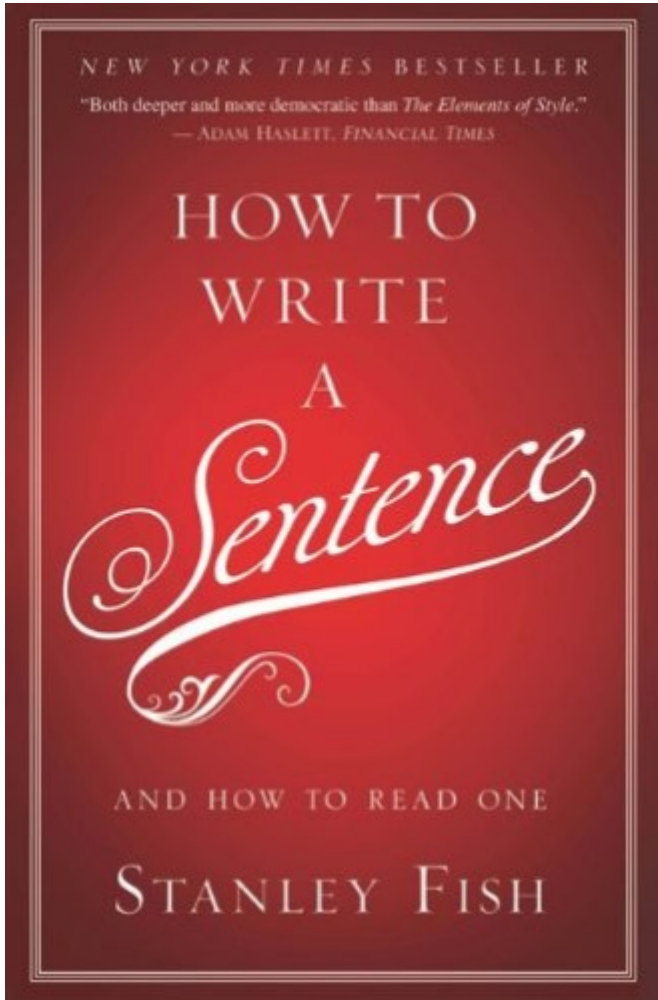


One good sentence

By [David Heim](#)

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In Review



How to Write a Sentence

By Stanley Fish

Harper

Staring helplessly at a broken appliance or other household malfunction, I often recall a quip by Joseph Epstein, an essayist and editor: the only thing I can fix is a sentence.

If editors are good at fixing sentences, it is because before they learned to fix sentences they learned to enjoy tinkering with them, the way some people like tinkering with a faucet valve or the inside of a toaster. What would happen if one used a different verb there? What if one compressed that thought this way? What about linking those two sentences with a dependent clause? What about slowing the sentence down or speeding it up? Is it better or worse that way?

Stanley Fish likes to tinker with sentences. His little book *How to Write a Sentence* (HarperCollins) is a meditation on sentences he admires. Like an athlete looking at videotape of an all-star performance, Fish breaks down some great sentences--by writers like John Updike and John Donne--to see why they have the effect they do. Then he sees if he can imitate it.

First sentences rightly get Fish's attention. When a first sentence is doing its job, it announces an angle of vision or a set of complications that compels the reader into the rest of the essay or novel. Some great ones are well known: Melville's "Call me Ishmael"; Austen's "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune will be in want of a wife." Fish cites some lesser-known gems, like the start of Francis Bacon's essay "Of Truth": "What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."

Fish's book made me wonder about theological sentences. What masterful theologians' sentences might be listed in such a book--sentences that don't just convey a thought but snap off an insight in a memorable way? We don't often think of theological writers as great stylists, but in all good writing the style enacts the content.

One has to admire the first line of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*: "Once, there was no 'secular.'" The "Once, there was . . ." sounds like the start of a fairy tale; we sit back and wait for a magical story to unfold. But it leads

straight to academic fussiness--"secular" used awkwardly as a noun, not a verb, as if it were a solid entity, and quotation marks that put the whole idea of the "secular" into question. All in all, a good introduction to Milbank's theology.

The first line of the English translation of Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* goes like this:

"Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church." Perhaps as audacious as the phrase "cheap grace" is the way Bonhoeffer places the reader firmly within "our church." Within nine words, the reader is asked to take sides in a theological battle that is deadly serious.