Some Hints on Non-Fiction Writing

Perhaps the most important thing you can take away from your college education is an enhanced ability to write. In a literate society such as our own, success at school and at work (and sometimes even at home) is highly dependent on how well you communicate your ideas and feelings in writing to other people. For example, I know that my ability to write effectively has allowed me: to earn an “A” in a class for which I only had a “B”-level understanding of the material, simply because the instructor could easily read my essays; to receive a string of bonuses at work for handling some extra writing-related duties that I could perform better than my boss; and to get a full refund of my security deposit from my slimy landlord by sending him a short, well-worded letter which threatened to take him to court and explained why I believed I would win. As they say, the pen is mightier than the sword.

Writing is not an innate talent; good writers are not simply “born” into existence. Instead, writing is better described as a craft—part art, part science, and like most things, a skill which can be acquired and improved only through practice. Unlike tying your shoe, however, writing is not something you learn once in life, quickly master, and never think about again. Simply put, writing is hard work. I thus offer the following general suggestions to help you improve your writing.

Take Your Writing Seriously. For most purposes, your ideas aren’t worth the gray matter containing them unless you can communicate them successfully. Give your ideas and yourself the attention they deserve by putting forth a lot of effort in presenting them. For better or worse, how you state something is often more important than what you are actually stating.

Be Patient and Persistent. Patience and persistence are indeed a writer’s virtues. Don’t expect to become a master writer overnight. Like any creative task, writing typically involves frustration, even for the most experienced and skillful of writers. And good writing always involves rewriting; there is no such thing as a perfect first draft.

Be Conscious of the Reader. Remember, writing is an act of communication. You are trying to state your ideas in a manner that most effectively implants them in your readers’ minds. Don’t expect your readers to fill in logical gaps in your argument, unless you are certain they can easily bridge those gaps. It is generally better to say too much than to say not enough, although you don’t want to insult your readers’ intelligence either.

Proofread, Proofread, Proofread. Part of taking your writing and your reading seriously is carefully proofreading what you write. Mistakes in grammar and spelling are a sign of laziness and incompetence, and most readers have little patience for writing that persistently breaks the rules and conventions of written language. Also,
proofread for clarity—is your writing easy to follow? There is no better test for this than to read your writing out loud, even if just to yourself.

**Say Something and Signpost.** Have a point to make or a story to tell, so that the reader has some reason for reading what you have written. Also, make the reader’s life easier by “signposting” the path of your argument; in other words, have a clear conception of why you are placing your paragraphs and sentences where you are placing them, and use transition words and phrases to let the readers follow along with relative ease.

**Use Paragraphs Effectively.** One of the easiest and subtlest ways to “signpost” the twists and turns of your prose is to use paragraphs. To a certain extent, paragraphs are used for aesthetic purposes—they break up the visual monotony of a long section of text. Much more importantly, though, paragraphs signal to your reader when you are moving on to a new point in your argument. A new paragraph tells the reader that, “I was talking about X, now I’m going to talk about Y.” Don’t confuse the reader by discussing a number of unrelated ideas in the same paragraph, or by unnecessarily splitting a set of closely related ideas into separate paragraphs.

**Don’t Try Too Hard.** As writer and teacher William Zinsser notes, “Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.” The quality of writing is not based on a simple measure of the density of fancy-sounding words, complex sentences, and creative metaphors. Instead, good writing is that which precisely and efficiently conveys its intended meaning to the reader—in other words, good writing is easy to read.

**Use a Dictionary.** One of the problems with using “fancy” words is that they are often misused, implying meanings not intended by the author. This is especially true if you haphazardly snatch strong-sounding words out of a thesaurus without checking their precise meaning in a dictionary. For example, do you really want to write that the building of the dam in Yosemite National Park’s Hetch Hetchy Valley “annihilated” the interests of nature preservationists? After all, were the interests of nature preservationists really “made null and void”, “destroyed completely,” and “blotted out of existence” by the dam in Hetch Hetchy, as a dictionary might translate your verb? You should feel free to use words that express strong emotion and make your writing less mundane, as long as you are aware of the meanings these words carry. As your language becomes more symbolic and metaphorical—as it strays away from precise definitions—you lose control as a writer over what meanings your readers will derive from your prose (what exactly do you mean by the “rape” of nature?). This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it is a writing strategy that you should use advisedly.

**Read as a Writer.** Like any skillful activity, good writing requires practice. But you can also improve your writing simply by thinking about writing when you read. For example, if you are reading something that you really enjoy, something that you effortlessly follow along with interest, step back and examine it as a writer. Ask yourself, what is it about this piece of writing—its structure, its style—that allows me to
connect so easily with the author? How does s/he catch and hold my attention? How can I emulate this in my own writing? Of course, you can ask opposite questions for pieces of writing that you find absolutely dismal.

**References.** The following sources can be very helpful to your efforts at becoming a skillful writer:

- William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (90 pages of wonderful advice and information on style, grammar, and usage—a classic in the field and perhaps the best six bucks you’ll ever spend)

- Frederick Crews, *The Random House Handbook* (or similar college handbook—a more expensive, textbook-length guide to style, grammar, and usage)

- William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (275 pages of advice from a noted nonfiction writer and teacher)