

I



How to Write Short

The problem of writing short is exemplified by this anecdote, published in the *New York Times*, about the famed novelist E. L. Doctorow:

One morning at breakfast, when she was in the first or second grade, E. L. Doctorow's daughter, Caroline, asked her father to write a note explaining her absence from school, due to a cold, the previous day. Doctorow began, "My daughter, Caroline..." He stopped. "Of course she's my daughter," he said to himself. "Who else would be writing a note for her?" He began again. "Please excuse Caroline Doctorow..." He stopped again. "Why do I have to beg and plead for her?" he said. "She had a virus.

She didn't commit a crime!" On he went, note after failed note, until a pile of crumpled pages lay at his feet. Finally, his wife, Helen, said, "I can't take this anymore," penned a perfect note and sent Caroline off to school. Doctorow concluded: "Writing is very difficult, especially in the short form."

When it comes to the how of short writing, you will find three paths: learning short writing through reading; practicing the best short writing moves; and cutting longer texts down to size. If you want to write short, you must read short, and you must do it without bias. Yes, your reading will include classic poems and other gems of human culture, but the clever writer can never discriminate against the funkier or more utilitarian examples of the craft. The baseball card, the limerick, the lyric, the ransom note, the fortune in the fortune cookie—each stands as a work with a sharp rhetorical purpose and a clearly imagined audience.

Close reading of short forms reveals the most strategic moves practiced by the best writers. To grow in the craft, we study those moves, name them, imitate them, and adapt them till they conform to our own sense of mission and begin to sound like us.

A hard part of the writing process is cutting, and yes, Mr. Doctorow, the pain is magnified when the writing is short. Comparing it to surgery on the human body, cutting our prose moves us from excess fat to basic fat to muscle to bone to marrow and even deeper. During revision, I realize that 90 percent of my cuts are helpful. I want to keep cutting the clutter, but I reach a point where it's hard to know what

to cut and what to keep. The final cuts are hardest because they can identify nuances of meaning (think of the sculptor's final touches) or they can threaten something essential to the reader's understanding. An editor or test reader can come to the writer's rescue. It is often those final cuts—the finishing touches—that create the most dazzling facets of the diamond, a jewel of short writing, ready to be polished. How and when do we make those crucial cuts?

When we have worked our way through the how of short writing, we will be ready to tackle the why.

1



Collect short writing.

Remember the movie kid who said, "I see dead people"?

I see short writing.

I collect it all in my daybook: haikus and sonnets, aphorisms and parables, prayers and insults, bumper sticker slogans and T-shirt rhymes, blurbs, titles, ads, street signs, marginalia, bulleted lists, song lyrics, announcements, propaganda, and names, names, and more names. I can also go new-school: tweets, blog posts, updates on social networks, e-mails, text messages, and more.

I'm in an airport motel in Providence, Rhode Island, toweling off after a shower, when my eye catches a green tag hooked onto the towel rack.

"Reuse or replace?" it reads.

And then: "To reuse: hang towels up; to replace: place towels on floor."

Then at the bottom: "Take care. We owe it to one another."

The style is spare. Absent are words such as *environment*, *sustainability*, or *climate change*. The messenger counts on my knowing the backstory: that needless laundering of towels helps no one. The slight message does heavy work. It offers readers a choice, then a course of action and, as in a parable, a moral as a reward.

I prowl the stacks at a bookstore near Brown University called Books on the Square. A volume called *The Notebook* catches my eye. The author is José Saramago of Portugal, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. In short daily passages from September 2008 to November 2009 the author chronicles the final year of his life, offering sharp opinions on politics, literature, and culture. Some entries measure five hundred words or more, but the average length is shorter. Before it became a book, the entries ran as blog posts.

It fills me with joy that an eighty-seven-year-old author would keep a blog. He stands with the octogenarian golf writer Dan Jenkins, who still reports on tournaments live via Twitter. A third musketeer could be Herman Wouk, who is publishing—at the age of ninety-seven—an epistolary novel narrated through not just letters but e-mails, text messages, and tweets.

Saramago blogs on November 25, 2008, after a press conference in São Paulo, Brazil:

I was surprised that several journalists wanted to ask me about my role as a blogger... my decision to write on the "infinite page of the Internet." Could it be, to put it more

clearly, that it's here that we all most closely resemble one another? Is this the closest thing we have to citizen power? Are we more companionable when we write on the Internet? I have no answers; I'm merely stating the questions. And I enjoy writing here now. I don't know whether it is more democratic, I only know that I feel just the same as the young man with the wild hair and the round-rimmed glasses, in his early twenties, who was asking me... questions. For a blog, no doubt.

This passage ends with a delightful jolt, a standard move in clever short writing. That intentional sentence fragment stops the paragraph short, a passage that rolls downhill from a first-person statement to a meditation on writing, technology, and democracy to a vivid physical description of a young blogger—all hitting a full stop with the starkest language, five one-syllable words needing just fifteen letters.

But Saramago can go shorter. Consider his take on the economic/political summit known as G20:

On the subject of the chimera that is the G20, just three questions:

Why?

What for?

For whom?

Here the text reveals the effect of a single elegant word—a grace note—in an otherwise straightforward composition. That word is *chimera*. It means "illusion," or what the dictionary defines as "a fabrication of the mind." But that

meaning has been abstracted from the original. In Greek mythology, the chimera was an imaginary hybrid creature: "a fire-breathing she-monster . . . having a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail." That metaphor transforms twenty "heads" of state into a power-hungry monster with twenty heads.

What shall we say about the nature of short writing for those, such as Saramago, who are best known for writing long? Is the short piece a distillation of something much more substantial?

In a preface to *The Notebook*, the Italian novelist Umberto Eco offers this reflection:

I am writing this preface because I feel I have an experience in common with our friend Saramago, and this is of writing books on the one hand, and on the other of writing moral critiques in a weekly magazine. Since the second type of writing is clearer and more popular than the former, lots of people have asked me if I haven't decanted into the little articles wider reflections from the bigger books. But no, I reply, experience teaches me . . . that it is the impulse of irritation, the satirical sting, the ruthless criticism written on the spur of the moment that will go on to supply material for an essayistic reflection or a more extended narrative. It is everyday writing that inspires the most committed works, not the other way round.

In other words, if you want to write long, begin by writing short.

If your goal is to write short and well, you must begin by reading the best short writing you can find. Start by keeping a "commonplace book," a notebook that contains treasured short passages from favorite authors next to bits and pieces of your own writing.

A great collector of short, vivid language was Dale Carnegie, who inspired millions of readers with his midwestern common sense and pragmatic optimism. His own phrases were quoted countless times, perhaps because he spent formative years storing the wisdom of others.

In an introduction to an anthology titled *Dale Carnegie's Scrapbook*, Dorothy Carnegie explains, "Dale Carnegie was a man who loved the tang of a salty phrase. In all of his reading, the hooks of his attention were barbed to catch the pungent paragraph, the apt expression, the sweeping sentence that thereafter remained fixed in his memory."

On random pages the scrapbook stores quotes from Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Emily Dickinson, and Theodore Roosevelt, along with Washington, Franklin, Emerson, and many more. Gertrude Stein ("I like familiarity. In me it does not breed contempt. Only more familiarity") bumps into Wilbur Wright ("A parrot talks much but flies little").

In his book *The Man Who Made Lists*, Joshua Kendall describes the life of Peter Roget, who gave us the world-famous thesaurus. As a young boy, Roget kept notebooks in which he listed words that described all aspects of his little world. "At the heart of Peter's childhood notebook are his word lists," writes Kendall, "written in a neat hand and

consisting of Latin words juxtaposed with their English meanings, grouped under categories such as 'Beasts,' 'People,' 'Parts of the Body,' 'Of Writing, Reading, etc.,' 'In the Garden,' 'Of the Weather,' and many more.

Roget would have been a fan of Ben Schott's *Original Miscellany*, a tiny volume filled with both practical knowledge and interesting curiosities. The Twelve Labors of Hercules rub up against the names of Santa's reindeer; World War II postal acronyms (BURMA: be upstairs ready, my angel) from soldiers to their sweethearts back home sit nicely upon a list of Internet emoticons including "wearing a turban": @:-). Quotations from Samuel Johnson abound, including this one on the last page:

There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.

Let it be, Dr. Johnson, let it be.

GRACE NOTES

1. Keep a daybook devoted to short writing.
2. Include examples of great short writing collected from other sources.
3. Write short pieces of your own inspired by the ones you've collected.
4. Over time, examine your short writing for seeds of longer pieces.

HOW TO WRITE SHORT

5. Practice writing plain sentences that contain a grace note, one interesting word that stands out, such as Saramago's *chimera*.

6. You will run into great short writing in the most surprising places, from restaurant menus to rest room walls. Record these in your daybook or snap a photo with your cell phone.

Study short writing wherever
it finds you.

When it comes to the English language, writers cannot afford to be snobs. I may study the language of a writer such as Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Kidnapped*, but I am even more interested in the mangled language of a real ransom note.

Dear Sir!

Have 50.000\$ redy 25.000\$ in
20\$ bills 15.000\$ in 10\$ bills and
10.000\$ in 5\$ bills After 2-4 days
we will inform you were to deliver
the mony.

We warn you for making
anyding public or for notify the Police

The child is in gut care.
Indication for all letters are
singnature

and three hohls.

This note, one of several delivered after the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby in 1932, became a key piece of evidence in the conviction and execution of Bruno Hauptmann for the crime. The grammatical mistakes and phonetic spelling were the first clues that the kidnapper was of German descent.

The British author David Lodge says it best: a novelist, or any writer, “cannot afford to cut himself off from low, vulgar, debased language.” Nothing expressed in language is irrelevant for the learning writer, not the chants of soccer hooligans or the list of ingredients on a box of cake mix.

My reading and writing career, for example, began with baseball cards.

I was a first grader when I learned to decode the letters on the pages of my Dick and Jane reading primers, and while the “stories” in those books were stultifying, there was a genuine thrill of discovery in turning those letters into sounds and those sounds into meaning.

But because I was born in New York City in 1948, my little existence was electrified by the golden age of baseball. I owned boxes and boxes of baseball cards, which we collected, traded, and “flipped” in a variety of competitive games. The cards—which back then came with slabs of fragrant

bubble gum — featured images of the players, sometimes in photographic portraits, sometimes in action. I still own a few favorite cards, including five from the career of the famed baseball man Don Zimmer, who has now spent more than sixty years in baseball as a player, coach, manager, and consultant.

His 1954 card describes him as a prospect for the Brooklyn Dodgers: “Don was leading the American Association in Home Runs and Runs Batted In, July 7, 1953, when he was struck in the head by a pitch, missing the remainder of the season.... Don has aspirations to some day become a Major League manager [irony unintended!]” A cartoon at the bottom of the card shows a bride and groom surrounded by baseball players: “He and Miss Jean Bauerle were married at home plate in Elmira, N.Y., August 18, 1951.”

It was from these brief texts in small print on the backs of pieces of cardboard that I learned not just the background of the players but the rules of the game, its history and traditions, and, best of all, its language and slang: A “blue dart” was a line drive. A “can of corn” was an easy pop fly. “Chin music” was a pitch up and in.

It took me years and years to get out of the habit of reading the backs of cereal boxes as I ate my Wheaties or Rice Krispies. There was adventure in those texts back then, promises of special prizes inside the box, trinkets such as siren whistles and magnifying glasses, or stories about famous athletes like Lou Gehrig.

The boxes are not as interesting these days, but I have saved a beauty, a box of Kellogg’s Raisin Bran from 2003. The phrase “Two Scoops!” is prominent on the front. On one

side panel, under the phrase “High In Fiber,” is a list of nutrition facts. But the jackpot for breakfast table readers is on the back, a quiz that asks you to match up short quotations with the famous people who uttered them.

Who said, “If my husband ever met a woman on the street who looked like the women in his paintings, he would faint”? OK, that has to be Mrs. Pablo Picasso. Correct. (Answers are on the inside of the box.) “Be nice to people on your way up because you might meet ‘em on your way down”? Sounds like the gritty New York City talk of Jimmy Durante. Correct! (OK, so I got 16 out of 18 wrong.)

Short writing experiments assault me from every direction. I find six hundred websites devoted to fortune cookie messages, including the following:

- “Bread today is better than cake tomorrow.”
- “A feeling is an idea with roots.”
- “Cookie says ‘You crack me up.’”

And my favorite: “Ignore previous cookie.”

There may not be a smaller tablet space for short writing than those heart-shaped Valentine candies carrying love messages. My favorites are the old-school “Oh you kid” and “Hubba hubba,” with these new ones for journalists, submitted by an author named j-love:

- “Luv byte”
- “I’m ur tease”
- “Hot scoop”
- “Im-press me”

- "Lede me on"
- "Sexy syntax"
- "Pxl8 me"

Look at the sources of short writing gathered for this chapter, from ransom notes to baseball cards to cookie fortunes to heart candies.

Short texts written for one reason can be creatively repurposed for just the right occasion. Consider my encounter with an old-fashioned nautical ship's wheel, used as a decoration at the Bayboro Café in St. Petersburg. As I read the settings for steering, I noticed that the progression of words could stand for romantic progress, a voyage on the sea of love:

Let Go

Slack Away

All Clear

Ahead Slow

Stop

Astern Slow

Not Clear

Heave In

Make Fast

Docking

Prepare yourself to find interesting short texts in strange and surprising places. Some clever authors, especially in the postmodern era, look for unusual spaces to fill with text. No

writer is better known for this than Dave Eggers, especially in the appendices to the paperback edition of his book *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Among the least literary spaces in a book is the copyright page, so what is the reader to make of this from Eggers?

The author wishes to reserve the right to use spaces like this, and to work within them, for no other reason than it entertains him and a small coterie of readers. It does not mean that anything ironic is happening. It does not mean that someone is being *pomo* or *meta* or *cute*. It simply means that someone is writing in small type, in a space usually devoted to the copyright information, because doing so is fun. It has no far-reaching implications for the art, nor does it say anything of importance about the author, or his contemporaries, or his predecessors, or successors. It is simply the use of a space because that space is there, and the use of it is entertaining. It should not make you angry, and it should not influence in any important way your reading of this appendix, or the book it appendicizes.

Write short in surprising spaces.

An epilogue: Just a few days ago I ran into Beau Zimmer, a young Florida journalist and a grandson of Don Zimmer. "Please extend to your grandparents my warmest wishes on their sixtieth wedding anniversary," I said. "I know they were married at home plate in Elmira, New York."

"You must have owned his baseball card," said Beau.

GRACE NOTES

1. Imagine that an anti-Valentine's Day movement swept America. You would still give out little heart candies, but the messages would now reflect disgust, disappointment, disillusion. Write ten that are better than "Eat your heart out."

2. Make believe that fortune cookies were served at all ethnic restaurants. How would the fortunes read at, say, a New York-style Italian restaurant? "Fuhgeddaboutit!" or "Stop reading, you meatball, and EAT!" Try this with a variety of ethnicities.

3. By definition, your early language experiences involved short texts such as nursery rhymes or song lyrics for kids. For me, it was "Ring-around-the-rosy," with its secret associations with the plague. Find one of your buried treasures, research its origins, and write about it in your daybook.

4. Write a brief premise for a movie in which something discovered in a pack of baseball cards proves crucial.

5. Write a summary of a fictional story in which a message in a bottle proves to be pivotal.

3



Read for focus.

Even when we read long works, we can still read for focus. While the big parts need a focus, so do the smaller parts: sections, chapters, vignettes, anecdotes, paragraphs. Frank Deford, one of America's most popular and versatile writers, knows about focus. In this paragraph he homes in on the practical economics in the year 1898, as exemplified by the Uneda company's charging five cents for a package of crackers:

Uneda knew pricing. The nickel was king in America at this time. It was so common a currency that the dime was, often as not, called a "double nickel." You didn't want to get stuck with a wooden nickel. The ultimate depth of worthlessness was a plugged nickel. What this country needed was a good five-cent cigar. At a time when laborers

in New York made twenty cents an hour and a good meal would set you back fifteen cents, you could go into a saloon and, for a nickel, get a stein of beer and free bread, salami, pickled herring, and hard-boiled eggs for the asking. "Bar-keep, I'll have another beer." When the subway opened up, naturally a ride was pegged at a nickel. This was the same as for streetcars, which particularly crisscrossed Brooklyn, so the players had to be nimble to negotiate streets to reach the ballpark: hence, the borough's team of Trolley Dodgers. The new movies not only charged a nickel, but were not called what they were, but what they cost: nickelodeons. A cuppa coffee cost a nickel. So did a soft drink. "A Moxie, please." "Sure thing, mister, that'll be a nickel." Ice cream was a nickel. Likewise a Tootsie Roll.

This single paragraph from the book *The Old Ball Game* stretches to 207 words, which, as a set piece, falls within our standards for short writing. I don't want to define focus in the way a Supreme Court justice once defined obscenity: "I know it when I see it." When I saw this paragraph for the first time, I knew it was focused. I could see, speak, and hear the feeling that all the parts of this paragraph were working in concert and that the author knew the one thing he wanted to say and then marshaled the evidence to support it.

The first sentence, "Uneda knew pricing," serves as a transition from the previous sentence about the cost of a package of crackers. It is the next sentence that expresses the key point: "The nickel was king in America at this time." Take out the prepositional phrases, and you get the focus in four words: "The nickel was king."

Prove it! says the reader to herself. Show me!

And he does. I count eleven examples that coronate the currency, the first three embedded in familiar idioms of the day, and the next seven an inventory of things that cost five cents: a cigar, a beer, a movie, the subway, coffee, soda, ice cream, and candy. The passage is nailed tight with repetitions of the word *nickel*—ten in all.

David Von Drehle, an author and editor, won awards for his extraordinary writing on deadline. Deadline writing requires the sharpest focus, and Von Drehle would prepare himself to battle the clock with a set of focusing questions:

- Why does the story matter?
- What's the point?
- Why is the story being told?
- What does the story say about life, the world, the times we live in?

My colleague Chip Scanlan adds another question: What's my story really about?

It's the adverb *really* that matters. You could argue that a story by the magazine editor and author Jay Heinrichs is "about" his mother-in-law. Anna Jane has a serious heart condition and lies in a hospital bed, barely able to speak to loved ones gathered around to witness her dying.

Around 3 o'clock in the morning, Anna Jane lifted a weak finger and pointed to the can of Coke on a table across the room. "Sip o' that?" she whispered. So they propped her up and gave her a drink. She downed half the Coke,

despite an oxymoronic nurse's protest that caffeine was bad for the dying woman. Three hours later Anna Jane was sitting up on her own; two days after that she checked out of the hospital, furious that she had failed to die on schedule. It took her a couple years before she finally joined her husband.

In other words, the doctors couldn't save her, but a Coke could.

What is the story *really* about? To me, it is about the good that can flow from the violation of conventional wisdom, which often calls for a challenge to authority. Perhaps the story is about Yogi Berra's baseball aphorism that "it ain't over till it's over."

In your reading and learning, you will recognize instances in which a text, even a short one, lacks focus. Consider these examples:

The topic is too wide: "Vandalism costs millions of dollars to repair." This is the equivalent of staring into a blue sky looking for a sliver of moon. Someone needs to help the writer answer questions that narrow the topic: What kind of vandalism? Exactly where in our community is this a problem? Can we find a microcosm, a single vandalized place that can stand for the others?

The author takes a detour: "Milli Vanilli was a German pop singing group in the late 1980s, a couple of pretty boys who preferred lip-synching to real singing, Germany being a place that produced several pop groups in that decade." The

story of the defrocked boy band needs its own focus. The state of German pop music may be a useful piece of background, but here it's a distraction.

The writer lacks a sense of audience: The result is a confusion of language: "The Omega Point in human history illustrates a teleological perspective that can stretch like Bazooka bubble gum if you chew on it too long." I am one of those writers who like to allude to Saint Augustine of Hippo and the Hungry Hungry Hippos game in the same sentence. That verbal ventriloquism may mark my prose as edgy, but it will not matter if the work is unfocused.

Clutter hides a clear focus: "He was the kind of man who was way too busy to engage in common everyday activities, such as the flushing of toilets and the placing of dirty dishes in the dishwasher." (I've written a bloated version of the novelist Mona Simpson's great opening line "He was a man too busy to flush toilets.") Removal of clutter from a thirty-two-word sentence reveals a sharply focused lead sentence. Nine words out-work thirty-two. The shorter the text, the tighter the focus.

GRACE NOTES

1. Begin to notice in longer works paragraphs with a sharp focus. Save the best ones in your daybook.
2. **Whatever you write, ask yourself the key questions:**
 - What's my point?
 - In a sentence, what am I trying to say?
 - What is the work *really* about?

3. Test your short writing experiments with these additional questions:

- Have I taken a detour?
- Have I squeezed in extra stuff?
- Have I shifted tenses or language styles?

4. Examine earlier entries in your daybook with these questions:

- What is this bit really about?
- Can I answer that question in ten words? Five? Three?

4



Practice reading at a glance.

What happens when a reader can see a text all at once, without having to turn a page or scroll down the screen? You can hold a book and realize that it weighs a pound and includes six hundred pages or more. You may peek at the first page or the last, but you cannot see the entire text at a glance. When the text is short enough, you can have that experience. When you practice that single glance, you can begin to make predictions about how the reading will go. Here's what you can do:

- Make a quick decision about how long it will take to read the piece and whether the topic is worth your time.
- Notice the beginning, middle, and end all at the same time, helping you sense the logic of the whole.

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