

First you write a sentence: The elements of reading, writing... and life (a review)

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What is a sentence? For most of us it is a syntactic structure containing a subject, verb and object. For Joe Moran, Professor of English and Cultural History at Liverpool's Sir John Moore's University in the UK, it is much more. His book, *First You Write a Sentence*, is about how to give a sentence stronger emotional and intellectual impact to get your message across effectively.

It is a shortish book (230 pages) with a select bibliography and index, containing seven chapters and dealing with word order, the use of nouns and verbs, using plain words, writing long sentences, how to link sentences, and as Moran describes it, 'why a sentence should be a gift to the world'. The book concludes with *Twenty Sentences on Sentences*, summarising the author's advice. It is an interesting and inspiring read and will be valuable for academic as well as creative writers. Early on, he cites Wendell Berry, a teacher of

English at the University of Kentucky in the United States. Berry gave his class an assignment to write a single sentence. Berry wrote an essay entitled *Standing by Words*, in which he explained that a sentence is the indispensable tool by which we see, feel and know the world. The function of the single sentence assignment was to force his students to slow down and think about what they wrote and say what was necessary in a short space. There is, as Moran writes, 'no virtue in volume, no benefit in bulk'.

Moran writes that we tend to use syntax (grammar) to organise sentences but choose words to add colour and style. The word *sentence* comes from the Latin, *sentire*, meaning *to feel*. Any sentence, writes Moran, should contain life and convey feeling. What gives it that feeling is the syntax, the order in which the words are presented. He notes that inflected languages like German and Latin

with word endings are less dependent on word order. English, which has few inflections, is. He stands by the classic word order of old-English – time, manner and place – and stresses the simplicity of explaining what happened, when, how and where.

Writing as a means of communication derives from four things – syntax, word choice, punctuation and typography. These, he says, are the human voice in print.

The first writing we know of was the *Cuneiform Script* invented by the inhabitants of Sumer in Mesopotamia. This was mainly used for recording oil, corn and cattle. *'The true heir of those little clay tablets,'* writes Moran, *'is not the sentence but the spreadsheet'*. The first 'real' sentences, he argues, were the epigrams engraved on ancient Greek tombs. An important part of the epigram was the development of carving letters and the migration from stone to papyrus. Virgil and Ovid and other great writers made part of their living from writing epigrams to order for festivals and celebrations and even for satire. As the epigram developed, so did sentence style.

Moran is very conscious of the importance of economy in sentences. He cites research showing that the attention span of the average reader is low. Short term memory retains most sentences in the head for about a minute. That means sentences

should be shorter and memorable. Moran mentions the Latin writer, Martial, who was one of the first to use a strong stress at the end of a sentence for overall effect and to make the sentence memorable.

Syntactic traps can also cause problems for readers, such as misplaced prepositions or prepositional phrases which can assume a completely different meaning to the one the writer intended, as in *'I wrote my speech on my flight to Paris on the back of a sick bag.'*

One of Moran's pet hates is what he calls *nouny sentences*, i.e. sentences with too many nouns, especially long abstract nouns, called *nominalisations*. According to the linguist Michael Halliday, nominalisation emerged at the beginning of the 17th century with the discovery of science. Over the next three centuries words ending in *-ity*, *-ism*, *-ology* and *-ation* took over the physical and social sciences, government and management. The answer, he suggests, is simple. Use more verbs. Verbs breathe life into sentences drowning in nouns, he believes. Another book called, *'Do I Make Myself Clear?'* by the former Editor of the Sunday Times newspaper (reviewed in TLC Volume 1 Issue 4) makes the same point. Instead of *puts emphasis on*, writes Moran, *say emphasises*. Instead of *gives the impression*, *say suggests*.

But even verbs, it seems, have their problems,

especially auxiliaries and modals, such as *would*, *could*, *may* and *might*. However, while preferring a more direct style of writing, Moran recognises that the use of modals offers a more polite and less confrontational style of address and therefore eases social relations in making suggestions or proposing a change in behaviour.

Most syntactical constructions we use have upsides and downsides, but the passive voice is particularly noticeable. It can be used to emphasise what happened or who made it happen as in *The new building was opened* or *The new building was opened by the Queen*. It can also be used to avoid blame as in *The accident was caused by bad weather* (i.e. not by bad driving).

Roland Barthes, the French writer and cultural theorist, hated adjectives. He felt they were used to give weight to nouns that they didn't need or deserve, or were used to disguise nouns to make negatives look more positive. In business, for example, *a robust style of management*, where *robust* is used to intensify style. The same goes for some adverbs, also often used as intensifiers as in, *an intensely robust management style*.

So, we come to punctuation.

Punctuation, Moran tells us, derives from *neume* (from the Greek *Pneuma* meaning *breath*). It told the singer or reciter when to pause and breathe.

When the early Christian monks first wrote down prayers and passages of the gospels to be read aloud they marked the voice pauses on the manuscript – what today we know as punctuation. The most important pause was the full stop, the end of one thought and the beginning of another.

The ideal length of sentences is another key feature of the book. Rudolf Flesch, a graduate of Columbia University New York in the 1940s, calculated that the average length of a sentence should be a maximum 25 words but the ideal number was 17, the average sentence length in a popular magazine like *Readers Digest*. Another readability expert, Robert Gunning, developed his own *Fog Index* to test readability. A high fog index meant the sentence was almost impossible to read and a low fog index meant it was clear. Gunning trained leading American corporations to improve the readability index of their publicity, including General Motors, Ford and American Airlines. He and Flesch were both employed by leading news agencies, Flesch by Associated Press and Gunning by United Press.

Long sentences have their place. A series of clauses well linked together can carry the reader along through a very long sentence as in masters like Tolstoy or, as Moran cites, the British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay.

The book is full of stories and one of the most

affecting is that of Lev Zazetsy, a young Russian soldier and star engineering student, who was shot at the battle of Smolensk in WW I. Half his brain was blown away. He was treated by neuropsychologist Alexander Luria, who worked with Vygotsky in the Vygotsky-Luria circle. Although Zazetsky could no longer see, remember, read or be active, with Luria's help he learned to write and kept a journal for the rest of his life. Every three days he wrote about 1000

words in a private journal and died in 1993 at the age of 73. The ability to write sentences allowed him, as Luria wrote, *'to live and not merely exist'*.

This is an extraordinarily rich book in the advice it gives and the stories it tells. If I were to choose one of the *Twenty Sentences on Sentences* in the conclusion I think it would be this: *'Listen, read and write for the sentences, because the sentence must be right or nothing will be right.'*