

Sentence as River and as Drum

Emerging writers often bring with them a fixed idea of just how long a sentence should be, often either very long or very short. In the exercise below, Kim Stafford encourages his students to try paragraphs made up entirely of both kinds of sentences, with the expectation that they will eventually come to create paragraphs that embed both “the roll of the river and the beat of the drum.”

KIM STAFFORD

When I left college to conduct an oral history project in the 1970s, I learned how the spoken language is performed in the key of *and*. A storyteller ends each “sentence,” each episode in a long recollection, with the word *and*, which simultaneously holds the floor from interruption and links one action to the next. This makes the music of one’s life feel endless.

At the same time I was observing this performance quirk, I was troubled by the way school had taught me to write interminable prosy sentences, with proof piled upon proof in classy rhetorical structures that left me breathless if I tried to read them aloud. I had learned too well. As someone beginning to write—to write the stories I was hearing in the world with the language habits I had learned in school—I felt the need to both unreel and to rein in my utterances. So, when I became a teacher of writing, I began to use the twin exercise of the long and short sentence to make each student’s repertoire more pliable. Each mode tempers the other.



The idea is simple. First, I invite an assembly of writers to compose a sentence that goes on for at least a page—and no fair cheating with a semicolon. Just use “and” when you have to, or a dash, or make a list,

and keep it going. After your years of being told not to, take pleasure in writing the greatest run-on sentence you can.

After doing this exercise some fifty times myself, I think I’ve begun to learn the atmospheric opportunity of the sentence that never has to make a hard decision. As always I comply with my own request, writing without stopping until I come to the lower right corner of my page, and then I put a title on the monster I have created:

A Life of Art in a Busy World

Could my writing be the river that winds through the obstacles of my life, flowing in its own way, without conflict, so sure of its own relation to gravity that it unfurls its long story past clock and meal, past child and loving wife, inquiring gently through dream and waking, flowing undisturbed and undisturbing past the mailbox, curling and eddying softly past the edges of deadline and annual report, suffusing budget and application and prospectus, carrying

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little rafts of poetry and barges of prose gracefully through the channel deepened by fear and scoured by grief, urging my intention effortlessly through thickets of disbelief, mildly passing no and yes and maybe on its journey to lower and lower ground, moving easily, flooding with clear water and light the lowest reaches I can find, without any destination but down, without any intention but vital motion through, without any agenda but inclusion, buoyancy, permission, carrying the living scent of one place to the hunger of another, flowing nameless and pure, eager, without ambition, disguised as the world itself traveling through the world?

Then we shake out our writing hands, take a blank page, and write from the upper left to the lower right corner again, but this time letting no sentence be longer than four words (but every sentence must have a subject and a verb). Again, I try the exercise

along with everyone and then release my cramp by adding a long and languid title:

The Realm Where Writing Can Happen Even When You Are So Busy You Can't Write Long But You Can Still Write All the Time Because You Have Watched How Rivers Move

Writing takes time. Life takes time. There's your problem. Can they happen together? They can. Rivers have the key. Rivers pass rocks. There is a way. A rock sits heavy. The river goes around. The mountain rises. The river cuts down. Life gets complex. Writing gets simple. There is a crevice. A moment opens. Writing takes possession. Queens rule small countries. Kings preside over jewels. Wives master hard times. Husbands can learn. Writing braids a rope. Each strand is small. Dreams are filaments. Conversations are strong wire. Family stories weave everything. It all connects. Novels forge rivers. Every little thing counts.

Do you believe? Do you want this? Others haunt arenas. Your writing inhabits threads. There are ways. Believe. Write. Be patient. Be bold. It will come together. Gather all things. Travel through time. Harvest gold. Be hospitable to everyone. Leave everyone. Enter your cell. Be the lucky prisoner. Your words are rain. Be free as rain. Tell it all. Rivers have ends. So do you. Be big. Let go.

An odd piece, but I'm fond of it, and I find some lucky nuggets: "Be the lucky prisoner." I like that. And more important than the success of either exercise is that I have reminded myself of the true elasticity of the sentence. In the midst of a run of long sentences, sometime soon, I will remember to embed a small one. Life needs contrast. And in the midst of drumbeat assertions, sometime soon, I will remember to let my cello speak an aria.

The exercise of the long sentence may help me discover connections among many things, all gathered into the net with the simple sticky magnetism of *and*. The exercise of the short sentences may help me discover the multiplicity of divergent opportunity within a single subject. I enjoy both. Together they contribute to the preliminary calisthenics of our writing workshop: Which was easy? Which was hard? Why? As we write, let's watch for opportunities to be concise, and then inclusive, breaking the boundaries of the acceptable in order to be a river, and be a drum. Rivers have long rhythms. Drums roll.

KIM STAFFORD is director of the Northwest Writing Institute and the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark College.

A version of this article appears in Stafford's recently released book *The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft* (University of Georgia Press, 2003).

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