

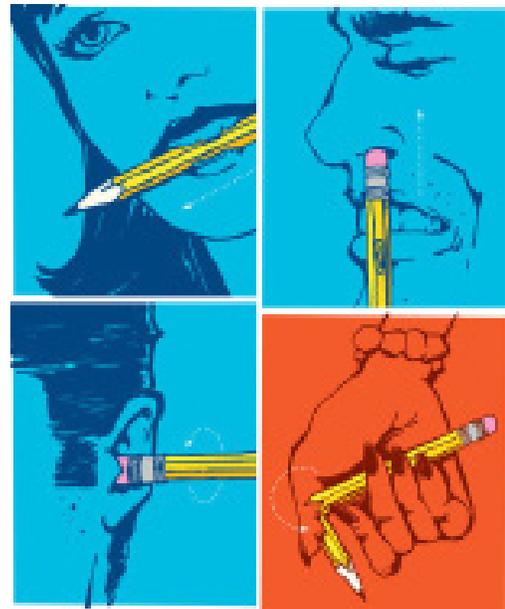
# Where Do Sentences Come From?

Sift the debris of a young writer's education, and you find dreadful things - strictures, prohibitions, dos, don'ts, an unnatural and nearly neurotic obsession with style, argument and transition. Yet in that debris you find no traces of a fundamental question: where do sentences come from? This is a philosophical question, as valuable in the asking as in the answering. But it's a practical question, too. Think about it long enough, and you begin to realize that many, if not most, of the things we believe about writing are false.

Whenever you find an unasked question you've also found an assumption. Here's another example: what is writing for? The answers seem obvious - communication, persuasion, expression. But the real answer in most classrooms is this: writing is for making assigned writing. Throughout their education, students everywhere are asked repeatedly to write papers that are inherently insincere exercises in rearranging things they've read or been told - papers in which their only stake is a grade. There's no occasion to ask something as basic as "Where do sentences come from?"

Certain kinds of writers do try to answer this question. They talk about "process" as if it explained something important. But what "process" usually describes is the circumstances - time, place, tools - in which certain writers believe that sentences come from wherever they come from. That gets us nowhere. It's like asking where water comes from and pointing to a David Hockney pool as an answer.

So let's demystify the origin of sentences. Think of it this way. You almost surely have a voice inside your head. At present, it's an untrained voice. It natters along quite happily,



constructing delayed ripostes and hypothetical conversations. Why not give it something useful to do? Memorize some poetry or prose, nothing too arcane. A rhythmic kind of writing works best, something that sounds almost spoken. Then play those passages over and over again in your memory. You now have in your head something that is identifiably “language,” not merely thoughts that somehow seem unlinguistic.

Now try turning a thought into a sentence. This is harder than it seems because first you have to find a thought. They may seem scarce because nothing in your education has suggested that your thoughts are worth paying attention to. Again and again I see in students, no matter how sophisticated they are, a fear of the dark, cavernous place called the mind. They turn to it as though it were a mailbox. They take a quick peek, find it empty and walk away.

So experiment a little. Make a sentence of your own in your head. Don't write it down. Any kind of sentence will do, but keep it short. Rearrange it. Reword it. Then throw it out. Make another. Rearrange. Reword. Discard. You can do this anywhere, at any time. Do it again and again, without inscribing anything. Experiment with rhythm. Let the sentences come and go. Evaluate them, play with them, but don't cling to them. If you find a sentence you really like, let it go and look for the next one. The more you do this, the easier it will be to remember the sentences you want to keep. Better yet, you'll know that you can replace any sentence you lose with one that's just as good.

There's a good reason for doing this all in your head. You're learning to be comfortable in that dark, cavernous place. It's not so frightening. There's language there, and you're learning to play with it on your own without the need to snatch at words and phrases for an assignment. And here's another good reason. A sentence you don't write down is a sentence you feel free to change. Inscribe it, and you're chained to it for life. That, at least, is how many writers act. A written sentence possesses a crippling inertia.

What should these mental sentences be about? Anything you happen to notice. Anything you happen to think. Anything you want to say. You could make a sentence merely because a word keeps popping into your mind. But learn to play with every sentence you make in your head, shuffling words, searching for accuracy, listening for rhythm. Your memory will surprise you. Because you're writing nothing down, it may seem as though you're not writing at all. But you're building confidence, an assurance that when you're in the place where sentences come from - deep in the intermingling of thought and words - you're in a place where good things usually happen.

Before you learn to write well, to trust yourself as a writer, you will have to learn to be patient in the presence of your own thoughts. You'll learn that making sentences in your head will elicit thoughts you didn't know you could have. Thinking patiently will yield far better sentences than you thought you could make.

I'm repeatedly asked how I write, what my "process" is. My answer is simple: I think patiently, trying out sentences in my head. That is the root of it. What happens on paper or at the keyboard is only distantly connected. The virtue of working this way is that circumstances - time, place, tools - make no difference whatsoever. All I need is my head. All I need is the moments I have.

There's no magic here. Practice these things, and you'll stop fearing what happens when it's time to make sentences worth inscribing. You'll no longer feel as though a sentence is a glandular secretion from some cranial inkwell that's always on the verge of drying up. You won't be able to say precisely where sentences come from - there is no where there - but you'll know how to wait patiently as they emerge and untangle themselves. You'll discover the most important thing your education left out: how to trust and value your own thinking. And you'll also discover one of things writing is for: pleasure.

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