

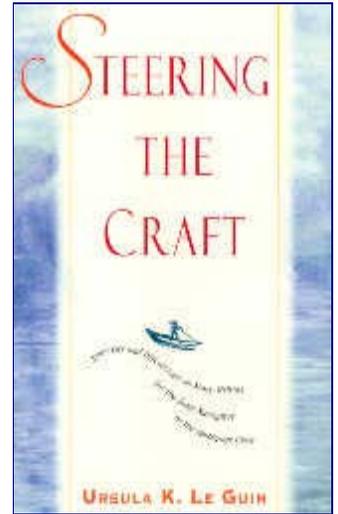
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Steering the Craft Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew by Ursula K. Le Guin

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2009



In his course "Building Great Sentences" Professor Brooks Landon mentioned this book, and I was immediately grabbed

by the title as it suggested that writing is a craft which one can learn to steer. One can see the eponymous craft being steered which graces the cover and the beginning of every chapter. The image remains the same while the words vary both in content and in the waves they create in graceful *swooshes* across the page. Here are some of my favorite *swooshes* which grace, illustrate, and support the chapter titles, but to appreciate the effect of the *swooshes* one will need to buy the book, and then one can see visually such details as in the heading for Chapter 3 the wavy curvature of the swooshed text lessens until it goes flat, level on the page, for the final phrase, "We were becalmed." Note: The slash (/) indicates the beginning of another wavy *swoosh*. One can see the boat, its steerer, and three *swooshes* on the cover of the book.

Book Cover — Steering the Craft: *Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing/for the Lone Navigator/or the Mutinous Crew*

Chapter One — The Sound of Your Writing: *She slipped swift as a silvery fish/through the slapping gurgle of the sea-waves.*

Chapter Two — Punctuation: *Damn the semicolons cried the captain full speed ahead*

Chapter Three — Sentence Length and Complex Syntax: *The wind died./The sail fell slack./The boat slowed, halted./We were becalmed.*

Chapter Four — Repetition: *The sudden wind brought rain,/a cold rain on a cold wind.*

Chapter Five — Adjective and Adverb: *We completed the voyage without succumbing/to the temptation of opening/the box of candy.*

Chapter Six — Pronoun and Verb: *The old woman dreamed of the past/as she navigated the seas of time.*

Chapter Seven — Point of View and Voice: *I saw he was lost in his memories, like a boat/that drifts on its own reflection.*

Chapter Eight — Changing Point of View: *They sailed easily from the past to the present,/but now/they can't get back.*

Chapter Nine — Indirect Narration or What Tells: *A: lower the topgallants!/B: I will when I find them.*

Chapter Ten — Crowding and Leaping: *If we dump the ballast we'll be there in no time.*

My suggestion when learning something new is to know all about it before you start. With Chapter Headings and the *swoosh* text already behind us, we are ready to begin our review of this book. Carefully climb into your craft, stand erect, feet apart, and grab the steering pole as I push you gently adrift in the tricky currents of write-water rapids with Ursula Le Guin as your co-pilot.

Under Punctuation, she notes that poet Carolyn Kizer said to her recently, "Poets are interested mostly in death and commas," but adds Le Guin adds her own comment, "Prose writers are interested mostly in life and commas." Then she addresses you with the steering pole in your hand:

[page 31] If you aren't interested in punctuation, or are afraid of it, you're missing out on a whole kit of the most essential, beautiful, elegant tools a writer has to work with.

In other words, you may not be able to steer your craft away from obstacles in the rapids if your punctuation duffle bag is bare or was left onshore as unnecessary baggage. Only with a full kit of grammar tools can one safely navigate the speedy twists and turns of English or any other language. Socrates knew it to be true about his native Greek when he said, "The misuse of language induces evil in the soul." (Page 32) Le Guin has that sentence pinned over her desk where it's been for a long time. It's a sentence which can act as an unanswered question because even if you think you understand immediately upon reading what it means, each exposure to it can infuse you with the energy required to use language and not misuse it. Saying blithely as so many talking heads do on television, ". . . between you and I" does not make it correct. After all if you switch the pronouns and say instead, ". . . between I and you" it sounds blatantly foolish, does it not? One way cannot be right without the other being wrong and therefore both must be wrong, it seems to I . . . uh, I mean "to me" of course, but you get the idea of what happens when you confuse nominative (I) and objective (me) forms of the first person personal pronoun singular. Le Guin seems to agree:

[page 32] How we talk is important to us all, and we're all shamed when told in public that we don't talk correctly. Shame can paralyze our minds. Many common misusages are actually overcorrections. People scolded for saying, "It's me" many start saying "Between you and I," because they have an uneasy feeling that *me* is incorrect, a bad word, to be avoided.

Like Le Guin, I like to push grammar a little bit, just between you and me. But to do that a writer must know what they're doing. There. That was an example of pushing it a bit. One would rightly have to say, "A writer must know what he or she is doing" which is awkward. The plural "they" accomplishes the same result as "he or she" with fewer words and no chance of misunderstanding, if one allows a little push or bending of the grammar rules. Surely one would not want to revert to the grammar rules of several hundred years ago and use male pronouns for both sexes. That practice would have us write such an abomination as Le Guin sarcastically suggests, "If a person needs an abortion, he should be required to tell his parents." (Page 33)

The popular grammar book, "Eats Shoots and Leaves", by Lynn Truss demonstrates the life and death necessity of comma choices. A gunman in a diner might be described as someone who "eats, shoots, and leaves", but a Panda bear's daily diet can be described as he "eats shoots and leaves" and no one is killed in the process. I wondered as I read this next passage which tells the Panda story, whether Lynn Truss was inspired by Le Guin's story to write her book on grammar.

[page 35] I will now tell the Panda Story to illustrate the importance of the presence or the absence of the comma. This panda walked into a tea shop and ordered a salad and ate it. Then it pulled out a pistol, shot the man at the next table dead, and walked out.

Everyone rushed after it, shouting, "Stop! Stop! Why did you do that?"

"Because I'm a panda," said the panda. "That's what pandas do. If you don't believe me, look in the dictionary."

So they looked in the dictionary and sure enough they found *Panda: Raccoon-like animal of Asia. Eats shoots and leaves.*

This panda parable operates on many levels, some having nothing to do with grammar, like this one: Some people will only open a dictionary if it's a matter of life and death! My wife Del rarely consulted a dictionary when I first met her, but knowing how competitive she was, I suggested we allow the use of the dictionary in playing Scrabble *before* one chooses a word to lay down. This made it necessary for us to each have a dictionary available as we both were looking up possible words before our next play. This rule also eliminates the challenge aspect of Scrabble. It had always seemed patently useless to use a dictionary to find a word which may not exist, which is what a challenge to a bad word would require. Instead, if she doesn't think a word I played is a real word, she can ask me what it means, knowing that I just looked up the strange word. This is a much more satisfying way to play Scrabble⁽¹⁾ — we call it simply *Matherne's Rules*.

The only good sentence is a short sentence. Is that true? And if not true, why do so many English teachers and style books teach writers to use short sentences, to equate clarity with terseness? I had never considered the question fully until taking the course "Building Great Sentences" by Professor Brooks Landon, having cut my writing teeth as a technical writer and a student of Strunk and White⁽²⁾. Landon gave examples of many long sentences, especially narrative sentences, whose sweep and scope carried one along on a fast moving current, jostling one from one side to another, gut-wrenching swoops down a steep waterfall, water splashing, soaking one through and through, and stopping only when the boat begins to founder, requiring all aboard to begin bailing out as quickly as possible. Ah, narrative sentences! They take on a life of their own as they carry us along in the scene they narrate, always aware that their "chief duty is to lead us to the next sentence." It was my great joy to drop my technical writing preciseness and discover the pleasures and freedom of sprawling cumulative sentences from Prof. Landon's lectures.

Perhaps Le Guin can explain when a short sentence is always a good sentence.

[page 39, 40] Beyond this basic, invisible job, the narrative sentence can do an infinite number of beautiful, surprising, powerful, audible, visible things (see *all* the examples). But the basic function of the narrative sentence is to keep the story going and keep the reader going with it.

Its rhythm is part of the rhythm of the whole piece; all its qualities are part of the quality and tone of the whole piece. As a narrative sentence, it isn't serving the story well if its rhythm is so unexpected, or its beauty so striking, or its similes or metaphors so dazzling, that it stops the reader, even to say Ooh, Ah! Poetry can do that. Poetry can be visibly, immediately dazzling. In poetry a line, a few words, can make the reader's breath catch and her eyes fill with tears. But for the most part, prose sets its proper beauty and power deeper, hiding it in the work as a whole. In a story it's the *scene* — the setting/ characters/ action/interaction/ dialogue/ feelings — that makes us hold our breath, and cry . . . and turn the page to find out what happens next. And so, until the scene ends, each sentence should lead to the next sentence.

Rhythm is what keeps the song going, the horse galloping, the story moving. Sentence length has a lot to do with the rhythm of prose. So an important aspect of the narrative sentence is — prosaically — its length.

Teachers trying to get school kids to write clearly, and journalists with their weird rules of writing, have filled a lot of heads with the notion that the only good sentence is a short sentence.

This is true for convicted criminals.

If you're not a convicted criminal, but rather, a committed writer, then choose your sentence structure, not based on the length, but on the rhythm and meaning you are striving to achieve. Some will be short. Some will take on a life of their own, like that shark you hefted into the boat, which lay there for several minutes as though dead, but as soon as you tried to move it, began to thrash about, knocking you almost unconscious and endangering your life, or the possum which your Schnauzer mauled senseless that you were carrying away in a shovel to bury it, when suddenly you noticed that the dead possum was eyeing your actions carefully.

Style is rhythm cries Woolf in this next passage which Virginia originally wrote to a writer friend:

[page 47] "Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand there am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm. 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. . . ."

By the time I finished the first paragraph of Chapter Five, Adjective and Adverb, I had noticed that the word "adjective" contains the word "diet" and that one should strive to write adjective-lite and adverb-lite at all costs. Not to remove all adjectives and adverbs, but strive to avoid an adjective in front of a noun when a descriptive noun can replace both, as "clown" does for "funny man", "sped" does for "ran quickly", and "growl" does for "growling voice". (Page 61)

Le Guin is not much for rules, but somehow she manages to ban one word. That word is "somehow". Somehow you just know it's an empty word. She bans its use when she teaches science fiction and fantasy writing, calling it a "weasel word" — an excuse for lazy thinking about what is really going on. If you use weasel words, soon your reader will find a way to weasel out of reading your stuff any further.

She offers Exercise Five as a Chastity exercise in which one must avoid using adjectives and adverbs and omitting dialogue. Here was my spontaneous effort at chastity:

He ate, noticing the time nearing 10 before the hour, the shadows growing across the brickwork, the janitors moving about with dustpans and brooms. Could he make the shuttle back to his hotel? Would his son from Indiana be there? Would he have time to digest his meal before he received his son's news?

Anyone who has had to deal with passive-aggressive people will recognize their almost universal use of the passive voice. It is maddening to have a person dump their opinions upon you as if they carried the weight of the world. These people anger me, possibly because I often use the passive voice when talking or writing myself, a legacy of my own academic training as a scientist.

[page 68] People often use the passive voice because it's indirect, polite, unaggressive, and admirably suited to making thoughts seem as if nobody had personally thought them and deeds seem as if nobody had done them, so that nobody need take responsibility. Thus the passive is beloved of bureaucrats and timid academics, and generally shunned by writers who do want to take responsibility . The cowardly writer says, "It is believed that being is constituted by ratiocination." The brave writer says, "I think, therefore I am."

As a physicist myself, I was tickled by Le Guin's statement that, "Philosophers, physicists, and God all speak in the present tense." (Page 71) Philosophers and physicists speak in generalities and eternal verities in their abstract discourse, and the present tense is useful, but other less certain sciences such as biology and sociology, psychology, and anthropology would best avoid the present tense because their fields are constantly changing. Anthropologists can change the very things they are describing, the habits of human

beings, because their very presence can modify the habits of the people they are describing. For narrative writers the use of present tense is not so simple.

[page 72] I think the mere name, "present tense," leads some writers to assume that present-time narration implies immediacy — a story-time close to the reader's present. Therefor they assume that use of the past tense implies a remoter time. This is naive. It doesn't work that way. I've read effective stories i which recent events were told in the past tense and the present tense was used for what happened a long time ago. The tenses have so little connotation of actual presentness or pastness that, in that respect, they're interchangeable.

Le Guin's description of the fictive aspect of present tense narrative illustrates its paradoxical nature, and since it is not in reality present tense narration, as in a live news report, she prefers to call it focused narrative. She lists some advantages this type of narrative has:

[page 73, 74] It is a technique, rather than a voice. Forced to move with a staccato awkwardness, it's more visible than the present tense. A bright beam tightly focused, it affords the writer and reader the detachment of visible artifice. It distances. It cuts out. It keeps the story cool. If the writer's engine is liable to overheat, focused narrative may be a wise choice.

Writers of narrative always have a choice of point of view, and Le Guin leads us in Chapter Seven through examples of the many points of view, first person, third person, limited third person, and involved author (aka omniscient author). Here is what she has to say about the "involved author" as a technique.

[page 87] Involved author is the most openly, obviously manipulative of the points of view. But the voice of the narrator who knows the whole story, tells it because if is important, and is profoundly involved with *all* the characters, cannot be dismissed as old-fashioned or uncool. It' not only type oldest and the most widely used storytelling voice, it's also the most versatile, flexible, and complex of the points of view — and probably, at this point, the most difficult for the writer.

In Chapter Nine, Le Guin discusses the difference between story and plot. The story is what happened and plot involves why things happened. She teams up with E. M. Forster in this next passage and they make a formidable exposition of story and plot.

[page 118] In E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, which I've loved and argued with for years, is a famous illustration of story: "The king died and then the queen died." And plot: "The king died and then the queen died of grief."

My opinion is that those are both rudimentary stories, the first loose, the second slightly structured. Neither one has or is a plot. "When the king's brother murdered the king and married the queen, the crown prince was upset" — now that's a plot, one you may recognize, in fact.

To illustrate how a story has a way of carrying the author with it to its conclusion, she fleshes out her metaphor of "steering the craft" which titles this book.

[page 118] I like my image of "steering the craft," but in fact the story boat is a magic one. It knows its course. The job of the person at the helm is help it find its own way to wherever it's going.

In the movie "Stranger Than Fiction", a character in a novel begins to hear the narrator's voice and discovers that she is going to kill him off at the end of the book. He consults a literature professor who is familiar with the writer's works, who tells him that she always kills off the main character. Thus the plot gets traction. Luckily real-life fiction writers don't live in a fictional world — they have the mighty

DELETE key which can ZAP! any character at will. So listen to what your characters say and simply write it down, just as Le Guin describes.

[page 122] If you're a fiction writer, though, I can tell you how to let people talk through you. Listen. Just be quiet, and listen. Let the character talk. Don't censor, don't control. Listen, and write.

Don't be afraid of doing this. After all, you *are* in control. These characters are entirely dependent on you. You made them up. Let the poor fictive creatures have their say — you can hit delete any time you like.

What is Crowding and Leaping, those two processes named in the title of Chapter Ten? Le Guin quotes what Keats told Shelley, that he should "load every rift with ore" — that is an example of crowding.

[page 141] It's what we mean when we exhort ourselves to avoid flabby language and clichés, never to use ten vague words where two will do, always to seek the vivid phrase, the exact word. By crowding I mean also keeping the story full, always full of what's happening in it; keeping it moving, not slacking and wandering into irrelevancies; keeping it interconnected with itself, rich with echoes forward and backward. Vivid, exact, concrete, accurate, dense, rich: these adjectives describe a prose that is crowded with sensations, meaning, and implications.

What is leaping? I remember reading in an early novel by James Michener, "The Fires of Spring", a character describing how the novelist would set the scene for sex to take place, and then finish the chapter with these words, "And you can guess what happened next." That would certainly qualify as leaping (on several levels). This technique gives over the finishing of the sexual act to the fertile and stimulated imagination of the reader, a task few avid readers would be disappointed with.

[page 141] But leaping is just as important. What you leap over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in. There's got to be white space around the word, silence around the voice. Listing is not describing. Only the relevant belongs. Some say God is in the details; some say the Devil is in the details. Both are correct.

Crowding is what you do in the first draft; leaping is what you do in the second draft. Put everything you have in the new home you just built, then take out that huge sofa set which makes the living room feel too crowded, the glass lamps which block the view of the fireplace, and so on. When you feel comfortable in the space you have created with your writing, then others will do so as well. Crowding builds details; leaping stimulates the imagination to fill in details. Crowding is doing the work for the reader; leaping is inviting the reader to join in the creative endeavor. Crowding is the script in a play; leaping is the subtext. Crowding is what happens on the pages of the book; leaping is what happens in the reader's mind. The best authors find individual ways to balance crowding and leaping.

One might choke at the thought of writing a sentence which used the active voice, progressive conjugation, potential mood, present tense, third person plural of *go* inflecting the past infinitive of *live*, but Ursula K. Le Guin gives us an example of that below and it is imminently readable and understandable. Here's the last passage of this book:

[page 164] At the beginning of one of my books I wrote, "The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California." . . .

I deliberately used this magnificent conglomeration of verbiage to establish myself and the reader as being in the complex situation of pretending to look back in time on some fictional people whom we pretend might exist in a time very far in our future. You say all that with a couple of verb forms. . . . It was the shortest way to say exactly what I meant. That's what verbs, in all their moods and tenses, are for.

To end this review, here is the sentence I wrote in imitation of Le Guin's model sentence in the blank space at the bottom of the last page. If you wish to say something complex, rest assured that the English tool bag has ample means for you to do so, but a bag of tools is of little use until you learn to handle them with dexterity.

The reader of this copy of Le Guin's "Steering the Craft" and my words might be going to have lived a long, long time from now as I write this marginalia flying home to New Orleans from Southern California.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Del notes that she has really learned some obscure words in doing so. I suspect she also learned some useful words along the way and developed a habit of using the dictionary when necessary.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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**Footnote 2.** Namely, their famous book, "The Elements of Style."

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