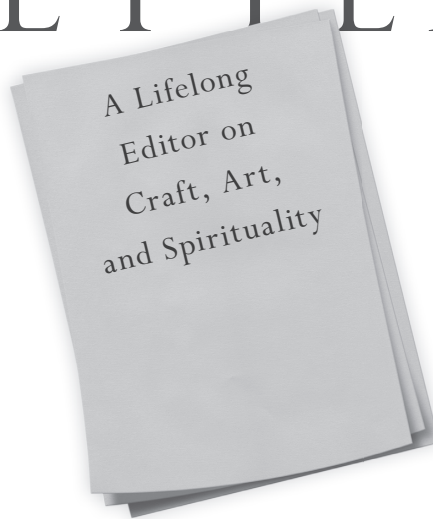


ONLINE RESOURCES

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WRITE BETTER



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Appendix F

BREVITY IS THE SOUL OF BLOGGING

I HAVE BLOGGED AT ANDYUNEDITED.COM FOR OVER A DOZEN YEARS and found it to be beneficial in three key ways. First, it is a great discipline for improving my writing skills. If every week or two I have to create an engaging title along with appealing and uncluttered prose, that is going to make all my writing better. Even the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz didn't just play Tchaikovsky, Chopin, and Liszt. He practiced the scales—every day, well into his eighties.

Second, blogging helps prevent writer's block. By writing regularly, I find that I am less likely to have times when my mind is blank. I train my mind (through practice) to be in the habit of looking for and identifying things I can write about. It's not a total solution to writer's block, but it helps.

Third, as noted in appendix A in *Write Better*, which discusses platform, blogging is a way to begin building and retaining an audience.

Blogging is a genre that follows certain precepts that can be different from some types of writing. Here are a few key guidelines.

Have a point of view. Readers want to know what you think, or they wouldn't read it. So don't be shy. Develop a style and persona that stands out. In my blog I often deliberately cultivate the persona of the curmudgeonly editor. (Okay, maybe that comes pretty naturally to me.) It gives an opportunity to be both opinionated and humorous. I don't make it too extreme or permeate the whole of each blog post with that style. I don't even put that in every blog post. That would be too much. But I try to do it enough to make it entertaining.

Write with passion. Write about what you care about, and let that show naturally. Don't manufacture it. Pay attention to what topics or events get your juices flowing. One caution: generally I advise against an angry tone or persona. Sometimes that is called for, but it can wear on readers and not be good for you spiritually. Be constructive; don't merely criticize. Be passionate, but be compassionate too.

Make headlines snappy. With so much competition for the attention of readers, your headline needs to stand out. Chapter ten of *Write Better* offers lots of ideas on how to make a good title. You have more room for creativity in blog post titles than in book titles. Here are a few from my blog:

- *Heads Will Scroll* (a cliché with a twist)
- *The Key Question I Ask Authors* (a baited hook)
- *I Love to Fire People* (a startling confession)
- *Are Book Lovers Killing Books?* (a controversial question)
- *Murphy Meets St. Anthony* (a curious connection)

The key is to have a title that will prompt people to read the first line. So . . .

Start with a knockout first sentence. We have a variety of ways to do this, as noted in chapter one of *Write Better*. To some extent, the guidelines that work for a grabbing article title also apply to first sentences.

Be brief. I think most blog posts are way too long—one thousand or two thousand words or more. Time is finite and people are busy. You are not just competing with other forms of reading but with TV shows, movies, video games, podcasts, sporting events, and Sunday afternoon naps. I aim for 300 words, though I often slip to 400 or 500. If it is any more than that, I cut or I find a way to split it into two or three posts. Academic blogging is probably an exception, but even there I think 1,000 words should be plenty. In any case, keeping your word count down is a great writing discipline that can help you learn to write in a spare, uncluttered way.

Make your post easy to scan. Use short paragraphs, insert bullet points, and include subheads as appropriate so readers can get a quick grasp of what you have to offer.

Be visual. It's a cliché to say we live in a visual age, but it is still true. I try to include at least one image in every blog post: a book cover or a photo of something I discuss. The photo can be of the actual topic or representational. In one post I used an example of a bat and baseball, so I took a picture of ones I had. In another I used the metaphor of being colorblind and included two versions of a picture I'd taken of a colorful flowerbed—one in color and one in black and white. Remember you usually can't just pull any image off the web without permission from the owner.¹ But several websites offer free images without prior permission (though you should still give a photo credit).

Have fun. Be creative. Every so often try something different. Write a post from the perspective of some iconic figure, real or imagined, past or present—Santa Claus, James Bond, Jonah, Elvis Presley’s dog. Try writing a post that is as alliterative as possible. Try satire. Be humorous in the style of Tina Fey or Stephen Colbert. Write a post in haiku or sonnet form. These are good writing exercises, and your readers may enjoy an occasional break from the routine.

Edit your work. Proofreading your own writing is hard because we think we know what we’ve written and tend to go too fast, missing things like *now* when it should be *not* (*not* a small difference), which won’t show up as errors with a spell checker. Try reading it aloud before it goes live. That will help slow you down so you can notice errors. Or if you have some good friends who love being grammar hounds, ask them to help.

Appendix G

THE DICTIONARY AND GOOGLE HITS ARE DEAD

TWO BLACK BEASTS HIDING UNDER THE DESK threaten to devour good nonfiction writing while we are asleep in our chairs. They are two of the most common and deadliest options writers or speakers can use. Good rewriting means slaying these goblins.

PLEASE DON'T USE THE DICTIONARY

The first ogre to dispatch is quoting a dictionary definition. In discussing the enrollment lottery for a local school, a writer for the *Tulsa World* made the point that such processes offer no guarantees for parents or students. “You won’t find ‘promise’ in the definition of ‘lottery,’ which Merriam-Webster defines as ‘an event or affair whose outcome is or seems to be determined by chance.’”¹ Please, reminding readers that a lottery makes no guarantees should be enough.

Even seasoned academics writing in respected journals are snared by this trap. One otherwise admirable article opens with these uninspiring words: “Webster’s defines truth as ‘the property (as of a statement) of being in accord with fact or reality.’”²

Why is dictionary quoting such a problem?

It’s lazy. Instead of making a true effort to help our readers understand the content in our own words in a way that clearly communicates to them in their context, we take the easy option—look up a word in a dictionary.

It tells but doesn’t show. Skilled communicators know that if you want to express your ideas powerfully, telling is rarely sufficient. Showing with a story or an illustration or a metaphor captures emotion and imagination. A dry dictionary definition is deadly.

It seems authoritative, but it’s not. Somehow people think Webster is a kind of oracle. Certainly a lot of excellent scholarship goes into making dictionaries. But if you want a real expert to support what you have to say about

statistics, you probably shouldn't quote a lexicographer. Quote a statistician. And if a professor doesn't have enough authority to define truth, perhaps we should look elsewhere.

It insults your audience. Do you really think your readers or listeners don't know the meaning of basic words? Sometimes specialized vocabulary needs to be defined. So when you talk about supralapsarianism, please explain. Otherwise, move on.

As with every rule, we have exceptions. Here's one: quote the dictionary when disagreeing with a dictionary definition. Doing so shows we are thinking about issues in fresh ways—that we are not locked into static patterns of thought.

In *My Life on the Road*, Gloria Steinem highlights how sexist ideas can be found even in something as supposedly objective as a dictionary. She writes, “Even the dictionary defines adventurer as ‘a person who has, enjoys, or seeks adventures,’ but adventuress is ‘a woman who uses unscrupulous means in order to gain wealth or social position.’”³

Granted, dictionaries often seek to describe what words mean in common usage, and it is true that this has been a common, albeit sexist, meaning for the word. In a sense, then, we shouldn't blame the messenger. Nonetheless, Steinem makes her point effectively by offering a keen observation that most may not have noticed and then by taking issue with it.

With every exception, of course, comes an exception to the exception, and that is: Don't start your article, chapter, blog, or talk with a dictionary definition even if you intend to disagree with it. Put it in the middle. Begin instead with something original, gripping, or humorous.

AND DON'T USE GOOGLE EITHER!

Having put a disappearing spell on the dictionary, let's get rid of Google too.

Do you know how important artichokes are? A Google search generated over 33 million hits! Astonishing. But that is nothing compared to *crochet*, which gives 459 million results. So if you are going to crochet an artichoke, well, you are clearly in the forefront of a massive cultural phenomenon!

Every time I read someone quote a statistic about the number of hits on Google, I'm ready to throw the book, burn the magazine, or savagely take my blue pencil to the computer screen. Could there possibly be a more lame, weak, and meaningless way to make a point (except possibly for quoting a dictionary definition)?

Why should writers and speakers stop using Google as a supposed source of statistical authority?

It's lazy. Instead of doing the work of some meaningful research, we try to get by with typing a few keystrokes.

It seems authoritative, but it's not. The internet is massive. You can get millions of hits on just about anything. If everything looks important, then nothing is important—including your statistics. A huge number of hits on Google proves nothing because it can prove anything.

It replaces actual thinking with pointless numbers. A number doesn't have any significance till we take the time and effort to put it in a valid context.

There can hardly be anything more important than this in effective communication. How do I know? Because “number of hits on Google” gave me 36.5 million hits!

Appendix H

THOUGH THIS BE ACADEMIC PUBLISHING, YET THERE IS METHOD IN IT

IN MANY WAYS, ACADEMIC PUBLISHING IS ITS OWN WORLD, especially when it comes to writing for scholarly journals. Often colleges and universities provide mentors for new faculty seeking to advance professionally, guiding them in the ways of publishing. Nonetheless, I often found professors making simple mistakes when it came to book publishing. Here are a few tips for smoothing the way to a contract.

I'm done with my dissertation, and now I'm thinking about my next project. Should I wait until my new book manuscript is finished before I contact an editor?

No. Academic editors often prefer to talk with you at a very early stage. Then they can offer suggestions on the shape a manuscript should take before you start. It is hard to tell an author, “You know, if you had just written your three-hundred-page manuscript this way instead of that way, we would be interested in it.” They feel reluctant asking you to go through all that work on speculation. As a result, instead of giving advice for completely revising the book, editors may simply say no. They don't want to put someone through all that effort when the book still might not be published, even after it is reworked.

What's better—to present one fully developed book idea or several partially developed ideas?

It's better to briefly describe three or four ideas and then let the editor suggest which one or two have the most promise for the publishing house. That saves you time and the editor time. Then you can develop a fuller proposal on those that are requested.

Do I need an agent?

Agents are not required to work with most academic publishers. It is fine to approach the publisher on your own. If you use an agent, remember that

the editor will still want to have direct contact with you about the content of the proposal.

How do I find an editor?

Talk to your academic colleagues who have published before. Do they have a name of an editor or publisher they would recommend? You can also go to academic conferences and stop by the book sales area to ask for an appointment with an editor from a publisher with a booth there.

Aren't simultaneous submissions taboo?

That is usually the case for journal publishing, but for book publishing it is not typically a problem. Most academic publishers I know are fine with simultaneous submissions if you make it clear in your cover letter that you are presenting the proposal to several others at the same time.

I'm early in my academic career. I should probably wait to publish a book until I'm established, right?

It would seem to make sense to wait until the end of your career to publish, when you can finally consolidate all you've learned and taught successfully for decades. But that is often too late. It is hard, from a publisher's perspective, for authors to start publishing just at the point when they are about to retire, leaving their discipline and all their connections. Publishers are looking for authors who are becoming known through presenting papers and publishing journal articles, who are active participants in the key discussions going on in their discipline, and who are networking with colleagues across the country and beyond. Publishers want to build authors whose reputations they can help develop over the course of several books.

I am new as an academic and have very little track record. How can I get a publisher to take me seriously?

One dimension to getting a book proposal taken seriously orbits around a word that is anathema to many academics—*promotion*. This conjures up pictures of hucksterism and selling patent medicines. But certain academically appropriate ways to do promotion can help publishers give you a second look.

A mentor or established scholar may be willing, for example, to give an upfront commitment to endorse your work. Mention that in the proposal. If he or she will actually write the endorsement so that it can be included in the proposal, so much the better. In fact, getting three or four colleagues to commit ahead of time would help a lot. Otherwise, in your proposal simply name those scholars you know personally who you would be willing to ask for endorsements. The better known these potential endorsers are, the better for your proposal.

Other kinds of promotion are equivalent to what you would do anyway to build your résumé—give papers at conferences, get articles published in academic journals or high-end journalistic venues such as the *Washington Post*, the *New Republic*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Another good option is writing for established scholarly blogs in your field that editors often frequent. You can also begin an academic blog on your own or jointly with some friends. It's best to post at least weekly to keep it active. The advantage of blogging with others is that you don't have to produce something every week. The disadvantage is that a group blog may not be quite as effective in establishing your own name in the academic conversation.

Remember, any editors worth their salt want to find bright, new talent with whom they can develop fruitful, long-term relationships. So, yes, you are at a disadvantage when you are relatively unknown and unpublished. But at the same time, you may be exactly what a publisher is looking for.

What else can I do to get a publisher to notice my work?

One possibility is to coauthor a project (whether book or article) with an established professor. Senior scholars will already have connections to editors and publishers who will automatically take their proposals seriously. One's *Doktorvater* would be a likely candidate for such an effort. But others you have worked under or met in other contexts are possible.

While suggesting such an arrangement may seem to be an imposition on someone (from your point of view), remember that many academics take their role seriously as mentors to the next generation of scholars. They want to help others (especially their own students) get established. And if the topic of the project comports nicely with or extends the work of the mentor, he or she will be more likely to join you. Nonetheless, as the junior partner you should probably expect to do most of the work in such a joint project.

What can help me have a successful author-editor relationship?

Ask yourself, what do you want in a student? Probably you are looking for curiosity, teachability, flexibility, as well as a willingness to work hard and take direction. That's what an editor is looking for in an author.

Those students who are too sure of themselves, too confident, are the ones you may have the hardest time with. They forget the years of experience and learning you have amassed and simply don't show enough humility. Likewise, remember that while you may have published one or two or even six books, an editor will have published dozens or hundreds of books. Take advantage of that hard-earned wisdom.

Yet an editor is also looking for a partner. Students who are too passive aren't what you want either. Editors want authors to bring something substantive to the table. Ultimately an author–editor relationship should also be a collaboration of equals.

What are academic publishers looking for?

Academic publishers usually do books in four categories: core texts, supplemental texts, monographs, and reference books. If your proposal doesn't easily fit in one of these slots, you'll probably have a hard time getting it published.

Where do ideas for academic books come from?

Often good ideas for academic books arise when you just can't seem to find the right book for a class that covers what you want your students to know or in the way you want to cover it. You can turn that frustration in a constructive direction by writing it yourself.

What about academics writing for a general readership?

Scholars often have excellent material for a general audience of thoughtful readers. But commonly, academics underestimate how much they will need to change their writing style to reach that audience. Often I will get a proposal from a professor who says the book will be for laypersons. But it is clear from the writing sample and the proposed table of contents that it is instead appropriate for graduate students—several levels above the supposed target audience.

Authors often assume knowledge of high-level vocabulary and background that general readers won't have. Professors are often so immersed in their subject matter that they can't remember what ordinary folks do not know.

General readers don't want lots of footnotes, don't want to know about your methodology, and certainly don't want a literature review. They expect you to write in first-person, active voice, not third-person passive. They don't want to wait until the last chapter to hear something practical. That should be found in every chapter. General readers will need stories and illustrations throughout to keep them motivated to read on. They will need concrete examples to help explain the theory you present.

Often academics can speak effectively to lay audiences. If that is your situation, try to write the way you talk. If it is not something you've done much of, then you might try to find opportunities to speak to lay audiences so you can hone your skills in reaching them.

What about self-publishing?

Self-publishing won't help an academic who is trying to build a vita of peer-reviewed publications. But if you can't find a publisher for your classroom

book, sometimes self-publishing can be a good option to make it available to your students. And if it catches on beyond more than your institution, it can be a way to get an established publisher to take notice and consider it for traditional publication.

But keep in mind that self-publishing takes a lot of work to do it well (design, proofreading, editing, production, printing, warehousing, shipping, billing, etc.). Even self-publishing services may require authors to do a lot of work to prepare the electronic file to their specifications. And then your job isn't over if you want it to be used beyond your own classes. Marketing and promotion follow.

How do I get started?

Perhaps even before you have a formal proposal, research the publishers who will be displaying at regional or national academic conferences in your discipline that you plan to attend. Review their websites to see what kinds of books they are doing. Ask your colleagues for their impressions. Then, early in the conference, ask if you can make an appointment with an editor while you are there. When you meet, ask questions. What are the editors looking for? What are common mistakes new authors make? What would they like to see in a proposal? Be ready to talk about yourself, your background, and your interests.

If I get a contract, can I negotiate terms?

For purely academic books, royalty rates, flat fees, and advances (if any) are usually fixed for first-time and even for many established academic authors. To ask too much about changing these could be seen as presumption or ignorance of the business of academic publishing, which is built on very slim or subsidized margins. Exceptions can include projects where the publisher sees significant potential for sales to general as well as academic markets. If you are lucky enough to have more than one contract offer, that may allow you to ask publishers if they want to match or better the terms of the stronger contract.

If you are curious, you can ask about marketing plans and make suggestions, but don't expect any commitments, verbal or contractual. This goes for setting the retail price of the book. Most academic publishers know the market and their business model better than you. Ask if you have concerns, but consider it friendly input rather than a negotiation. (Some academic publishers market almost exclusively to libraries and set retail prices at \$100, \$200, or more. If a lower retail price is important to you, you will simply need to find another publisher.)

Many contracts will offer ten free copies of the published book you will receive (again, except for library publishers). If you need more copies to put in front of key influencers who will help spread the news about the book, ask if you could provide a list of influencers for the publisher to send copies to.

If the contract has a clause giving the publisher right of first refusal on the next project (especially at the same terms as the current contract—which would then include another next book clause!), I strongly recommend asking this to be deleted. First, it is extremely easy for an author to get around this by offering a lame proposal the publisher is sure to reject. Second, publishers should want you to do another book with them because they earned it rather than because you must. Exceptions could be a contract for several books at once or for a series.

Appendix I

WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS ACADEMIC WRITING

A Plea for Polished Prose

IN *STYLISH ACADEMIC WRITING*, HELEN SWORD RIPS THE VEIL off one of the worst-kept secrets in all of academia: most academic writing is just plain awful. Jargon-filled, abstract, impersonal, and sleep-inducing.

What makes Sword's book even more convincing is that she has data to back up her claims. She studied five hundred articles from academic journals evenly spread over ten different disciplines. Among other analysis, she actually counted first-person pronouns (historians being culpable for using the fewest) and abstract nouns such as *nominalization* (those in higher ed being most guilty of this infraction).

The good news is—the news is not all bad! Science writers used the pronouns *I* and *we* quite a bit. Historians rarely used abstract nouns.

There was hope on another front. Sword not only studied journal articles but also the advice found in the guidelines for writers issued by the journals. They all tended to advocate these constructive principles:

- The three Cs—clarity, coherence, conciseness
- Including some short and some long sentences
- Plain English
- Precision
- Active verbs
- Telling a story

There was, however, less consensus on:

- Personal pronouns
- Careful use of jargon
- Personal voice

- Creative expression
- Nonstandard structure
- Engaging titles

In another twist, Sword analyzes the writing itself in the guidelines the journals created. Again, on the one hand we get a mix of creative use of metaphor, humor, word play, and other engaging techniques, while on the other hand we find styles of writing that are, yes, academic and stodgy.

A CHAIN OF MISINFORMATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Why are some academics so addicted to bad writing? Why do they churn out passive verbs like promises from a politician? Why do they multiply abstract nouns like mosquitoes in summer? Why can't they escape from the jungle of jargon? And maybe most importantly, why can't they be funny?

Certainly you can't blame lack of brain power. Can you blame misguided motives? None of the editors I have known want or enjoy turgid prose. Yet Patricia Nelson Limerick claims academics "demand dreariness because they think that dreariness is in the students' best interests. Professors believe that a dull writing style is an academic survival skill because they think that is what editors want, both editors of academic journals and editors of university presses. What we have here is a chain of misinformation and misunderstanding."¹

Sword lists other explanations, including the alluring possibility of conspiracy. While jargon can sometimes serve as convenient shorthand, it can also function "like a secret handshake, a signal to our peers that we belong to the same elite insiders' club."² Or maybe scholars mistakenly think such writing sounds more objective and authoritative, not realizing that postmodernism has already blown their cover.

Limerick adds another possible reason: it is a defense mechanism. "The benefit here [of obscure writing] is that no one can attack your position, say you are wrong or even raise questions about the accuracy of what you have said, if they cannot tell what you have said. In those terms, awful, indecipherable prose is its own form of armor, protecting the fragile, sensitive thoughts of timid souls."³ Academics sometimes write the way they do for the express purpose of *not* being understood.

That's right. They write complex, convoluted, murky, mind-numbing sentences so almost no one will know what they're talking about. We might

assume they want to influence others with their ideas. But the fewer readers who know what they're saying, the fewer who will be able to criticize them. And that so often is the academic game: to show how someone else is wrong.

As an undergraduate, I remember talking over a paper I'd written with my professor. "Well," he said, "it takes some nerve to disagree with Hobbes, but I think you're right." I thought I had invented dynamite! Now I knew how to write *all* my papers! Take someone on and show how they are wrong.

Whether the reason for bad writing is habit, insecurity, or misguided advice, a few simple words impart the first step to freedom: "Hello, my name is _____ . I'm an academic."

A CUP OF COLD WATER

With so much bad academic writing, we cry, "Pages, pages everywhere, and not a word to read." Yet much academic writing can be refreshing and worth savoring. Take Kevin Vanhoozer's essay in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*.

At Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in autumn 2009 I had just led a pep rally for the integration of biblical studies and systematics when Dennis Hollinger asked about the elephant in the room: [N. T.] Wright's approach to justification. At the time I was still in my dogmatic slumbers; all I could do was stammer in reply, "I think it's in *another* room." Well, the elephant—not the good bishop but the problem of biblical studies overturning received theological views—is indeed in the room. In fact, it is stampeding through our big evangelical tent, kicking up sawdust and overturning the tables of the doctrine changers.

I'm in no position as a systematic theologian to offer *ex cathedra* pronouncements about the true shape and substance of Second Temple Judaism. As one New Testament scholar kindly put it to me: "You might be right, but you won't be convincing." I therefore feel like a school-crossing guard—what the British call a lollipop man—charged with helping people navigate their way across the Berlin Wall separating biblical studies and dogmatics. My aim in what follows is to encourage peace talks between New Perspectives and old Protestants.⁴

Here's reading that's fun and informative. Vanhoozer puts himself (self-deprecatingly) into the picture and decorates it with similes and metaphors of elephants and crossing guards. Scriptural and historical allusions romp through these paragraphs. We travel from the concrete terrain of Massachu-

setts to Jerusalem to England to Germany in a few sentences, yet never lose our way in the wilds of abstraction.

We are not just entertained by this. We learn through vivid contrasts of old and new, biblical studies and theology, war and peace. Active verbs stammer, stampede, overturn, navigate, and kick their way through our own slumbers, waking us up to the drama of ideas (and yes, Kevin, of doctrine).

Granted, the entire essay can't and shouldn't be written in this way. But such sentences and paragraphs can be sprinkled throughout to keep us readers awake and attentive. That is, in fact, exactly Vanhoozer's approach. He doesn't merely write well. He communicates well. He uses a variety of artful skills to keep us interested, to make sure we understand, and to help us remember. He is an academic who offers a cup of clear, cold water to thirsty minds.

Conclusion: yes, convention remains a powerful force that shapes most academic writing. But within every discipline we have latitude for and actual published examples of good, interesting, stylish writing.

Appendix J

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS AND OTHERS

CHAPTER 1. FINDING AN OPENING

1. Find an article, blog, or chapter with a weak or average opening. Read through it and try to find something in the middle of the piece that could be stronger. Then rewrite the opening using that instead. (*Hint:* Don't look in established magazines, popular websites, or bestselling books. These often have good openings. Instead, look in more obscure places.)
2. The chapter mentions thesis openings, particular-to-general openings, humorous openings, dramatic openings, intriguing openings, understated openings, anti-openings, and long, poetic openings. But that's not an exhaustive list. Browse through popular magazines, books, and websites to find one or more examples of types of openings not mentioned in chapter one.
3. Pull out something you've written previously. Could it be improved by throwing away the first few paragraphs? Where would be a better place to start? Rewrite as needed.
4. Find a few favorite opening lines of books or articles and explain why they work.
5. Write three openings for your next piece and test them with readers to see which they think is best.

CHAPTER 2. KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

1. Pick three articles, each from a different online or print magazine. Read each one. In a sentence for each, describe the audience as specifically as you can.
2. Look again at the three articles you selected. In each one, how did the author clearly keep his or her focus on a well-defined audience, or what made it difficult to clearly identify who the author was writing for?

3. Summarize what chapter two says about the ways writers should and should not be concerned about their audience.
4. Name three things you are interested in, really enjoy, or are passionate about. Be as specific as possible—for example, not “music” but a particular song, not “history” but a particular person or year, not “food” but a particular dish, not “the environment” but a particular lake, not “sports” but a particular baseball game.

Think of an individual you would like to talk to about this topic, someone to whom you’d like to explain what it is and why you are so interested. It can be a different person for each one.

CHAPTER 3. GIVING STRUCTURE

1. Look at the list of three subjects you are interested in from exercise 4 for chapter two. Pick one.
2. Find out more about the topic you selected by:
 - Writing your first thoughts about the topic. (Don’t worry about these being polished or organized. They can be random and incomplete.)
 - Reading articles online or in print about the topic, noting in a file the most interesting anecdotes, facts, influences, implications, and opinions (putting direct quotations in quotation marks and keeping clear notes on bibliographic information—author, article title, date, URL, etc.—for the notes you take).
 - Looking at the general background of the topic, how it fits in its larger context culturally, socially, geographically, and historically, or how it is different from or similar to others in its category.
 - Talking to people who have firsthand experience or expertise with the topic and taking notes on what they say.
 - Noting your own responses and reactions to what you are finding.
 - Listing questions that come up that you’d like to have answered and where you think you could look to find those answers.
3. Once you’ve gathered your material in point 2 above, try organizing the material into two or three different outlines. Which do you think might be best and why?
4. Look at the list of possible structures listed in chapter three. Explain what kind of structure *Write Better* uses.

CHAPTER 4. THE CHARACTER OF PERSUASION

1. Why does persuasion have such a bad name?
2. Select three specific examples of persuasion—an advertisement, a newspaper editorial, a sermon, a political speech, etc. Evaluate each by answering the following questions:
 - What is the goal of each piece?
 - What weaknesses do you see in the argument that were not addressed?
 - How does or doesn't what is advocated enhance the common good?
 - How might the proposal injure certain groups of people or individuals, or how might they object?
3. Watch the movie *The Big Kahuna*. Pick two of the questions below and write 250-word answers for each.
 - Why was (or wasn't) Bob being manipulative with Mr. Fuller when he talked about Jesus?
 - Are all attempts at persuasion mere salesmanship? Why? If so, is that a bad thing?
 - If in conversation you intentionally bring up a topic you care about, are you automatically being unnatural and insincere? Why or why not?
 - Is it wrong to steer conversations? Explain.
 - Was Phil right that trying to persuade people of something makes you or them less human? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 5. THE CRAFT OF PERSUASION

1. Pick out three more examples of persuasion (in addition to the ones selected for the exercises for chapter four) such as advertisements, newspaper editorials, sermons, political speeches, etc. On a scale of one to ten, rate each one on the following criteria and offer a one-sentence comment on why you gave each rating. (Note that for simplicity and repetition, the best scores will be 5 or 6 rather than 10.)

Simplicity

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
VERY COMPLICATED			JUST RIGHT SIMPLICITY				OVERSIMPLIFIED		

Comment:

CHAPTER 7. CRACKING OUR WRITER'S BLOCK

1. For a week, using a small notebook or a notetaking app on your phone, write down every idea that comes to mind, good or bad. These ideas could happen while you are walking to class, watching a video, playing a game, eating a meal, talking with friends, working on the job, or brushing your teeth. Write down each one, no matter how trivial it may seem, whether or not it is something you might write about later.
2. Pick out a book by Shakespeare or Steinbeck, Austen or Achebe, or any other favorite. Find a passage and copy several paragraphs by hand (handwriting is better, but typing would be okay).
3. Here are the *Balderdash* words mentioned in chapter seven that you can try out on your own. Don't take more than one minute to come up with a phony definition for each:
 - padashan
 - icekhana
 - swallet
4. Get a copy of the box game *Balderdash*, and play it with some friends.

**CHAPTER 8. THE NUTS, BOLTS, HAMMERS,
AND SAWS OF GOOD REWRITING**

1. Revise or rewrite each of the following sample paragraphs.¹ As you do, keep in mind the six guidelines from Orwell and the additional five tips mentioned in chapter eight.
 - There is a simple truth that is so easily lost in the press of work on the job that one rarely hears business leaders or managers even ask the question about what value relationships might have in the context of discerning major decisions.
 - Perhaps you have several interactions with individuals that seem as good as gold when you are one to one with each other. But then you show up in a different setting together—a classroom, a committee meeting, a family gathering—and things are somehow different. An individual who expressed real wisdom privately is suddenly reticent to share openheartedly. Someone who is normally gentle as a dove exhibits a hard, defensive edge. Relationships which, in other settings, are characterized by trust become tense or give way to maneuvering and posturing that speaks of a subtle distrust.

- Napoleon and Wellington were like two peas in a pod. There is a reason everyone links them together because they had a famous battle with each other at Waterloo in 1815. Other interesting things seem to connect them to each other too. Both of them were born in the same year, that being 1769. Both of them had prominent, important fathers who died when Napoleon and Wellington were in their early adolescence. Both of them had the same number of brothers and sisters—each had four brothers and three sisters. Both of them spoke French as their second language. Both of them taught themselves military tactics and strategies, having no prior formal military training before becoming officers. Both of them were at the head of their nations. Napoleon was emperor of France before Waterloo, and Wellington was prime minister of Britain afterward from 1828–30. They even shared two of the same mistresses. Wellington picked them up after Napoleon’s defeat. One of Wellington’s brothers even married the sister-in-law of the ex-wife of one of Napoleon’s brothers.

CHAPTER 9. WE REMEMBER ENDINGS FIRST

1. Go to the library and pull out collections of best essays such as the annual volumes of *The Best American Essays*, *The Best American Sports Writing*, and *The Best American Travel Writing*. Flip through them and find one or two essays that have particularly strong endings. Copy the endings and then explain why they are so good.
2. Find an essay or assignment you wrote recently, perhaps for another class or for a blog. Reread it to see if you can find a better ending somewhere in the middle of the piece. Then rewrite it with your new ending.

CHAPTER 10. TITLES THAT WORK

1. Why are titles important?
2. What does the author say are the key components of a strong book or article title?
3. Look at a bestseller list for nonfiction or how-to books.
 - How many titles consist entirely of a metaphor with no content?
 - How many titles have only one, two, or three words?
 - Look at the list of six elements that often characterize great ideas and titles:

- Simple
- Concrete
- Emotional
- Unexpected
- Credible
- Stories

Now, for the first ten books in the bestseller list you chose above, list which of the six criteria are reflected in each title.

- Which are the weakest titles in the whole list and why?
- Take the weakest titles and brainstorm a half dozen alternatives for each.

CHAPTER 11. CREATIVITY, THE MYSTERIOUS MUSE

1. Convergent thinking means seeing links between objects or ideas that aren't ordinarily combined. As the chapter notes, for example, the words *cottage*, *Swiss*, and *cake* are all linked by the word *cheese*. What word links each of the following? (Answers are found at the end of this appendix.)
 - rock, soul, folk
 - grade, high, medical
 - white, gingerbread, doll
 - news, wrapping, tissue
 - sound, color, gender
2. Divergent thinking means starting with one object or idea and going in many possible directions. List as many uses as you can with for each object listed. You get sixty seconds for each.
 - coffee cup
 - baseball
 - pencil
 - paper clip
 - chair
 - toothbrush
3. What kind of reading do you do most on your own time? If fiction, for example, what particular type—literary, sci-fi, mysteries, young adult, graphic novels, romances? Pick a popular book in a genre you don't usually read and read it this week.
4. As the chapter says, physical exercise can actually help our ability to think and be creative. What do you do for exercise? If you don't exercise

regularly, do something physical every day this week—walk or run a couple miles, play tennis, ride a bike for thirty minutes, play basketball for an hour, or the like.

5. Go to a website with writing exercises, such as writingexercises.co.uk/index.php, authority.pub/creative-writing-exercises, or writetodone.com/10-best-creative-writing-exercises. Pick two exercises and do them.

CHAPTER 12. BREAKING THE RULES

1. How do you respond when the author suggests that there are no rules in grammar?
2. According to the author, when are good times to break the rules of grammar and when are bad times? How do you know the difference?
3. Print out a copy of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. Circle every time he begins a sentence with a conjunction.

CHAPTER 13. THE KEY TO POWERFUL PROSE—TONE

1. Lemony Snicket opens his book *The Bad Beginning* this way:

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming, and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features, but they were extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery, and despair. I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes.

- What's the tone of this opening?
 - What specific things does Snicket do in his writing to achieve the tone?
 - What's the message?
 - How does the tone contribute to and make the message stronger?
2. Here is the opening of Judy Ruiz's "Oranges and Sweet Sister Boy," in *The Best American Essays 1989*, ed. Geoffrey Wolff (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1989).

I am sleeping, hard, when the telephone rings. It's my brother, and he's calling to say that he is now my sister. I feel something fry a little, deep behind my eyes. Knowing how sometimes dreams get mixed up with not-dreams, I decide to do a reality test at once. "Let me get a cigarette," I say, knowing that if I reach for a Marlboro and it turns into a trombone or a snake or anything else on the way to my lips that I'm still out in the large world of dreams.

The cigarette stays a cigarette. I light it. I ask my brother to run that stuff by me again.

- What's the tone of this opening?
- What specific things does Ruiz do in her writing to achieve the tone?
- What's the message?
- How does the tone contribute to and make the message stronger?

3. Douglas Adams begins *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* like this:

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun.

Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-eight million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

- What's the tone of this opening?
- What specific things does Adams do in his writing to achieve the tone?
- What's the message?
- How does the tone contribute to and make the message stronger?

CHAPTER 14. FOR THE LOVE OF METAPHOR

1. Why does the author say nonfiction writers should use metaphors?
2. How, if at all, do you think metaphors work similarly or differently in nonfiction than in fiction?
3. Look in books, magazines, or online to find two examples of nonfiction writers using long- and short-form metaphors. How well do the metaphors work and why?

4. Here are some clichés. Rewrite or edit five of them to give each a fresh twist.

- All hands on deck.
- An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
- I'd do that at the drop of a hat.
- He's a babe in the woods.
- She's going bananas.
- I drew the short straw.
- Life is just a bowl of cherries.
- It all boils down to money.
- That's just child's play.
- It's time to deep six that laptop.
- Time for a gut check.
- You went away with your tail between your legs.
- She's not a team player.
- He threw in the towel.
- When it rains it pours.
- You're a day late and a dollar short.

CHAPTER 15. LESS IS MORE

1. Describe how a movie you've seen told too much (didn't trust the audience to get it, as described in the opening of the chapter).
2. Describe how a movie you've seen instead effectively showed what was happening without telling too much (trusting the audience to understand).
3. Why do writers often tend to say too much, to explain too much, and to tell rather than show?

CHAPTER 16. CALLED TO WRITE

1. Write out two or three paragraphs in response to each of the five rubrics mentioned in the chapter:

- *Keep your eyes open to what God is already doing.* What themes, people, events, ideas, concerns, interests, and issues keep coming up in my life?
 - *Pay attention to what gives you joy and energy.* What do I find myself doing even when I don't have to or when no one asks me? What do I do that makes me feel great afterward? What makes me feel productive? What gives me a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment?
 - *Listen to others.* What do others affirm that I am doing and encourage me to keep at? When do I get compliments and words of thanks for my efforts in a particular area?
 - *Don't ignore dreams.* What dreams have I had that might relate to God's call on my life? Ask trusted friends and counselors if they have any response to what they may mean. If you don't remember dreams much, keep a pad of paper and a pencil by your bed for a week, and as soon as you wake up, write down what you remember dreaming.
 - *Follow Jesus.* What is already in the Bible that you know you need to pay attention to?
2. Try your hand at drafting a one-sentence statement of your calling. If several options come to mind, draft a sentence for each one.

CHAPTER 17. THE QUEST FOR VOICE

1. Who are your heroes or models for writing? Select a representative passage from that writer and explain what you like so much about his or her voice.
2. How would you define voice?
3. What are the positive aspects of voice? What are the potential problems?
4. Explain why you agree or disagree with Anne Lamott's contention that

We write to expose the unexposed. . . . Truth seems to want expression. Unacknowledged truth saps your energy and keeps you and your characters wired and delusional. But when you open the closet door and let what was inside out, you can get a rush of liberation. . . . The truth of your experience can only come through in your own voice.²

5. T. S. Eliot contends that we don't move forward by breaking from the past but by building on the past. Do you agree or not? Explain.
6. What might it look like for you to use writing to make the world a better, truer, or more beautiful place?

CHAPTER 18. THE SPIRITUALITY OF WRITING ABOUT YOURSELF

1. How can writing about ourselves be tricky for our spiritual lives?
2. What key ideas are offered in the chapter for keeping ourselves in perspective as we write?
3. At the end of each day this week, write a sentence or two in response to each of these questions:
 - What was a high and low for me today?
 - When did I have a deep sense of connection with God, others, and myself? When didn't I have a sense of connection?

CHAPTER 19. SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND WRITING

1. How are you the beneficiary of history, culture, family background, or social circumstances?
2. Why can listening to others help us grow in humility?
3. What friend, spouse, teacher, pastor, coworker, or relative in your life can be or is completely honest with you about your writing? If you don't have people in your life like this, who might be able to fill that role for you?

CHAPTER 20. THE COURAGE TO CREATE AND LET GO

1. When have you been stuck in your writing, when you just couldn't get started or restarted? Describe what it looked and felt like.
2. What projects have you just kept reworking, refining, adding to, and subtracting from, but never finished? Why do you think you have had difficulty saying it was done?

CHAPTER 21. STEWARDS WITH A MESSAGE

1. How is writing both about you and not about you?
2. What does the chapter say about being a steward as a writer?
3. How can you grow in having your identity in Christ?

Answers to Chapter 11, Question 1: rock, soul, folk—music; grade, high, medical—school; white, gingerbread, doll—house; news, wrapping, tissue—paper; sound, color, gender—barrier

NOTES

APPENDIX F: BREVITY IS THE SOUL OF BLOGGING

¹Usually it is not a problem to picture items for sale like book covers, especially if you link those images to websites where they are for sale. This is usually considered free promotion for the sellers, something they actually want.

APPENDIX G: THE DICTIONARY AND GOOGLE HITS ARE DEAD

¹Althea Peterson, “Because I Said So: Tulsa Public Schools’ Difficult, Disappointing Zarrow Situation,” *Tulsa World*, March 9, 2017, www.tulsaworld.com/blogs/scene/becauseisaidso/because-i-said-so-tulsa-public-schools-difficult-disappointing-zarrow/article_72002203-1192-50b5-9318-132f18929827.html.

²Grant Osborne, “Historical Narrative or Truth in the Bible,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (December 2005): 673.

³Gloria Steinem, *My Life on the Road* (New York: Random House, 2015), xxiv.

APPENDIX I: WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS ACADEMIC WRITING

¹Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Dancing with Professors,” quoted in Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.

²Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 7.

³Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Dancing with Professors: The Trouble with Academic Prose,” *New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1993.

⁴Kevin Vanhoozer, “Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation?” in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 235–36.

APPENDIX J: QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS AND OTHERS

¹The first two examples are adapted from unpublished writing exercises by Jeff Yourison.

²Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 198–99.