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# Introduction

In this age of information, when words—sometimes not even words, but the outline of a word—serve as conveyor belts of facts and advertisements, where is the sentence that fills the brain with unqualified joy? Something that breaks through the crushing barrage of workhorse prose? A sentence that veers from the traditional, overly familiar subject-verb linear line to rejigger the world so we see anew?

Style is so much more than decoration. Style—syntax, rhythm, sound, schemes and tropes, diction, imagery—is content. Blaise Pascal conveyed this idea in Pascal’s *Pensées*: “Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have different effects.” As Yeats wrote in an introduction to his collected plays, “As I altered my syntax, I altered my intellect.” Our greatest writers skillfully work their sentences to evoke readers’

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emotions or, through rhythm and sound, mimic the experience they are describing. Gustave Flaubert fretted over each and every sentence, that “atrocious labor.” For Virginia Woolf, style was all about rhythm. “Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words.... Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.” Stuart Dybek said something similar: “There’s a story and the writer then finds the words that serve as beats and notes to capture the invisible music. And like all music, that soundless thrum, now represented in language...conveys deep emotion.” Readers are savvy and expect a great story to be paired with great writing. When it isn’t, when the sentences clunk and jar, when one sentence sounds the same as the next, why not put the book down and find a more musical one? As Donald Maas says in *Writing 21st Century Fiction*, “High impact comes from a combination of two factors: great stories and beautiful writing.”

During a recent move, I found a box of my old notebooks from my middle school years. Peppered in with the typical angst of a teenage girl (*does he like me? do I like him?*) are stunning sentences from Austen, Emerson, Dostoevsky, Woolf, Pasternak. From way back, I’ve been an admirer and collector of stylish sentences—sentences that transported

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me, illuminating a dimension of existence that I sensed, but didn't believe was true until I read it.

My love affair with the sentence continues. As I writer, I still collect sentences, but now I take them apart to understand them. One of my favorite classes to teach is Style in Fiction, because we get to swim around in one extraordinary sentence for an inordinate amount of time; because we deconstruct sentences and study their inner workings; because we can use the same architecture to create our own sentences; because the day is so much better when you hear a beautiful sentence singing in your ear.

So I bring you *How to Write Stunning Sentences*. In twenty-five essays, I've gathered together stunning sentences from some of our most stylistically-minded writers and taken them apart, showing you how they work their magic.

In ten of the essays, I've had the good fortune to talk to the writer about the making of sentences. What were they thinking about when they wrote such a beautiful sentence? How do they go about crafting stunning sentences? Catherine Brady talks about using imagery literally and figuratively to create subtext and how one good sentence leads to another good sentence. When writing, Melanie Rae Thon listens to inner speech, which is beyond language, akin to Woolf's wave in the mind. You'll also hear the craft of sentence-making from the masterful James Baldwin, Grace

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Paley, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Toni Morrison, who will teach you about humor, specificity through adjectives, diction, and the power of synecdochy.

After each essay, I've included writing prompts derived from the techniques of these writers. You'll learn about left branching, right branching, and mid-branching sentences. You'll write a sentence that travels from hard sounds to soft, or vice versa, to mimic the experience you are describing. In writer's groups or workshops, you've heard ad nauseum the need for specific details, but what about the need for precise imprecision? Or the power of repetition? Or animating the inanimate?

Think of this book as your classroom, and the masters of mesmerizing sentences have crowded into the room to generously teach you what they know. With this book, you'll soon fashion your own stunning sentences.

*Part One*  
**SYNTAX**



# 1



## John Updike: Adjectival Sentences

*Pigeon Feathers* led to *Problems and Other Stories*, to *Trust Me*, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, *Seek My Face*, and *The Widows of Eastwick*. I didn't set out to make a nick in Updike's massive oeuvre; rather, I got sucked in, his writing mesmerizing me with one explosive, original image after another. Ultimately I was humbled—my writing felt anemic compared to his—and inspired to work harder, see more.

Most reviewers of Updike's work feel compelled to say something about his exquisite details: "efflorescent in observed detail," wrote Elizabeth Hardwick. "Richly textured," said the *Boston Herald*. "[I]ncessantly observing art," wrote the *New York Times*. Updike said about his fiction, "My only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due."

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In nearly every workshop, writers are told to use specific details. When I put myself on the receiving end of Updike's avalanche of details, an interesting thing happened to me: his reality became more real than reality itself. I could see his story's reality—the characters and setting and story world—better than the real world around me. And I wanted to stay in his world. If one of the jobs of a writer is to make the reader see anew, Updike accomplishes that, not by strangeness or otherworldliness or the fantastical or bizarre, but by writing all the way down to the granular, to the gleam on the brass doorknob.

Some critics call out those instances when Updike overdoes it, “when the prolific becomes prolix,” and others name it indigestible self-absorption. But for me, the risk is worth it because of the many times when it does work. In his loose, flowing syntax and long sentences over-brimming with adjectives, the banal shines, and so does his love for the lived experience, for felt emotion.

Here's Updike, describing one of his characters opening a car door in *Seek My Face*. In this novel, the main protagonist, Hope, is an artist, so Updike's language is informed by her artistic eye and particularly laced with specificity.

Kathryn finds the door handle of Alec's car; the dark and rain release the concussive pang of the driver's side