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Bookshelf: Several short sentences about writing by Verlyn Klinkenberg

By [Michelle Nijhuis](#) on September 30, 2013 | [1 Response](#)

Several short sentences about writing

Verlyn Klinkenberg

“The writer’s job isn’t accepting sentences,” writes [Verlyn Klinkenberg](#).

“The job is making them, word by word.”

To emphasize the importance of sentences, Klinkenberg hits a hard return after each of his.

Like this.

Which is annoying at first, but the rhythm soon begins to soothe the ear, like that of an epic poem especially for writers.

Each sentence should express a thought precisely, with rhythm, clarity, and balance, writes Klinkenberg.

Sentences that come to mind too quickly or easily – Klinkenberg calls them “volunteers” – are likely to be cliched or dull.

That’s why Klinkenberg distrusts “flow.”

Writers in flow, he says, are just collecting volunteer sentences.

The reader, not the writer, should be in flow.

[Klinkenberg](#) suggests that writers abandon outlines, and instead trust the order of their thoughts.

From thoughts will come sentences.

In fact, thoughts and sentences should be the same thing.

Or nearly the same thing.

And if a writer learns to write while thinking, while observing and understanding how and why each sentence is built, he or she can compose and revise at the same time.

Or nearly the same time.

“With practice, this will become a more efficient and more creative way to write, a way of discovering what you didn’t know you could say,” writes Klinkenberg.

I believe him, and I plan to follow his advice.

But not while on deadline.

Not yet, anyway.

(P.S. Klinkenberg appends a brilliantly selected set of passages written by great literary journalists.

And some tart grammatical advice.

Both are nearly as useful as the main section of the book.)

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Michelle Nijhuis

Michelle Nijhuis' award-winning reporting on science and the environment appears in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and many other publications. A longtime contributing editor of *High Country News*, ... [MORE »](#)

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[Jill U Adams](#) September 30, 2013 at 12:02 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

I met Klinkenberg at a nature writing conference at Paul Smith’s College in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York. I was inclined to like him as he sat with the participants rather than shield himself by sticking with the other invited speakers. Plus, he told great stories about behind the scenes decision-making at the New York Times.

His session came on one of the last days. We sat in a circle, maybe twenty of us, and he talked about writing one sentence at a time. Write one sentence. Think about all the directions in which it may lead. Then and only then, write the next sentence. Rinse, repeat.

This surprised me completely, as I am a big fan of filler sentences when I’m stuck. I’ve been puzzling about this for years. When I saw his book, I knew I was ready for more.

And the book gave me so much more: Klinkenberg assured me to trust myself, to notice what I notice, to write about such things with authority. “The most subversive thing you can do is to write clearly and directly, asserting the facts as you understand them, your perceptions as you’ve gathered them.”

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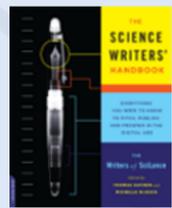
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