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Good Sentences

By Patrick Barry

He is careful what he reads, for that is what he will write.

— Annie Dillard,
The Writing Life (1989)¹

I've always said the only way to be a good writer is to be a good reader. You can't do it consciously. You can't say, "This is how you need to structure a sentence." But your mind structures the words and it sees them, and when you try to write them again, they tend to come out better because your mind is thinking of what was a pleasing sentence to read and remembers that when you try to write.

— Chief Justice John Roberts²

To write good sentences, you need to read good sentences. Skilled writers and editors know this, so they seek out good sentences wherever they can find them—the short stories of Alice Munro, the political essays of William F. Buckley, even well-crafted cartoons, speeches, and advertisements. They read not just with voracity but also with an eye toward larceny, always on the lookout for moves that they can learn and repurpose.



“Plain Language,” edited by Joseph Kimble, has been a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal* for 35 years. To contribute an article, contact Prof. Kimble at WMU-Cooley Law School, 300 S. Capitol Ave., Lansing, MI 48933, or at kimblej@cooley.edu. For an index of past columns, Google “Plain Language column index.”

In this way, skilled writers and editors combine two pieces of advice: one from Judge Frank Easterbrook, who is among the best judicial writers around; and one from Francine Prose, who is among the best literary writers around.

The advice from Judge Easterbrook comes from an interview in 2014. “Spend more time reading,” Easterbrook said when asked what young lawyers could do to improve their writing skills.³ He specifically recommended the novels of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Saul Bellow, though he also said that much can be learned from regularly reading well-edited magazines like *The Atlantic* and *Commentary*. “The best way to become a good legal writer,” he insisted, “is to spend more time reading good prose.”⁴

The advice from Francine Prose comes early in her 2006 book *Reading Like a Writer*: “Too often, students are being taught to read as if literature were some kind of ethics class or civics class—or worse, some kind of self-help manual. In fact, the important thing is the way the writer uses the language.”⁵ She later notes that “[e]very so often I’ll hear writers say that there are other writers they would read if for no other reason than to marvel at the skill with which they can put together the sort of sentences that move us to read closely, to disassemble and reassemble them, much the way a me-

chanic might learn about an engine by taking it apart.”⁶

Embrace this craftlike approach to reading. Pay attention not just to a passage’s content but also to its composition, to how it was put together word by word, sentence by sentence. Study how paragraphs are constructed, how their various parts work together to communicate information clearly, effectively, and sometimes beautifully. Your writing will improve. Your rhythm will improve. Your readers will be grateful.

Ted Williams, Jimi Hendrix,
and Edouard Manet

When baseball great Ted Williams joined the Boston Red Sox as a 21-year-old rookie in 1939, the best hitter on the team was a slugger named Jimmie Foxx. Williams idolized Foxx, who was so strong and imposing that Lefty Gomez, a star pitcher for the New York Yankees, once remarked that even Foxx’s hair had muscles.⁷ Because Foxx drank buttermilk, Williams drank buttermilk—despite not liking the stuff at all.⁸ And because watching Foxx take batting practice before games gave Williams a chance to study the mechanics of a future Hall of Famer, Williams consistently carved out time to do so.⁹ “To play good baseball,” Williams seemed to believe, “you need to watch good baseball.”

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Jimi Hendrix did something similar when he started becoming serious about the guitar. In the early 1960s, well before he would redefine what it meant to play the “Star-Spangled Banner” and eventually become what the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame describes as “the most gifted instrumentalist of all time,”¹⁰ Hendrix went on the Chitlin Circuit, a collection of venues throughout the southern, eastern, and upper midwestern states that welcomed black performers during a period of intense segregation. Still only a backup musician, Hendrix used the time to learn as much as he could from legends like Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Little Richard, Solomon Burke, and the Isley Brothers.¹¹

Similar patterns of intense, imitative immersion in the work of others can be found in the career trajectories of musicians as different as the composer Joseph Haydn;¹² the jazz virtuoso Charlie Parker;¹³ and the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin.¹⁴ “To play good music,” they might all say, “you need to hear good music.”

Visual artists are no different. In 1850, 18-year-old Edouard Manet, the future star of Impressionist painting, registered as a copyist at the Louvre Museum in Paris. He spent hours a day imitating the works of Renaissance greats like Titian, Tintoretto, and Domenico Ghirlandaio.¹⁵ To paint good paintings, the lesson is, you need to see good paintings—and maybe even copy them too.

Digital library

Not everyone has access to the Louvre, as Manet did. Or to the legends of the Chitlin Circuit, as Jimi Hendrix did. And certainly nobody has access anymore to Jimmie Foxx, up close, in a batting cage, ready to be watched and studied, as Ted Williams did. But everyone can have access to superlative writing, regardless of your field, age, or profession. Your local library and bookstore make that possible. So does Amazon, Project Gutenberg, and the online versions of well-edited magazines and newspapers.

The University of Michigan Law School has even developed its own repository of excellent writing. Aware that many of the sentences that students read for class come

from convoluted statutes and clunkily composed judicial opinions, it has created a digital library designed to expose them to the patterns and techniques of passages that are much more elegant and engaging. The resource is called, straightforwardly enough, “Good Sentences,” and is available at <http://libguides.law.umich.edu/goodsentences>.

The Good Sentences library at Michigan is devoted to writing related to law in general. But you can imagine a Good Sentences library devoted to writing related to more specific topics: contracts, torts, immigration, family law—anything, really. You can imagine one set up for prosecutors, another for defense counsel, still another for each variety of transactional attorney. “Every discipline has a literature,” William Zinsser explains in *Writing to Learn*, “a body of writing that students and teachers can use as a model; writing is learned by imitation.”¹⁶

You might also imagine a Good Sentences library personally set up for yourself. Pick a subject. Find people who have written sentences you admire. And then read them, preferably aloud; preferably every day; preferably with an understanding that regardless of your career ambitions, much of your life will be spent composing sentences. You’ll compose them at work. You’ll compose them at home. You’ll compose them on your computer and on your phone. You’ll even compose them at least a few times, I hope, by hand—especially when you really want to make a personal connection.

Nobody is born knowing how to do this. But there are more than enough good sentences already written in the world to give you a wealth of models to learn from, with plenty more being crafted each day, on every subject, and in countless mediums. If you read widely enough, if you read well enough, you’ll no doubt craft many good ones yourself. ■

Patrick Barry is a clinical assistant professor at the University of Michigan Law School. If you would like to be added to his monthly email of “Good Sentences,” sign up at <http://libguides.law.umich.edu/goodsentences> or email Patrick at barrypj@umich.edu. Created at the request of former students, the email provides a regular dose of quality writing and other resources.

ENDNOTES

1. Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), p 68.
2. *Interview with Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr.*, 13 *Scribes J Leg Writing* 39–40 (2010).
3. Garner, *Garner on Language and Writing* (Chicago: American Bar Assoc, 2009), p 16.
4. *Id.*
5. Prose, *Reading Like a Writer: A Cure for People Who Love Books and Those Who Want to Write Them* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), p 9.
6. *Id.* at 36.
7. James, *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p 891.
8. Bradlee Jr., *The Kid: The Immortal Life of Ted Williams* (Columbus: Little, Brown & Company, 2013), p 118.
9. Burns, *Baseball: Inning 6—The National Pastime (1940–1950)* (PBS television broadcast September 25, 1994).
10. Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, *The Jimi Hendrix Experience* <<https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/jimi-hendrix-experience>> [accessed January 10, 2019].
11. Cross, *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix* (New York: Hachette Books, 2006), pp 104–105 and Smeaton, *Jimi Hendrix: Here My Train a Comin’* (PBS television broadcast November 5, 2013).
12. Geiringer, *Haydn: A Creative Life in Music* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p 21 (“According to Johann Friedrich Rochlitz, Haydn once said: ‘Proper teachers I have never had. I always started right away with the practical side, first in singing and in playing instruments, later in composition. I listened more than I studied, but I heard the finest music in all forms that was to be heard in my time, and of this there was much in Vienna. Oh, so much! I listened attentively and tried to turn to good account what most impressed me. Thus, little by little my knowledge and my ability were developed.’”).
13. Crouch, *Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker* (New York: Harper, 2013), p 175.
14. Ritz, *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin* (Columbus: Little, Brown & Company, 2014), p 72 (“Aretha liked to hang out at our shop—not only because she was crazy, but because of the music. She also spent a lot of time in my room—I had a separate apartment-like setup in the mansion—where she’d sit in front of the hi-fi for hours on end. That’s where she first heard Sarah Vaughan, Smokey’s favorite. But she didn’t stop with Sarah. She studied Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Carmen McRae, Anita O’Day, June Christy, Dakota Station—anyone I had on the box. She got to a point where she could imitate these singers, lick for lick.”).
15. Morris, *How Manet was influenced by the artists of the Renaissance*, *The Spectator* (August 3, 2013) <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/08/how-manet-was-influenced-by-the-artists-of-the-renaissance>> [accessed January 10, 2019].
16. Zinsser, *Writing to Learn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p viii.