

edited by Beth Notzon



IDEAS INTO WORDS: MASTERING THE CRAFT OF SCIENCE WRITING. ELISE HANCOCK. BALTIMORE: JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS; 2003. XV + 151 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$42.00, SOFTCOVER \$18.95. ISBN 0-8018-7329-0 (HARDCOVER), 0-8018-7330-4 (SOFTCOVER).

“To write *anything* is to expose yourself, unavoidably. You cannot help but reveal the way your mind moves”, observes Elise Hancock in *Ideas into Words: Mastering the Craft of Science Writing*. Indeed, this book by Hancock, for many years editor of the *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, provides both advice on nonfiction writing and glimpses of the thinking and functioning of a successful editor.

This compact book begins with a chapter on mindsets related to writing and one on finding story ideas. Then comes a chapter on interviewing and other research. The next two chapters, which contain many examples, focus on doing the writing itself. The following chapter offers guidance on editing one’s own work. And the last chapter, “When You’re Feeling Stuck”, suggests what to do if bogged down at given stages; in part it reviews earlier material. The format of the book—with most chapters containing exhortations followed by elaboration—resembles that of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, which Hancock recommends.

Much of Hancock’s advice may be familiar to experienced writers, writing teachers, and editors. Hancock says to keep the reader in mind, not only when writing but also when gathering information; to carry a notebook at all times; to know the difference between a topic and a story idea; to do one’s homework before an interview—and then listen during the interview; to show rather than tell; and to remember to “put in all your raisins (i.e., fun facts, great quotes, and interesting comparisons)”. Such points, although not novel, are ones that beginning writers need to know, and Hancock generally presents them effectively.

Even long-established writers and editors may find some of the material new, for example, the guidance on distinguishing scientific visionaries from scientific delusionaries and the concept of subject matter’s, and thus a story’s, having an inherent organic shape, such as that of a spiral, meander, beech leaf, or delta. One suggestion that many may find new and useful is to retain at the end of a manu-

script a “bone heap” consisting of discarded sentences and paragraphs for possible reinstatement later. Another such suggestion is to print out drafts in galley format, with a single narrow column per page, to leave ample room for revision. More experienced readers also may appreciate the section on mentorship, much of which can apply to editorial internships. And they may enjoy Hancock’s fresh analogies, such as her observation that in writing, as in painting a room, getting ready should take most of the time.

Many items in the book are related to editing or author-editor interactions. In the foreword, science writer Robert Kanigel describes writing for and learning from Hancock over the years. And Hancock offers other writers much useful advice about working with editors. For example, she recommends seeking out editors of well-prepared local, regional, and special-interest publications (“not all big league talent is in the big leagues”); asking editors to describe their readerships; bringing interviews back on track by noting the editor’s expectations; and considering each manuscript “only a draft” to avoid excessive emotional investment. Hancock also gives authors helpful advice on learning to edit their own work. She suggests, “when you must sit through a forgettable speech, practice editorial pruning [of it]”, and she provides useful guidance on tightening up one’s own prose.

Indeed, some of Hancock’s insights may be more meaningful to editors than to authors. She observes that discussing a draft with an author and then having the author revise it often produces “far better fixes” than would result from the editor’s trying to correct the problems. She notes that “most of us tend to think of editing as ‘fixing’ what is off. We forget the other half of the job, and maybe the more important half—retaining and strengthening what is good.” And, referring to the tale in which a boy receives a pile of manure for Christmas and optimistically concludes that a pony must be nearby, she advocates the “looking for the pony” approach to dreadful-seeming drafts.

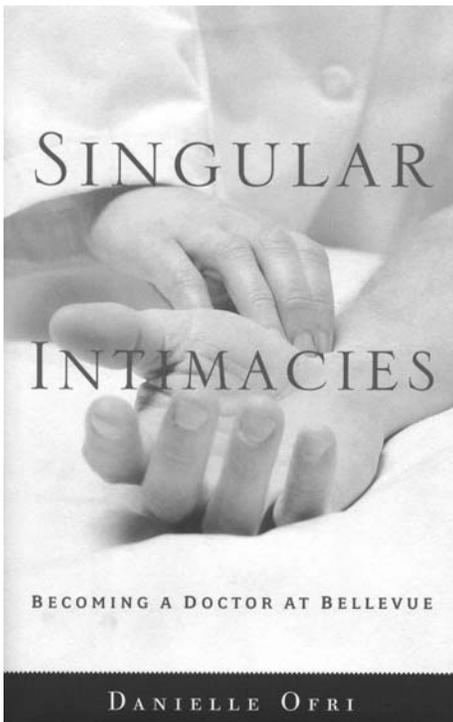
Despite its useful insight and advice, the book has limitations. Although the material on interviewing is robust and generally excellent, that on other aspects of information-gathering seems thin. A few statements—such as that all journalists now tape-record interviews—are debatable. And some recommendations—for example, to interview in the morning, to avoid such “lumpy” words as *particularly* and *egregious*, and to polish one’s prose late in the writing process—appear somewhat arbitrary. (To her credit, Hancock advises against blindly following rules, including her own.) Many editors may be uncomfortable in editing quotations from interviews as much as Hancock seems to consider permissible. And the book seems narrower in scope than the subtitle “Mastering the

Craft of Science Writing” might suggest. For example, it says little about use of the World Wide Web in science reporting, markets for freelance science stories, professional associations for science writers, and other books likely to aid in science writing.

Used with works that complement its content, *Ideas into Words* can serve well in courses in science journalism. It can assist those who wish to increase their writing skill on their own. And it shows how the mind of one talented editor moves.

Barbara Gastel

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SINGULAR INTIMACIES: BECOMING A DOCTOR AT BELLEVUE. DANIELLE OFRI. BOSTON: BEACON PRESS; 2003. 240 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$24.00. ISBN 0-807-07252-4.

Singular Intimacies is a beautifully written and painfully honest book about the training and development of a physician. Danielle Ofri is not only a doctor affiliated with Bellevue Hospital and New York University but also the cofounder of the *Bellevue Literary Review*. She writes with skill and humor and is a good observer. Many of the chapters have been published previously, but they fit together as a narrative.

The book progresses from her days as a medical student to attending physician, and most chapters describe particular patients who touched the author’s life. The “singular intimacy” of the title denotes the “unique bond” that forms between patient and physician during extreme circumstances, such as a near-death experience. Her remarkable patients include the elderly man with whom she established common ground but who then attempted to molest her, the unreachable inmate who resisted endoscopy after swallowing a battery, the charming but hopelessly addicted veteran with AIDS and endocarditis, the old woman who died while Ofri was performing a rectal examination, the brain-dead woman who eventually went home to South Carolina, and the young mother

of two who is in denial about her AIDS diagnosis.

Ofri cares deeply for her patients, regardless of their life circumstances, their medical conditions, or the reasons for their hospitalization. Illness and death are learning opportunities at first but become personal experiences for her when a childhood friend dies prematurely and a talented but abrasive attending commits suicide. Those events highlight the book’s themes of denial, loss, compassion, and the arbitrariness of illness. Only once does Ofri finally refuse to treat a belligerent patient—after his multiple threats give her good reason to believe herself in danger.

Like many recent true-life medical accounts, this book reveals some of the unpleasant aspects of medicine, such as the sheetless mattress on the floor in the freezing room where medical students sleep, the interns’ motto “when in doubt, pretend”, the indecipherable medical orders, the occasional inability to diagnose a patient’s disorder, the brutality of CPR, and the man who dies in part because of hospital hierarchy. If the true test of enlightenment is the recognition of one’s inadequacies, Ofri has been enlightened. By the end of the book, she laments “our shortcomings,

our limited intellect, our inadequate tools, the false pride”.

The structure of the book is circular: it begins and ends with the case of a French woman with lung cancer who prepares for her death, then recovers. Ofri's development as a physician is circular as well. As one might expect, in the beginning she is an insecure, idealistic, and emotional medical student striving to gain knowledge while above all providing her patients with sensitive, personalized care. The descriptions of her shortcomings are many, and the reader is relieved as her training progresses and she acquires technical expertise. Most notable is her correct diagnosis of AIDS in a difficult patient despite disagreement from all medical consultants. At the end of her residency, however, she concludes that emotional relationships with patients are more important than clinical knowledge.

Ofri's first emotional breakdown occurs when, as a medical student, she sustains a needlestick while half asleep observing a hysterectomy. Because no staff members even acknowledge the event, she is increasingly upset about the possibility of AIDS. She finally approaches the patient, a former nurse's aide, to ask about her HIV status. The patient assures her that Ofri has nothing to worry about, but Ofri has already broken down in front of the woman while reproaching herself: “A real doctor wouldn't be weeping in her patient's arms.”

Anyone would be terrified about the prospect of a life-threatening illness. Yet Ofri often cries openly on the death of a favorite patient. She recognizes that part of the physician's job is to comfort

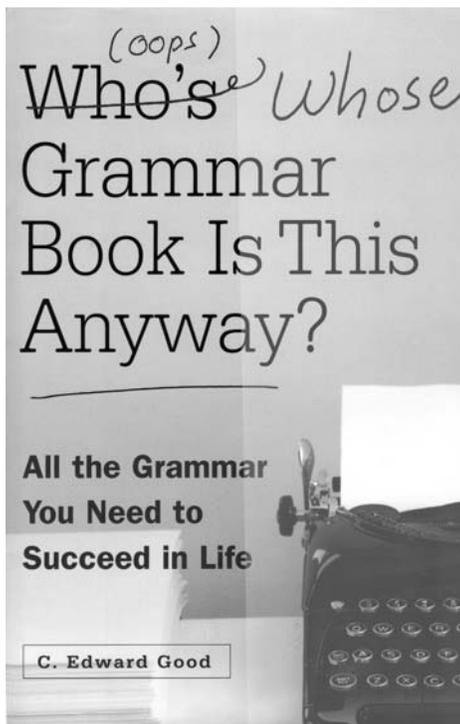
patients, and not vice versa. However, she also states, “I'd always scorned the conventional wisdom that doctors shouldn't get emotionally involved with their patients. That view seemed so archaic and paternalistic.” In the final chapter, she describes her spectacular breakdown in front of a dead woman's family as “my most authentic experience as a doctor”; she has seen that medical skills and knowledge are not sufficient, or even paramount, in the practice of medicine.

It is a cliché to insist that physicians be emotionally removed from their patients, and yet cogent reasons exist for this attitude. It is easy to imagine that Ofri's emotional investment in patients could lead to burnout, and perhaps it contributed to her decision to take time off after her training. She seems to focus on her own responses to death and illness rather than on the needs of her patients and their families. Furthermore, readers (perhaps especially female readers) may find it disquieting that despite Ofri's considerable successes, she emphasizes traditionally “feminine” empathy over professional skills. Surely physicians can show that they care without dissolving into tears.

A few typographic and grammatical errors in the book detract from Ofri's engaging and often poetic style, but otherwise, the book is highly recommended to anyone who enjoys “true-life” medical stories.

Laura J Ninger

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WHO'S (...OOOPS!) WHOSE GRAMMAR BOOK IS THIS ANYWAY? ALL THE GRAMMAR YOU NEED TO SUCCEED IN LIFE. C EDWARD GOOD. NEW YORK: BARNES & NOBLE BOOKS; 2002. 430 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$7.98. ISBN 1-56731-576-3.

Edward Good takes you back in time to your English classes in junior high school. Miss Hamrick—the strict English teacher Good uses to introduce his concepts—walks around the classroom, ruler in hand, imparting the dogmas of the English language. And there you are, afraid of conjugating a verb incorrectly, scared of feeling her ruler on your knuckles. But most of us somehow made it through and have mastered the rules of grammar.

For those who have forgotten the basics of English grammar or never learned them to begin with, Good explains in Part 1 of the book the eight basic parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections), dedicating one chapter to each. He clearly and wittily describes what words are and do, defining terms and using lots of examples in the process. Exercises follow explanations of concepts. For example, Good provides a paragraph from a book by Winston Churchill and asks the reader to find the transitive and intransitive verbs in it. When necessary, as in the case of Churchill's text, Good explains the differences between American and British usage. A summary of the main points closes each chapter.

Good takes a more “belligerent” tone in the chapters in Part 2, which deal with what Good calls the “Wars of the Words”—the tension between nouns and verbs, problems with the verb to be, the use of active vs passive voice, and the spat between clauses and phrases. As science editors know from experience, the nouns are currently winning the war of words. “Be's have taken over”, Good writes. “The passive voice rules. The clause is king.” Good seeks to reverse all that. As he notes, “good writers have known for hundreds of years that verbs should triumph over nouns, that not to be answers that haunting question posed so long ago, that the active voice should usually reign supreme, and that no one has ever written a well-claused paper”.

After reading Part 2, you might be tempted to copy some chapters and send them to authors. But wait until you read

Part 3, “A Theory of Style”, which deals with the structure of writing. Beginning with the “quintessential American sentence: John hit the ball”, Good describes how good writing is structured. When you master the basic sentence (“subject + verb + other stuff”), Good says, you might get an A from your third-grade teacher. Learning the basic structure of the sentence is just the starting point. To be a good writer one must master the “arts” of subordination, noun substitution, and parallel structure. Good devotes a chapter to each of these concepts.

Good writers also avoid the “Common Grammatical Mistakes” dealt with in Part 4 of the book. Just reading the titles of the chapters in this section will make you smile as they bring to mind some of your editing jobs: “There's lots of these subject-verb disagreements.” “We could of used the right helping verb.” “Your leaving out the word ‘are’.” “Should you take out it's apostrophe?” “Like, I'm like gonna like learn how to like talk.”

The last part of the book deals with punctuation. “Many people think that punctuation involves a matter of taste”, Good writes. But although some punctuation marks can be discretionary, he points out that “many rules of punctuation are inscribed in stone”. In 11 short chapters, Good explains the correct use of the period, the comma, the semicolon, the colon, the dash, parentheses, brackets, the question mark and the exclamation point, the hyphen, the apostrophe, and quotation marks.

Good closes his book with an epilogue on “The Erosion of Grammar”, in which he complains about the indifference of US school boards to the teaching of grammar. Good's book covers “all the grammar you need to succeed in life”—or at least all the grammar you need to edit a scientific paper.

Diego Pineda

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