https://lithub.com/good-sentences-are-why-we-read/?fbclid=IwAR230ylafmqSjdBJgANU_wdA4QvEVrJyn1POhRD9sw4YJsaMjTpYjJzWhVg

No one can agree on what a sentence is. The safest definition is typographic. A sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop—except that some start with quote marks, and some end with question or exclamation marks, so that doesn't quite work. Let's try again. A sentence is the largest domain over which the rules of grammar have dominion. Thus it stands grammatically apart from the sentences around it. Except when it is a fragment that hangs over from the last sentence as an afterthought. Or that briefly sets a scene, like every sentence of the shipping forecast. *Occasional gales. Fog patches. Mainly moderate*.

A sentence is a small, sealed vessel for holding meaning. It delivers some news—an assertion, command or question—about the world. Every sentence needs a subject, which is a noun or noun phrase, and a predicate, which is just the bit of the sentence that isn't the subject and that must have a main verb. The subject is usually (but not always) what the sentence is about and the predicate is usually (but not always) what happens to the subject or what it is. *This* [subject] i*s a sentence* [predicate]. A sentence must have a subject and a main verb, except when it leaves out one or both of them because their presence is implied. OK?

A sentence can be a single word, or it can stretch into infinity, because more words can be piled on to a main

clause for ever. The Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal wrote a whole novel (*Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age*) containing just one sentence. But he said that his comic sensibility was shaped by a short one he once read on a dry cleaner's receipt: *Some stains can be removed only by the destruction of the material itself*.

Marcel Proust, who in *The Captive* wrote a 447-word sentence about a sofa, said that he wanted to "weave these long silks as I spin them" and to "encircle the truth with a single—even if long and sinuous—stroke." For Proust, a sentence traced an unbroken line of thought. Cutting it in two broke the line. Depending on its line of thought, a sentence can be a tiny shard of sense or a Proustian demi-world, brought to life and lit up with words.

For Henry David Thoreau, the sentence was the harvest gleaned in a writer's brain. "The fruit a thinker bears is *sentences*," he wrote in his journal. For Marianne Moore, the sentence exerted a pull on her "as the pull of a fabric is governed by gravity." For James Baldwin, the one true goal was "to write a sentence as clean as a bone." For John Cheever, "every sentence is an innovation," something never thought, never mind said, in quite that way before. For Annie Dillard, the sentence is a writer's true medium, and a writer with no feel for the sentence is not a writer, because that would be like being a painter who could not bear the smell of paint. For Gary Lutz, the sentence is our "one true theater of endeavor." For

Maggie Nelson, the sentence is something to “labor grimly on . . . wondering all the while if prose is but the gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness.” For John Banville, the sentence is “this essential piece of our humanness . . . our greatest invention.”

What special *terroir* makes a piece of writing irreplicable? Its sentences.

Skilled writers write in sentences—not because sentences are what we all write in (although they are), but because they write small. They see the sentence as the *ur*-unit, the granular element that must be got right or nothing will be right. Their books, however long they become, are gatherings of sentences.

Scientists at the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Kraków analyzed more than a hundred classic works by authors such as Dickens, Joyce and Beckett, and found that the sentences behaved like a mathematical multifractal: a structure whose smallest part resembles its whole. The best writing is self-consistent. It sounds as if it comes from the same breathing body standing in the same place, rather as wine from a certain *terroir* is said to have, from its climate and soil, a taste irreplicable anywhere else. What special *terroir* makes a piece of writing irreplicable? Its sentences.

Dedicated birdwatchers can identify a bird even when they do not have time to note its distinguishing marks of plumage and song. A skilled birder can tell you the breed from its general impression, size and shape,

even if it is just a blur flying past in the dusk. A writer's voice is like that, too, perhaps. A skilled reader can spot it from a single sentence flashing by.

A sentence is more than its meaning. It is a line of words where logic and lyric meet—a piece of both sense and sound, even if that sound is heard only in the head. Things often thought to be peculiar to poetry—meter, rhythm, music—are there in prose as well, or should be. When John Betjeman began a BBC radio talk with the sentence "We came to Looe by unimportant lanes," he must have known it sounded better than "We drove to Looe via the minor roads." His version is ten syllables with the stress on each second syllable: a perfect iambic pentameter.

Some writers map their sentences metrically, marking the stressed and unstressed syllables with scansion marks as if notating a musical score. Some even work out the stresses before they fill in the words. The rest of us just have a foggy sense that a sentence needs an extra beat. But we still know that a sentence is not just what it says but how it says it. Robert Frost called this its "sound of sense," the emotional truth you could grasp even if you heard the sentence spoken by a muffled voice in another room. Here, he felt, beneath the mere grammatical obedience, were "the brute tones of our human throat that may once have been all our meaning."

Rookie sentence writers are often too busy worrying about the something they are trying to say to worry enough about how that something looks and sounds.

They look straight past the words into the meaning that they have strong-armed into them. They fasten on content and forget about form— forgetting that content and form are the same thing, that what a sentence says is how it says it, and vice versa.

Rhythm is so basic to language that it does not need to be taught. You can correct a child's syntax and pronunciation, but if they have no feel for the rhythms of speech, they will not sound human. The rhythm of English stresses certain syllables within each word and certain words within each sentence. It makes us linger on nouns, adjectives and verbs and skip lightly over pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions. Hence we will never love the automated sentences of satnavs and public address systems, with their random rise and fall.

Rhythm is the song of life. The syllabic stress patterns of speech sync up with the heartbeat we hear in the womb, the pulses of air in the lungs, the strides of walking and running. Beating a rhythm is our first music, the joyous reflex that makes us tap feet, drum fingers and clap hands. To the young man carrying a pair of battered drumsticks everywhere in his back pocket, or the musicians of remote tribes who commandeer a river as a drum kit, their hands working up pops and thuds on the water as beatboxers do with their voices, the rhythmic urge must be obeyed. The music critic Ian Penman, writing about Grace Jones, called rhythm "song's manacle

and its demonic charge . . . the original breath . . . the whisper of unremitting demand."

Rhythm holds meaning. Great orators make the rhythm of the words resound in our brains and bones before we work out what they have said. The rhythm wins us over—is "proved upon our pulses," as Keats put it—and then the sense catches up. I like to hear sentences read aloud, in public readings in echoey halls, or audiobooks coming through my earphones as I pace the streets, or radio essays I listen to under the duvet in the dark, the speaker's timbre sending me to sleep like a cradle song.

I haunt the corridors of my university building, speaking sentences under my breath. Those who know me know to ignore me. Sometimes I walk round the block doing the same thing, and passing strangers are surely less forgiving. Talk to yourself at work and you are just sounding out your thoughts; talk to yourself in the street and others look away and give you plenty of pavement. But it all helps, I tell myself, to lock the rhythms of writing into the skull. "Read good books, have good sentences in your ears," the poet Jane Kenyon advised—and a true and useful sentence can survive even a comma splice like that.

Bad grammar is usually a sign of something deeper amiss with the rhythm. More can go awry in a sentence than syntactical exactitude. Worse than the words being wrongly arranged is putting them in an order that neither moves nor sings. The sentence just

limps and wheezes along to its sad end with a tuneless clank. When the writer has a tin ear for the sound of a sentence then the reader knows, just as when she hears flat or pitchy singing, that something is wrong, even if she can't quite say why.

I can let a book fall open and tell, just from reading a few sentences, if I will like it. However compelling the subject of a book might be, I find it hard to carry on reading if its sentences are boring. I should be more forgiving, since I have written my share of boring sentences. I am not. Neither are you, even if you don't know it yet. You think you are looking past this sentence into what it is saying—about life, love, the existence of angels, the design of the injection-molded polypropylene stacking chair, whatever it is— but no. You think you care what this is about, but really you care how it sounds. You are reading it for its sentences.

A sentence is more than its meaning. It is a line of words where logic and lyric meet—a piece of both sense and sound, even if that sound is heard only in the head.

I read cookery books by my favorite food writers—Elizabeth David, Jane Grigson, Elisabeth Luard, Nigel Slater—with no intention of cooking any of the recipes. (I am of the school of cuisine that believes you can eat well by learning how to shop.) I read and

love these books not for instruction but for the sentences. For good food writing is, like all good writing, both precise and evocative.

When, in the early 1950s, Elizabeth David wanted to remind her ration-coupon British readers of the taste of figs, wild garlic and Kalamata olives, her sentences had to be as bright and unencumbered as the Mediterranean sun. Before the 1970s, it was hard to source the more exotic ingredients in her recipes outside of Soho delicatessens. For the metropolitan middle classes, her mentions of eggplants and anchovies were a partly vicarious pleasure, a reminder of the summers they were starting to spend in Tuscany and Provence. The best food writing walks this blurred line between sound advice and sensual reminiscence.

Provided you skip the dull bits about metric measures and oven settings, the sentences in a recipe are a pleasure to read. They are so sequential, so assured. *Warm two tablespoons of olive oil in a pan, then add the sliced onion*. The verdicts sound fair and true in a way that those in life rarely are. *Yesterday's bread has less moisture and so makes crisper toast*. Good food writing is clean, full of flavor, a meal in itself.

Elizabeth David wrote well, I suspect, because she saw what the culinary and writing arts have in common. A good sentence is the verbal fulfillment of her kitchen credo, borrowed from Escoffier: *Faites simple*. She thought of good cooking as lucid and sincere—as a sentence should seem to be. She

disliked rich sauces and other rococo effects that hid the true flavors of food.

A sentence, too, should rely more on quality ingredients than baroque artifice. She frowned on kitchens weighed down with needless gizmos and other advertisements of culinary activity. A sentence, too, should not advertise the labor that went into its making. She hated English cooking that was a self-lacerating slog of peeling and boiling, when it should be an open-hearted labor of love. A sentence, too, should be—at least for the reader—an uncompromised joy.

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