paul says

It's unclear who this book was written for. It's certainly not an introduction to sentence writing, nor is it, judging by its relatively advanced (well, "inchoate" is in there) diction, for kids. It's hardly meant for an

academic audience, though, as it routinely spurns "prescriptive" guides like Strunk and White (which certainly takes a beating). Fish also spurns the use of much established terminology and definitions contained in "the literature," opting instead to use his own terms, which for some reason he thinks will be more useful to a writer for their arbitrariness and distance from any sort of agreed-upon standard. In the end I decided the book must have been written for a much older audience, one familiar with books and reading and literature, and one with perhaps a slight germ of interest in the building blocks that make up those books, but with absolutely no desire to ever go about writing one themselves. This is certainly not a craft book (though nor is it really an entertaining, feel-good, celebratory celebration of (good) sentences). Where craft is concerned, Fish gives advice like "First, figure out what you want to do, then figure out how you're gonna do it." He presents certain "types" of sentences (again, the categorization is arbitrary and his own), then details how one can imitate that sort of sentence by essentially switching the verb and subject out with other verbs and nouns. (Fish also has a terrible habit of presenting a bunch of his own mimetic examples, then saying "These are my examples, and they aren't very good, but I'm sure I could do better." Do it then! This is your book! This isn't a spontaneous lecture!) Fish also has a knack for misinterpreting author after author after author—Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* opener is a particularly egregious example, but it happens too with Roth and with Hemingway, and with Orwell and, I'm sure, with plenty others. Anyway, I'd say for all intents and purposes this book is worthless, unless you've never seen a sentence before and want to write one that sounds almost exactly like a bunch of arbitrary examples. One gets the idea that the entire book is nothing more than a guy who likes sentences sort of mumbling to himself long-windedly about what he happens to think about them.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

A Collection of Thoughts Inspired by Paul Bryant's Review

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

As usual, one of Paul Bryant's reviews acted as a powerful stimulus to think through some issues that have been percolating in the back of my mind for a while.

Paul is my favourite polymath-emetician and literary agent provocateur as well as my avant guardian. Everything he writes is worth reading, contemplating, enjoying and following.

"A Confederacy of Dunces"

Jonathan Swift might be able to explain Fish's enemies (in quite a nice sentence, too):

"When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him."

A Podcast

You might be interested in this podcast from this morning (24 March, 2011):

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/sto...>

Some Thoughts about Stanley's Fishing Expedition

I think most debate has become so passionate and subjective that it shocks people when somebody pretends or appears to be dispassionate and objective.

Form and substance is an ancient distinction, but who (else but Fish) today would say that form was more important than substance?

I think this is a reason why Fish could be perceived to be threatening by both the left and the right.

He is actually quite radical, in that he looks at the root of all things.
But by emptying the vessel of content, he becomes an empty vessel or a neutral medium.
He is more interested in the form or the structure (the medium not the message).
By failing to be overtly political, or interventionist or discriminatory (in a positive sense), he might alienate the left liberal.
But this doesn't make him an advocate of the status quo.
He purports to be neutral about the right and alienates them as well.
For them, he has a dangerous ability to see through the internal logic of the content and undermine the gravity of the conservative message.
The threat to both sides of politics is that this method of debate, by being empty and neutral, could be filled with powerful content in the hands of someone else.
To the extent that he is a master of form and rhetoric, his skills could be waylaid by a new Hitler or Stalin, who could use his skills to achieve an "evil" goal.
This abuse of form to convey a content message would betray Fish's own world view, but values inevitably seek to fill an empty, value-free space.
He could therefore be the author of his own downfall like the French Structuralists.
His skills are manageable in his hands, but what fate will befall his acolytes?
Fish has the ability of an old-style lawyer to be dispassionate, to be objective, to know all of the arguments for both sides, to detect the weaknesses in presentation, to be surgical in his precision.
His delivery is concise and precise, elegant and effective.
But he doesn't seek to use these skills as an adversary on behalf of one side versus another.
If he wanted to be a judge, he could probably be a very fair judge.
But he probably wouldn't want to be a judge, because that would force him to make assessments of the content, whereas his passion is for the form.
This means he sits outside the system, and he won't play the game that everybody else plays and believes in and takes so seriously.
He plays his own game, and the main game feels threatened by his lack of interest.
Their fear is that, if his ideas catch on, then other people will lose faith in the main game.
What he has done to people might be to undermine the content of their arrogant self-belief.
He is on the outside of the parade pointing out that the emperor is wearing no clothes.

Paul Links to "The King's New Clothes"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W747Fd...>

Gee, that brings back memories and how apt.
It must be over 30 years since I've heard that song, but what a song!

*"And everybody was cheering like mad,
except one little boy. You see, he hadn't heard about
the magic suit and didn't know what he was supposed to see."*

And from the original:

"But among the crowds a little child suddenly gasped out, "But he hasn't got anything on." And the people began to whisper to one another what the child had said. "He hasn't got anything on." "There's a little child saying he hasn't got anything on." Till everyone was saying, "But he hasn't got anything on." The Emperor himself had the uncomfortable feeling that what they were whispering was only too true. "But I will have to go through with the procession," he said to himself.

"So he drew himself up and walked boldly on holding his head higher than before, and the courtiers held on to the train that wasn't there at all."

So if my modest hypothesis is right, Stanley is a lawyer who doesn't want to be a courtier holding the train that isn't there.

And this from Wiki:

Andersen's decision to change the ending may have occurred after he read the manuscript tale to a child, or had its source in a childhood incident similar to that in the tale.

In 1872, he recalled standing in a crowd with his mother waiting to see King Frederick VI.

When the king made his appearance, Andersen cried out, "Oh, he's nothing more than a human being!"

His mother tried to silence him by crying, "Have you gone mad, child?"

Whatever the reason, Andersen thought the change would prove more satirical.

Formalist or Non-Conformist or both?

As paradoxical as it might seem, I wonder whether Fish is a non-conformalist.

Paul Links to Extracts from Fish's Critics

Paul wrote: "I finally checked Wiki and it turns out he's often in hot water

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_..."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_...

I was going to say that this negative criticism of Fish reminded me a lot of the reaction to FR Leavis and TS Eliot and the New Criticism in the 40's and 50's:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Crit...

My own political and literary views are really influenced by the New York Intellectuals mentioned in the article:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_...

And they absolutely hated the New Criticism.

They might be regarded as old fashioned now (some of them were part of the Old Left), but I still love reading their prose.

The amazing thing about Fish is how vehement and personal the criticism of him is, as if he is explicitly a threat to everybody, a clear and present danger.

They're all furiously dialling 911 (like he's some "campus killer" on the loose amongst our children).

If he was French, he would probably just be treated as an interesting, but eccentric, shit-stirrer.

Instead, they treat him like the Devil incarnate.

Some of his critics are people who I would otherwise respect (Eagleton).

Who would want to be a sophist or sophisticated?

I find Fish fascinating to listen to, because he adds to how I feel about things.

He's quite entertaining and invigorating and rejuvenating in a dry way (like a 21st century "Dead Poets Society").

His critics approach him as if their views are mutually exclusive, whereas I see them as complementary (if not complimentary).

But to pursue my analogies, he is a living technique, a methodology, a rifle, a cannon, and people are judging him for what could be done if his cannon got into the hands of others (like the NRA might say, you could argue that Fish's rifle or cannon isn't intrinsically bad, it's only bad in the hands of the wrong person).

You want to ask: isn't the worst thing that could happen that we could end up with a "loose canon" (sorry).

However, the thing is that he isn't loose in his methodology at all, he is actually incredibly rigid and

disciplined and unforgiving (the lawyer in him).

I think that a lot of theorists envy him, because he actually came close to "inventing" something new, whereas they just play around with literature's "rich tapestry" using old techniques.

People will probably remember him long after they have forgotten his critics.

Which reminds me that I should be reading "A Confederacy of Dunces".

Stefanie says

I don't know anything much about Stanley Fish other than that I have heard and seen his name listed among critics of a certain age. When I first started reading the book I was pretty open to what he had to say since I had no preconceived notions of what to expect. I soon found myself grinding my teeth. Then I found out that besides a literary critic he is also a legal scholar and suddenly he made a bit more sense.

The first part of the book is written like a lawyer wrote it. He has a whole neat and tidy argument laid out and he moves through it point by point. He says early on that he is a sentence watcher, not a sentence writer, yet that doesn't stop him from putting forth his theories on the best way to learn how to write good sentences.

Fish is of the mind that form comes before content. Until you understand the forms a sentence can take and how a sentence works, one shouldn't bother worrying about content. For Fish a sentence is two things:

1. organization of items in the world
2. a structure of logical relationships

Blessedly he is not a grammar Nazi. He insists you can understand what a sentence does without knowing the parts of speech and all that. But while you don't need to know the parts of speech, you do need to know the variety of ways in which a sentence can be built and he is here to show us how.

The best way of course is to imitate well-written sentences. Take, for instance, the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. Rip it apart to see what it is doing, then use its form to write your own sentence. But don't worry about content, only worry about the form. The sentence structure is a template and if you understand the template, then you can just fill in the blanks with content later.

When he says: "This, then, is my theology: *You shall tie yourself to forms and the forms shall set you free.*" And then goes on to say it's like the Karate Kid being trained to fight by waxing the car and painting the fence. Well, I just about decided I had read far enough. I mean, *Karate Kid* is a movie. You can't seriously tell me that "wax on, wax off" is a good way to learn karate. He does have a point in that a good writer does need to know how a sentence works. But I am in the Vonnegut camp in *Like Shaking Hands with God* when he says a writer needs to have passion and something to say before he or she tries to write anything. Then you start working to shape sentences to fit the content.

So I'm thinking I'm not going to finish the book but for some reason I keep reading. I'm glad I did because when Fish starts reading sentences, taking them apart and putting them back together again, he is really good. His analysis of what makes Virginia Woolf's sentences so magical is marvelous. And his analysis of what Gertrude Stein does with her sentences is the best I have ever read. Happily, the middle section of the book is mostly Fish reading sentences and showing us why the ones he has chosen are so good. And it is fun to read.

Then the bubble is broken, we wind down to the end and he is back to his old self, but a little softer than in the beginning. Or maybe I was a little softer having so enjoyed the middle section of the book. Does the

middle part make up for the beginning and end? Not entirely but it does make the book well worth reading. And if your personal approach to writing meshes with Fish's then the entire book will likely be a pleasure. If you, like me, are not a writer, or have a writing philosophy opposed to Fish's, the middle section of the book still makes it worthwhile.

Matt Bianco says

"Some appreciate fine art; others appreciate fine wines. Stanley Fish appreciates fine sentences."

I never thought I would read a book entitled *How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One*; even less did I think I would enjoy one. Yet, here I am and I can do no other.

Stanley Fish writes a book in which he introduces the sentence as a work of art. Not only does he succeed in convincing you that it is art, but he then succeeds at teaching you how to be a connoisseur of that art. His stated goal for the book is "to bring you into the little worlds made cunningly by as many writers as I can cram into a short book." He promises "to give you both sentence pleasure and sentence craft, the ability to appreciate a good sentence and the ability to fashion one." He succeeds.

He begins with form. He isn't concerned with the categories of words: nouns, verbs, adjectives, predicates, etc. Not because they aren't important--they are, he says--but because his focus is upon the form those words take when put together into sentences. That doesn't mean those categories can be ignored, rather that they are not the end for sentence craft. He then defines what a sentence is, less with a dictionary definition--his is "a sentence is an organization of items in the world, a structure of logical relationships"--and more with examples of finely crafted sentences.

From there, he moves into developing both sentence pleasure and sentence craft, simultaneously. The first task is to establish one in the sentence craft--which, for him, means mastering the form first. Fish assigns an exercise in which one takes a very short sentence "John hit the ball," and expands it to a 15-word sentence, a 30-word sentence, and finally a 100-word sentence. This is done without every losing the original meaning of the sentence "John hit the ball."

In the next exercise, again meant to focus on form rather than content, he takes the first stanza of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and asks the reader to replace the nonsense words with good English words. One could take any poem (or have someone else do it for you) and replace random words with nonsense words. You, then, would put good English words back into the poem, focusing on the fact that only certain types of words can go into any one of the slots. The goal is to start understanding and articulating why an adverb has to go here, and a noun there. Substituting, Fish says, is the easy part, explaining how you knew to do it the harder part.

All the while working through these exercises, Fish is introducing the reader to fine sentences. But, even as he introduces these fine sentences, he slowly and courteously explains what makes them fine. He points out the word order, the structure, certain words that hinge the thoughts together, or ways in which the author is able to slow down a fast-moving sentence at just the right moment, or speed up a slow-moving sentence.

He also explains how some sentences fall into categories; the first he calls the subordinating style (Andrew Kern has referred to it as the rational sentence.) He then gives examples of subordinating sentences, with exercises to mimic them and learn to write them. Then he introduces the additive style (what Andrew Kern refers to as organic writing.) Again, exercises are provided so that the reader can mimic and write additive sentences. Finally, he introduces the satiric sentence. The satiric sentence is important because it teaches the

writer to write a sentence that "doesn't quite come out and say what it is saying, and what it is saying is often devastating." It teaches the writer to have control over his writing, in that "it is a mode of writing characterized by great control of tone over the length of sentences, paragraphs, and sometimes entire volumes." Satiric sentences are, of course, coupled with exercises and examples to mimic.

After introducing the reader to (and making him comfortable with) the categories of sentences, he goes over a two sentence types that don't really qualify as categories: first sentences and last sentences. These sentences are special because they have specific goals that have to be achieved if they are to do their job well. Breaking this down in and of itself helps the reader (and potential writer) to understand them better and to be able to produce them himself.

How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One is an important book, not just for readers and writers, but for parents and children. It helps you to appreciate sentences, of course, but more importantly helps you to communicate through them. In a world of tweets and LOL's, this is a quickly dying artform--but, an art it is. And so what better description can I give of this book than that it is--as a good friend said--"the left-brained person's Strunk & White."

rose says

What a ramble. In an unlikely plot twist this book even meanders itself into an existential crisis: "If in the end everything we say or do will fade into insignificance in the vast panorama of eternity, why do anything? Why write sentences?"

Don't come here for a clean 'How to... 101'. Do stay because Fish just excitedly found his old shoebox collection of nifty sentences, scribbled on the back of various grocery lists. However, it's late, all his lit buddies are asleep and, damn it, he really wants to talk about puns (aaand sold!) and layers of meaning (already sold) with someone. At times he even remembers the title of his book and pivots back from semantics, theology, or whatever tangent he's on to drop a technicality (but, hey, "don't worry about the term; you don't have to learn it, but it might be useful at a cocktail party").

This may sound like a less-than-pleased review but I promise you it isn't. If rambles and sentences are your thing, this is a treat.

Paul Bryant says

PB (in rabble-rousing mode) : Gimme a GH as in "enough"!

Crowd of drunken Goodreaders : "GH!"

PB : Gimme an O like in "women"!

Crowd: O!

PB : Gimme a TI like in "station"!

Crowd : TI!!

PB : What's that spell?

Crowd : GHOTI! GHOTI!!

PB : Yeah, but what does it sound like?

Crowd : FISH! FISH! FISH!

One of the blurbs on the back of this slender volume says :

Whether people like Stanley Fish or not they tend to find him fascinating.

Translation:

I know several people who deliberately bought clothes shop mannekins so they could take them home and label them STANLEY FISH and after a few daiquiris regularly stab them with breadknives yelling DIE FISH DIE

I mean to say, that's a strange quote to use as a blurb, don't you think?

I have myself many favourite sentences. Being some might say overfond of the unclassical music of our time, I choose to choose four delightful examples from three writers writing about that major minor art form :

1) A great pop song springs out of nowhere, sounds like other things but mostly resembles itself, and contains a series of musical and lyrical hooks so irresistible, so packed with slang, lust and alien rhythm, they have a comedic element.

2) Pop songs are the invention of a new kind of language, either sonically or grammatically, and a combination of sly gimmickry, bulging confidence and cultish insider knowledge gives them the seductive impact of novelty.

3) This is rock and roll made simply, bursting with baroque and brash ideas, keening and self-centered, vigorously and impudently shedding echoes of bland Doo Wop, monochromatic skiffing, mild crooning, bleached-out Berryisms, or Phil Spector inhuman lushness.

4) I like old time delta pre-Cambrian blues, I like Mountain Folk home-make instrumentals backing singalongs for the Innsmouth secret cabals of south sea islander Dagon communions in the 4 Square Pentecostal, I like those after-Bingo black-mass choirs that echo as far as the creaking bridge and back, and I especially like the guy with no teeth ignoring all the Finns and Fish-Faces and wailing and stamping and just keeps on and playing his alien American guitar on the glider out front of the Odd Fellows hall.

And one from the world of independent movies:

5) I've wept on every birthday I ever had because life is huge and fleeting and I hate certain people and certain shoes and I feel that life is terribly unfair and sometimes beautiful and wonderful and extraordinary and also numbing and horrifying and insurmountable and I hate myself a lot of the time but the rest of the time I adore myself.

So, I think we're actually very rich in great sentences, you don't have to go scurrying off to Johnny Milton or

Lawrence Sterne, they're very nearly a dime a dozen. Fish makes what could be a charming logflume through the Dollywood of literary style into a smart 20 kilometer hike through the forest of corrugated brows, too much like hard work for this dilettante. And anyway, where was Philip Roth, whose sentences can unhook bras from a range of 200 yards – scientifically proven at Harvard, I believe – or Donny DeLillo, whose enemies are often strangled to death by his patented brand of boa constricting sentences? Where was Henry James, and James Joyce? Stanley discusses opening lines of novels and doesn't include this one from JJ :

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo .

Or what about this one he missed also by JJ :

In Rodot's Yvonne and Madeleine newmake their tumbled beauties, shattering with gold teeth chaussons of pastry, their mouths yellowed with the pus of flan Breton.

Now that's more like it.

So, this book could have been like WAY better, but I'm not turning into a Fish-stabber and I don't know why people appear to not love Mr Fish.

QUOTES BY

- 1-2 by Paul Morley. Guardian
3. Michael Baker, Perfect Sound Forever
4. Harald Sundt, email to the Beefheart discussion group
5. by Jennifer Westfeldt and Heather Juergensen from Kissing Jessica Stein,

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

I dreamed I read this book in my Maidenform bra, and what a nightmare it was.
