

# On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction (6th ed.).

**William Zinsser. 1998. Harper Collins,  
New York, NY, ISBN 0-06-273523-3.  
\$14.00.**

The cover of the new 6th edition of Zinsser's *On Writing Well* says over 900,000 copies of the book have been sold. There's a good chance you may have had it as the required text for undergraduate writing courses.

This book is a great reference for the everyday on-the-job memo and letter writer as well as for those of us who make our livings at the keyboard. It's also a good reference if you're doing in-service writing training for your organization.

I've been using it for the course I teach, Writing for Publication, for the past eight to 10 years. There are three new chapters in this latest edition. One is labeled "Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence" and urges writers to "live interestingly, to convey a zest for what they're writing about."

But the basic parts of the book that emphasize simplicity and eliminating clutter have remained unchanged over the past two or three editions. This won't help book sales—but if you find a fifth, fourth or even earlier edition you can probably save enough to buy lunch and still get the basic message.

At the beginning of every term I tell my students that three short chapters on "Simplicity," "Clutter" and "Bits and Pieces" are the key to the course: master the concepts and you get that 'A'.

The book is an interesting and entertaining read—it practices what it preaches. As a companion book, I use *The Associated Press Guide to Good Writing*. It also emphasizes clarity and zest, but most of its examples (both good and bad) are in newspaper style.

And you journalism types should love what Zinsser says in the "Nonfiction as Literature" chapter. "I have no patience with the snobbery that says nonfiction is only journalism by another name and that journalism by any name is a dirty word. While we're redefining literature, let's also redefine journalism. Journalism is writing that first appears in any periodic journal, whatever its constituency."

Zinsser references an earlier classic, *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, and says every writer should re-read it once a year. Some good things don't change; Professor Will Strunk wrote *The Elements of Style* in the First World War era.

**Jack Sperbeck**  
**University of Minnesota**