

Instructor's Guide to

HOW TO WRITE A SENTENCE

And How to Read One

by STANLEY FISH

"Both deeper and more democratic than *The Elements of Style*."

—*Financial Times*

"A guided tour through some of the most beautiful, arresting sentences in the English language."

—*Slate*

INTRODUCTION

"All you have to do is write one true sentence," said Ernest Hemingway with his usual understatement. "Write the truest sentence you know." Easier said than done, of course, but the foundation of Hemingway's advice—that all students of writing should practice and execute their work in a sentence-by-sentence manner—makes a lot of sense. This is the thrust of Stanley Fish's clear, concise, and accessible guidebook, *How to Write a Sentence*.

This volume, which carries the important subtitle of "And How to Read One," is about both the art and craft of sentence making. It's the work of a writer, professor, and columnist who rightly considers himself a sentence connoisseur (on page 3): "Some appreciate fine art; others appreciate fine wines. I appreciate fine sentences." Conversational, wide-ranging, opinionated, and deeply informed, Fish is the ideal companion as you and your students set out to explore what makes a given sentence tick, what makes it successful, and what makes it great—or a failure. A true aficionado of language, Fish makes his points succinctly and engagingly. His chapters are short and precise; his tone is amiable, enthusiastic, and never boring.

Full of interesting asides and readable analyses, *How to Write a Sentence* is also brimming with well-chosen examples from the likes of Jane Austen, John Milton, William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, Elmore Leonard, John Updike, and Agatha Christie. Imitation of such masters is encouraged frequently in these pages, for this is a different sort of writing guide—one that asserts that students will be better served by emulating the form, logic, or style of a certain well-made sentence than by, for example, committing to rote the various functions of the eight parts of speech in English.

This instructor's guide will augment and further the exercises that can be found in the pages of *How to Write a Sentence*, and it's keyed to Fish's book in a chapter-by-chapter fashion. For each of the book's ten chapters, a teacher-friendly summary is presented at the outset, and then

four questions are given. These questions are all directly addressed to your students; the first two (questions 1 and 2) are meant to encourage individual responses or classroom discussions, while the following two (questions 3 and 4) are presented as homework assignments, paper-writing requirements, or the like. The book's brief Epilogue warrants a summary, too, along with two final questions.

CHAPTER ONE: WHY SENTENCES?

SUMMARY: In the opening chapter of *How to Write a Sentence*, Fish explains why he thinks sentences—rather than words—are the fundamental ingredients of writing. He admits that he's a member of "the tribe of sentence watchers," that he's "always on the lookout for sentences that take your breath away." (page 3) This book is a sentence primer of sorts—a gathering of lessons, tips, observations, and digressions on the art and the function of the sentence in English. It's basically a how-to-write (and how-to-read) guidebook that's entirely sentence-driven. As Fish notes at the outset, "My motives are at once aesthetic and practical. . . . I promise to give you both sentence pleasure and sentence craft, the ability to appreciate a good sentence and the ability to fashion one." (page 8)

1. When it comes to writing, Fish announces on page 1, "the nitty-gritty material of the medium" is not words but, in fact, sentences. What is his reasoning here? Why aren't words the essential components of writing? And why does Fish regard sentences as such?
2. On page 11, Fish offers a three-part assertion that he calls "the formula." What is this formula? Describe what it means, how it works, and explain whether you, as a student of writing as well as reading, would deem this formula successful.
3. Sentences "promise nothing less than lessons and practice in the organization of the world," as Fish notes on page 7. A grand claim, perhaps—but, if we stop and think about the aim or the purpose of language itself, maybe Fish is right on target. Keeping in mind Fish's "promise" assertion from above, compose a brief essay that explains how sentences—in your own view—can or cannot be related to ideas like organization, logic, discourse, rhetoric, and structure. What can sentences do? What can't they do?
4. One of the "definitions" of a sentence in this book is lifted from the work of the poet John Donne: "A little world made cunningly." (page 8) What does this phrase, in its original context, describe? As a homework assignment, select and transcribe four or five cunningly-made sentences from anything you've read lately for either schoolwork or pleasure—and in each case, explain why you've chosen the sentence. For each example, talk about the cunning aspects that you admire: the intellect, the perceptiveness, the artistry, the dexterity, the grace, etc.

CHAPTER TWO: WHY YOU WON'T FIND THE ANSWER IN STRUNK AND WHITE

SUMMARY: The question addressed in Chapter Two is “What is a sentence?” In providing an answer, Fish first points out that many other writing guides and composition texts—even the celebrated *Elements of Style*, first published in 1959 and written by Strunk and White—have missed the mark in this regard by incorrectly or over-simplistically emphasizing that writing can be learned through studying grammatical forms (such as the functions of the parts of speech, or the mechanics of dependent and independent clauses). It’s not, as Fish notes on page 15, “that focusing on forms is irrelevant to the act of composing, but that the focus one finds in grammar books is on the wrong forms, on forms detached from the underlying (or overarching) form that must be in place before any technical terms can be meaningful or alive. That underlying form is the sentence itself.” So, this brief volume is a series of explanations and appreciations vis-à-vis the sentence. And by “sentence,” to be clear, Fish is referring to both “an organization of items in the world” and “a structure of logical relationships.” (page 17) To this end, the familiar and essential “doer, doing, done to” pattern—or, if you prefer, reliable “subject-verb-object” structure—is established and reiterated. Several examples of, and elaborations on, this structure are offered, always in an effort to draw students’ attention to the relationships (a word that’s very important to Chapter Two) that exist amid the words of a given sentence. If these words are all in accord in terms of their structure and logic—in terms of “what they point to,” as Fish puts it, more than once—then the sentence in question is valid and coherent. It makes sense; it works; it is a sentence.

1. At the bottom of page 16, Fish asks: “What is it that we do when we make a sentence out of a random collection of words?” As a student, and as one who has read this chapter, how would you answer him? Be sure to explain how the excerpt from Kenneth Koch’s poem (see page 17) illustrates the point Fish is making here.

2. The title of this chapter refers explicitly to *The Elements of Style*, a grammar guide that’s widely been seen (for a few generations now) as not just a standard work of its kind but, moreover, a classic. However, Fish reminds us that “[y]ou can’t tell anything about the function a word plays in a sentence by identifying it as a noun or a verb.” (page 20) Why is this point so crucial to Chapter Two of *How to Write a Sentence*? What does it have to do with the broader assertions or arguments that the author is making in this book?

3. On page 23, Fish takes the simple sentence “John hit the ball” and converts it “into something unreadable but perfectly formed.” On your own, do the same sort of convoluted conversion for the sentences “Mary looked at the clock” and “David made breakfast.” This sort of overwriting isn’t really difficult, as Fish tells us: “Constructing [such a] monster is easy.” But—after building such monsters—as the meaningful part of your assignment, go back to each of your long and winding sentences and, in as much detail as possible, offering as many verbal and logistical explanations as you can, describe what you did to your “Mary” and “David” constructions.

CHAPTER THREE: IT’S NOT THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

SUMMARY: Chapter Three immediately picks up on the structural/logical claims for the sentence that were paramount in the previous chapter. Fish urges us, whenever we focus on sentences, to pay particular “attention to the structural relationships that make content—any content—possible.” (page 25) Again, it’s all about the relationships among the words—rather than what the words mean. So, when we are studying sentences—when we’re breaking them down, or trying to write them, or appreciating them, or diagraming them—content must come AFTER form. As Fish asserts on page 29, such “forms” are “not parts of speech or any other bit of abstract machinery. [Rather, they are] structures of logic and rhetoric within which and by means of which meanings—lots of them—can be generated.” Logical structures, he adds, include things like the familiar actor/action/object-acted-upon pattern, while “rhetorical structures are structures of argument.” That is, argument as in rhetoric—as in building a discourse, constructing a causal narrative, making a case. Writing is about not just expressing ourselves, after all—it’s also about communicating our thoughts and impressions so that others will hear us, understand us, reply to us, laugh with us. Such communication comes down to rhetoric. Rhetoric, or the establishment of a reasoned argument in words and ideas, comes down to structure. Structure comes down to form. And form comes before content (for now, at least!).

1. After explicating a linguistic example, conceived by Noam Chomsky, of “a well-formed structure without meaning” (see pages 26-7), Fish announces: “It is true that you can’t get from form to content, but it is also true that without form, content cannot emerge. . . . Forms are generative not of specific meanings, but of the very possibility of meaning.” Explain what he means here, concentrating on his “very possibility of meaning” remark.

2. Define “templates” (as the term is used on page 29 and afterwards). How might such templates prove useful to writers and students? What can they do for us, as writers of sentences? What lessons can they offer?

3. As a homework assignment, write a few sentences, as suggested by Fish on page 30, “in which three or even four times zones—past perfect, past, present, future—are structured into an account of related actions.” The more creative you can get with these sentences, the better; but above all else, be sure to keep them logically sound, formally intact, and structurally airtight.

4. “Creativity is often contrasted with forms to the latter’s detriment,” writes Fish on page 30, “but the truth is that forms are the engines of creativity.” A few pages later, he tells us, directly and confidently (and somewhat biblically): “You shall tie yourself to forms and the forms shall set you free.” In a short essay, paraphrase the point Fish is making here about the relationship between ironclad form and artistic content, between structure and imagination, between being constrained and being creative. How could something that holds you in, or holds you down, actually “set you free”? When writing your essay, consider citing supportive examples (of your own choosing) from literature, music, or any of the other arts.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT IS A GOOD SENTENCE?

SUMMARY: The key word in the chapter title above is, of course, “good.” Not just a sentence, mind you, but a good one. We’re now moving our discussion into the realm of WHAT is being said in a given sentence (as opposed to HOW it’s being said). Thus Fish redirects us from the matter of form back to that of content. On page 35, he writes: “Content, the communication in a thrilling and effective way of ideas and passions, is finally what sentences are for.” But back to “good” for a moment—it’s a relative term, obviously, and it’s also a value judgment that could mean different things to different readers in different situations (or of different backgrounds). As such, “good” is a word that leads us, as students of sentence making, to the notion of context. Selecting (as a writer) or determining (as a reader) the context of a given sentence—the purpose it’s being written for; the point or aim or intent that it’s serving—is the overall concern of Chapter Four. “The first thing to ask when writing a sentence,” as Fish writes on page 37, “is ‘What am I trying to do?’” Writing a sentence is about making choices—and these include not just choices about form and structure but also, and inevitably, choices about content and style. This last word, style, receives a lot of attention in this chapter (and it gets even more attention in subsequent chapters). Fish says on page 43: “The first step in producing good sentences is to decide on what style you will use to communicate your message, a decision that sends a message of its own.”

1. On page 37, Fish parenthetically remarks: “Examples, not rules, are what learning to write requires.” How is he able to make this claim? What’s his reasoning here? And do you agree with him? Explain.

2. What is meant in *How to Write a Sentence* by the phrase “dimensions of assessment”? (It’s a phrase that, as we see on page 38, actually comes from another book, *How to Do Things with Words*.) Why should we, as writers of sentences, be concerned with dimensions of assessment? What does an awareness of such dimensions give to us? How does it strengthen our writing?

3. The discussion of style in writing is an important aspect of this chapter. On page 42, we read: “The shaping power of language cannot be avoided. We cannot choose to distance ourselves from it. We can only choose to employ it in one way or another. We can only choose our style, not choose to abandon style.” Is it true to say that the presence of style in writing is as necessary and as inevitable as is the presence of words in language? Write a short paper addressing this question—and in doing so, refer to Fish’s citations of Bishop Thomas Sprat, the Roman orator Cato, and Jonathan Swift. (pages 40-2)

4. Marianne Moore once wrote that her fellow poet (and fellow modernist) William Carlos Williams wrote in a language that was “plain American, which cats and dogs can read.” What could be simpler, in terms of style, than that? Yet obviously the work of Williams was, in its way, highly stylized. As a homework assignment, track down a poem or story or novel that seems as simple or “plain” as can be—and then describe some of the intricacies, hallmarks, or defining characteristics of the style at work in the piece you’ve chosen.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE SUBORDINATING STYLE

SUMMARY: Chapters Five, Six, and Seven slow things down a bit, thereby exploring three different formal modes that can be employed in the writing of sentences: the subordinating, additive, and satiric styles. (Of course, these aren't the only three styles available to a writer; there are an unlimited number of styles under the sun. Fish chose these three for their common use and pedagogical readiness.) In these style-driven chapters, the author presents fewer basic rules and general axioms, and more case-in-point examples. Students will learn a good deal in these chapters through imitation; sentences created by various well-known writers are cited as illustrations, and are then extolled, dismantled, critiqued, and spotlighted accordingly. In Chapter Five: The Subordinating Style, we encounter a mode of writing that, as we read on page 46, "orders its components in relationships of causality (one event or state is caused by another), temporality (events or states are prior or subsequent to one another), and precedence (events and states are arranged in hierarchies of importance)." As we've seen before in this book, it's all about relationships—moreover, in the specific case of subordination, it's also about control. At the end of this chapter, we therefore read that sentences in the subordinating mode guide "the reader down a path that lies waiting for him or her," such that the reader feels he or she is "in the company of a mind that has thought it all out and is delivering it . . . with complete mastery." (page 60)

1. "It may sound counterintuitive," remarks Fish on page 48, "but you'll have a better chance of persuading readers that what you are about to say is universally acknowledged as a truth if you don't actually use the phrase 'It is a truth universally acknowledged.'" Why does Fish point this out? Is he mocking Jane Austen? What's he telling us about the art of writing? What advice is he sharing about the deployment of style?

2. Look again at the extended sentence by Martin Luther King, Jr. (pages 52-3). Then, review what Fish says about this sentence on page 54: "As the huge dependent clause (a clause that does not stand alone as a complete sentence) grows and grows, the independent clause—the sentence's supposedly main assertion—becomes less and less necessary." Why is this so? And what does this insight tell us, in turn, about how subordinating-style sentences achieve their power, about what makes them effective? Also, what does Fish mean (page 52) when he says that such sentences "lean forward"?

3. "Control is what this style at once performs and announces," writes Fish of the subordinating style on page 56. Write a short paper that revisits two or three of the sentences cited as examples over the course of Chapter Five, and in each case, try to explain the "control" at work in the sentence at hand. In each sentence you've chosen, how is such control is being achieved?

4. As a homework assignment, consult a blog, a political tract, a newspaper or magazine article, or even an essay (in any case, a text of your own choosing) with the goal of pulling a subordinating-style sentence or two out of this piece of writing. Try to find subordinating sentences that exemplify what Fish calls "imitative form" on page 58—that is, sentences where the "words do what they describe." Then, share these sentences with your classmates.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ADDITIVE STYLE

SUMMARY: Chapter Six of *How to Write a Sentence* takes us in a new and seemingly opposite direction from the style of sentence-writing that we studied in the previous chapter. As Fish writes on page 61, “Suppose you wanted to achieve another effect, the effect of not planning, order, and control, but of spontaneity, haphazardness, and chance.” Enter: the additive style. In this chapter, we are shown how the additive style has been put to use by the likes of Sterne, Salinger, Woolf, Hemingway, and others. In each and every example, one idea or moment or event follows right after another, one impression leads to the next, one phrase gives way to another—with “each presenting itself as an equivalent of or an addition to what precedes it,” as Fish writes on page 87, and “with no attempt to subordinate one to another.”

1. Why does Fish call the great French essayist Montaigne “the fountain of [the additive] style”? And what criticisms does Fish convey of Montaigne’s way of writing—or, more accurately, of Montaigne’s own claims about why he wrote as he did? Do you agree with these criticisms? Why or why not?
2. “The great modern theorist of the additive, or coordinating, style is Gertrude Stein,” writes Fish on page 69. What does Stein mean when she says—as quoted by Fish on the following page—that “everything is the same except composition and time”? What is Stein saying here about writing—that is, about how she herself tries to write? And further, what does Fish mean when he says that this “insight [of Stein’s] is theological”?
3. Why is the additive style of sentence making so aptly suited to the “stream of consciousness” writing that we associate with modern writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce? As a homework assignment, write a short essay that addresses this question. While doing so, feel free to cite one or more of the excerpts from Woolf’s work that appear in this chapter. Another (and related) idea to explore in your paper might be Fish’s remark (page 87) that the additive style is especially useful for writers who want to “create [a] still but moving picture.”
4. “Although it might seem as if writing in the additive style is just a matter of putting one thing after another in no particular order (how can that be hard?), it is in fact the more difficult style to master,” Fish writes on page 84. He’s comparing the additive style with the subordinating style, of course. Do you agree with Fish on this point? Why or why not? Write a short paper explaining how you see this matter.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SATIRIC STYLE: THE RETURN OF CONTENT

SUMMARY: Chapter Seven turns our attention to the satiric style. In the two previous chapters of *How to Write a Sentence*, we’ve looked closely at the subordinating and additive styles, both of which are formal methods of approach—the former subordinates or classifies its contents; the latter adds or associates its words and phrases one after another. Now we turn to satire, which is a matter of content, rather than form. But why satire, you ask? It’s a fair question, and

Fish's forthright answer is this: "While formal devices are limited in number, contents are not; a book surveying or anatomizing them would go on forever. . . . So I'm arbitrarily going to choose one kind of content to serve as a bridge between the largely formal part of this book, the how-to-write part, and the more relaxed part, the how-to-read-and-appreciate part. I choose satire, the art in which 'human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit.'" (pages 89-90) A bit later, and importantly, Fish adds that satire "is a mode of writing characterized by great control of tone. . . . [And while] satire is obviously a content category . . . there's a lot of formal skill [required] in writing satire, so our training in forms will continue."

1. Look again at the Oscar Wilde quotation on page 92. Explain why the phrase "perfectly at its ease" is, as Fish points out, doubly insulting to the English public. That is, explain both of the insults at work in this phrase.

2. On page 95, we find a famous satirical quotation from the work of Jonathan Swift. On the following page, in order to convey the brilliant economy and careful structure of Swift's quote, Fish offers several off-the-cuff "imitations" of it. Explain why these imitations—as Fish himself admits—are "so lame"? Why do they sound so flat? Why do they seem dull and unforgettable? What do they lack?

3. As we've seen in the two questions immediately above, two of the standout examples in this chapter come from English writers (namely, Wilde and Swift). When discussing the inner workings of satire near the top of page 95, Fish notes, parenthetically: "The English are particularly good at this." Why do you think he makes this claim? After doing a bit of research, prepare a brief essay about the tradition of satire in English literature.

4. As a homework assignment, take a subject near and dear to your heart—anything of your choosing, as long as it's something that you know a lot about and care for—and then write a satirical piece that spoofs or dismisses (or even demolishes?) your chosen subject. In crafting your satire, try to employ some of the techniques and tactics discussed in Chapter Seven. Go ahead, be merciless! And have fun with your piece; sometimes it's easiest to mock that which we love most.

CHAPTER EIGHT: FIRST SENTENCES

SUMMARY: In Chapter Eight: First Sentences, we're looking at many fine sentences that possess what Fish calls (page 99) "an angle of lean"—a varied yet consistent quality that somehow tilts forward and suggests future events, that grabs us (as readers) immediately, and pulls us in, and makes us likewise tilt forward in anticipation. The first sentence, Fish continues, is "at once a formal category and a category of substance. . . . Even the simplest first sentence is on its toes, beckoning us to the next and the next and the next, promising us insights, complications, crises, and, sometimes, resolutions." As with the chapter that immediately follows it (on last sentences), this chapter is rich in memorable, effective, and beautifully written sentences, but not for formally instructive purposes. Fish tells us: "There can be no formula for writing a first sentence, for the promise it holds out is unique to the imagined world it introduces." (page

100) In Chapter Eight, we're considering a host of first sentences in terms of how they introduce—through words, images, arguments, structures, rhythms, surprises, negations, affirmations, and so on—their respective imagined worlds.

1. What does Fish mean by “angle of lean”? (pages 99, 102) Why is this phrase so important to a successful first sentence?

2. Beginning on page 110, we find the opening sentence of “Nature,” an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Paraphrase this sentence; explain what Emerson is warning us of, or what he's cautioning against. What does Fish mean when he says, on page 111, that “what [this] sentence argues is that faith in the state is faith in a chimera”?

3. First sentences are sometimes “marked by compression,” as Fish says on page 106. “They do a lot of work in a short time. . . . These sentences are narrative in mode; they begin to tell a story, and we want to hear the rest of it. In other first sentences the job of setting things up is done not by narrative, but by mood, metaphor, and imagery.” As a homework assignment, review some of your favorite stories, essays, or novels in order to produce several examples of both kinds—that is, the shorter, narrative kind of first sentence as well as the atmospheric or metaphorical kind.

4. On the facing pages of 100 and 101, we see two first sentences from two world-famous mystery novelists. One opening sentence comes from a book published in 1971; the other from a 1980 book—and both novels, we notice, feature a female detective as their heroine. Based on these two opening sentences—and taking into consideration the tone, language, and point of view of each—which novel would you be more interested in reading? Write a short paper that explains and defends your choice.

CHAPTER NINE: LAST SENTENCES

SUMMARY: And now we go from first to last. If first sentences are “promissory notes,” as Fish writes on page 119, then last sentences are the “heirs of the interest that is generated by everything that precedes them.” As such, “they don't have to start the engine; all they have to do is shut it down.” As with the chapter that comes just before it, Chapter Nine is long on examples; closing sentences of all sorts and stripes and styles are paraded before students to demonstrate how several notable writers have, in various situations and with various concluding intentions, tried to land the proverbial plane. Interestingly, there are a few instances in this chapter in which Fish shows us how certain authors were unable (or otherwise incapable) of executing such a landing successfully. There are also a few illustrative last sentences that are flat-out clichés—yet somehow, sometimes, even these can work, as we see. As with the first sentence, as Fish writes on page 122, the last sentence “is both a formal and a content category. Last sentences are formal items because they can be picked out with no reference to anything that is being said; but it is only because of the things that have been said before they appear that last sentences are resonant.”

1. Last sentences, Fish says, “often come across as elegiac.” (page 119) Why is this so? What is he telling us about the manner in which last sentences usually function?

2. What exactly is meant by “alliteration” (a literary term that’s mentioned on page 124, and elsewhere)? Explain why Fish thinks alliteration is being deployed successfully in the final sentence of *The Great Gatsby*.

3. Early in this chapter (page 120), Fish cites the final sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. However, he’s doing so not for laudatory reasons, but to point out why this sentence DOESN’T work: “The sentence is just too formulaic, mechanical, and stagey. . . . (I have the same opinion of the novel’s even more famous first sentence).” Are you familiar with the first sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities*? Look it up, if you’re not, and then write a short paper in which you either agree with Fish’s evaluations of both of these sentences or take them to task.

4. We know about happy endings and unhappy ones; we know about comedies and tragedies. But, along these same lines, must last sentences always adhere to one emotional extreme or the other? No, of course not. Fish notes on page 130: “Some last sentences refuse both . . . positive and negative resolutions and keep their tensions and tumults alive till the end.” He goes on to offer, by example, the final sentence of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. As a homework project, come up with a last sentence—as culled from a book you’ve read and enjoyed, of any size or genre—that delivers its final and concluding blow, as it were, by maintaining a stance of indifference, neutrality, or unresolved conflict.

CHAPTER TEN: SENTENCES THAT ARE ABOUT THEMSELVES (AREN’T THEY ALL?)

SUMMARY: Chapter Ten begins with a concise and useful review of the path traveled thus far by *How to Read a Sentence*. The whole development of Fish’s argument, from its impetus to its main thrust to its tangents, is presented in a recap that might well boast the clarity and logic of some of the author’s model sentences. But this backward glance is just for openers; the majority of Chapter Ten is a resolution of the form-versus-content issue that’s been interwoven into the nine preceding chapters of the book. “In reading over the pages I have written,” Fish admits on page 135, “I have become aware that they have been staging a drama or a contest between what we might call the instrumental view of language . . . and a view of a language as a formal system [in which] meanings serve it and not the other way around. . . . Almost without my knowing it, the unfolding of my argument mirrored the struggle between these two views.” Indeed, given that content and form have been more or less slugging it out in this book in a theis/anthithesis manner, what Fish offers in this concluding chapter is a synthesis. On page 136, he states: “In this final section I will bring the two strains of the book together by looking at sentences whose content is their form—sentences self-conscious about their own composition, sentences that meditate on their own limitations, sentences that burst their own limitations, sentences that invite and resist interrogation, sentences that . . . [are] determinedly self-reflexive and aspire to the condition of pure objects.”

1. On page 137, Fish offers a sentence by John Milton that “enacts what it describes.” Why does Fish claim, as he does on the following page, that Milton’s sentence is “itself a true poem because of its reticence”?
2. The Ford Madox Ford sentence quoted by Fish on page 150 shows us a person (i.e., John Dowell, narrator of *The Good Soldier*) who, in Fish’s phrase, “cannot even comprehend his incomprehension.” How does the sentence do this? Explain why Fish says that this sentence “fully present[s] a character and allow[s] us to see through him at the same time.”
3. When analyzing a sentence by Anthony Powell at the bottom of page 153—an appropriately rhythmic and far-reaching sentence that begins with “The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality”—Fish notes that “only mortal beings experience time as a shaping medium, which means that only mortal beings write, or need to write, sentences.” Write a brief essay that explains—or even expands on—the link that Fish is making here. That is, the link between the temporality (or linear chronology) of life and the fact that, in living such a life, we must all make choices, organize thoughts, establish categories, and create sentences.
4. Look again at the final sentence of this chapter, which is a “who knows?” type of rhetorical question positing a supposed “choice between eternity and some of the sentences we have lingered over.” What exactly is Fish asking of us, in this last sentence? What is the “choice” at hand? In a short paper, discuss the religious significance—or the theological (to use a word employed often by Fish) heft—that distinguishes so many of the exemplary sentences in *How to Write a Sentence*, especially as the book approaches its close. (Also, looking forward just a bit, note how Fish uses the phrase “altar of sentences” in the final paragraph of his Epilogue.)

EPILOGUE

SUMMARY: The book’s short Epilogue reminds us that, as is so often the case, what looks like the end is really a beginning. There are now, and there will always be, many more model sentences out there, just waiting for our attention—many more “sentences to read, to take apart, to caress, and to write.” (page 159) In doing all of these activities, we’re doing important work indeed, for sentences “engage us in the stringent and salutary exploration of the linguistic resources out of which our lives and our very selves are made.”

1. “I invite those readers who can’t believe I failed to include their all-time favorite sentence to send it to me,” says Fish on page 159. What sentence, in this regard, would YOU send to him? Pick one, and then share your choice with your classmates.
2. One of the more poetic and insightful—and stunning—excerpts in this book is surely the passage by Gertrude Stein on page 160, which also happens to be Fish’s last quotation. In that passage, we find the following sentence: “I like the feeling the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves.” Why is Stein so moved by the experience of diagramming sentences? And why does she say that the sentences in question are, in fact, diagramming

themselves? How is this possible? Or isn't it? Write a short paper explaining what diagramming sentences means to her—grammatically, spiritually, existentially, and otherwise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STANLEY FISH is the Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor and a professor of law at Florida International University. He has previously taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Johns Hopkins University, Duke University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he was dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The author of more than a dozen books, Fish is also a weekly columnist for *The New York Times*.

SCOTT PITCOCK, who wrote this teacher's guide, is a writer, editor, and public radio producer and host. He is based in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One by Stanley Fish
Harper: Hardcover, 978-0-06-184054-8.

www.HarperAcademic.com