



Building Great Sentences: How to Write the Kinds of Sentences You Love to Read

Brooks Landon

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Based on the bestselling series from The Great Courses, *Building Great Sentences* celebrates the sheer joy of language—and will forever change the way you read and write.

Great writing begins with the sentence. Whether it's two words ("Jesus wept.") or William Faulkner's 1,287-word sentence in *Absalom! Absalom!*, sentences have the power to captivate, entertain, motivate, educate, and, most importantly, delight. Yet, the sentence-oriented approach to writing is too often overlooked in favor of bland economy. *Building Great Sentences* teaches you to write better sentences by luxuriating in the pleasures of language.

Award-winning Professor Brooks Landon draws on examples from masters of long, elegant sentences—including Don DeLillo, Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Samuel Johnson—to reveal the mechanics of how language works on thoughts and emotions, providing the tools to write powerful, more effective sentences.

Building Great Sentences: How to Write the Kinds of Sentences You Love to Read **Details**

Date : Published June 25th 2013 by Plume

ISBN : 9780452298606

Author : Brooks Landon

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Language, Writing, Nonfiction, Humanities

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David says

To put it another way, propositions are the atoms from which the molecule of the sentence is constructed.

So here I go reading another one of those "How to write" books. Except this one was different, and before I get into the gritty-nitty of it, I'd like to talk about prose. Specifically, prose style. Because that is what Brooks Landon is really talking about when he talks about sentences.

Those of us who read a lot, and especially those of us who assay/aspire/pretend to be writers ourselves, probably spend a lot of time thinking about "good writing" and especially what makes writing "good." And when the topic moves specifically to writing style, there are as many opinions as there are readers. But while you'll get people who deny there is any such thing as "good writing" as an objective, measurable quality - there is only writing that one likes, and writing that one doesn't - I call bullshit on that. Certainly no book is loved or hated by everyone. And entertainment value, having an important message, having interesting characters, a thrilling plot, those are all qualities that are fair to factor in when you decide how many stars to give a book on Goodreads. Everyone has their own subjective criteria. Some people love Dan Brown, some people love *Twilight*. If you give *Twilight* 5 stars because it made the teenage girl in you squee and melt, okay, fine, whatever.

But if you say that *Twilight* demonstrates Stephenie Meyer's command of prose, that she builds great sentences and knows her way around the English language and is worthy of being called a great writer, not on the basis that she entertained millions with brain-crack for girls but because she crafts prose with an artisan's skill, well... I will say you are nucking futs and you should not use words because words are too pretty for you.

Incidentally, I'd say the same thing if we switch "Stephenie Meyer" to "J.K. Rowling," even though I have a great love for Harry Potter. Rowling is a better writer than Stephenie Meyer by far, but a *great* writer - by which I mean, a writer who writes great sentences - she is not.

My point being, there is a skill to writing great prose. Yes, it's just one aspect of great writing. You can write the beautifullest sentences in the world and not tell a great story, or have wooden characters. But we all agree (even if we don't agree that we agree) that there is such a thing as good sentence-writing, which is to say, good prose. If there isn't, then why do we even bother learning to write better? What is "polishing" if prose quality is purely subjective and the only thing that's really objective is grammatical correctness?

Ray Bradbury is not my favorite author, because all of his science fiction is suburban Illinois circa 1950. But read this opening from *The Martian Chronicles*:

They had a house of crystal pillars on the planet Mars by the edge of an empty sea, and every morning you could see Mrs. K eating the golden fruits that grew from the crystal walls, or

clearing the house with handfuls of magnetic dust which, taking all dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind. Afternoons, when the fossil sea was warm and motionless, and the wine trees stood stiff in the yard, and the little distant Martian bone town was all enclosed, and no one drifted out their doors, you could see Mr. K himself in his room, reading from a metal book with raised hieroglyphs over which he brushed his hand, as one might play a harp. And from the book, as his fingers stroked, a voice sang, a soft ancient voice, which told tales of when the sea was red steam on the shore and ancient men had carried clouds of metal insects and electric spiders into battle.

Now, think what you like about the rest of the book, or about science fiction, but I don't care if you hate sci-fi or you think Martians and electric spiders are stupid, if you do not see that that is great writing on a sentence level then what can I say to you but stick to simple nouns and simple predicates, you poor blighted proselorn churl.

Here's another sentence I selected myself, from *Lightning Bug*, by Donald Harington:

Deep in the dark blue air sing these lives that make the summer night. The lightning bug does not sing. But of all these lives, it alone, the lightning bug alone, is visible. The others are heard but not seen, felt but not seen, smelled but not seen.

Take those sentences apart. Analyze them. What techniques does Harington use? (Does this sound like an English class?) Is it not clear to you that there is skill involved? Maybe the style is not to your taste. Appreciation of different styles *is* subjective. But recognition of skill is not. There are some specific techniques in the above sentences, and Brooks Landon even gives name to them.

Lest you think it's all about high-falutin' rhetorical arts, though, there is also the simplicity of using exactly the right words for the right effect. One of the most famous sentence examples in science fiction is this one from Robert Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon*:

He punched the door with a code combination, and awaited face check. It came properly, the door dilated, and a voice inside said, "Come in, Felix."

There are no particularly sophisticated techniques used in the construction of those sentences. But they are active, things-are-happening sentences that also sneak in crucial bits of world-building and scene-setting with the simple (and, at the time this was written, exotically futuristic) use of words like "face check" and "dilated." People have written essays about Heinlein's genius in describing a "dilating door."

I am also tempted here to include the sentence in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* that goes on for *nine pages*. Except, y'know, that would make this review go on for *nine pages*.

That's a writing trick you probably should not try at home.

So, how do you write with great prose style? Brooks Landon argues, with authority, that you write great sentences. How do you write great sentences? Here we get to an art that is not as subjective as it may seem, and yet it is unique, personal, and can only be demonstrated but not really taught. I will liken it to martial arts, since I practice Japanese jujutsu. There is nothing magical or mystical about proper throws and joint locks and grappling techniques. It all works according to perfectly scientific, physiological principles. And you can learn it, by doing, and each move can be analyzed mechanically, particularly with reference to a good understanding of anatomy. And yet nobody can become a black belt just by studying a book, no matter how comprehensive the illustrations and descriptions. There are certain things that take way too many words to explain, if you can even explain them at all: "Just do *this*!" you say, and you demonstrate, and the student can only become proficient at it by doing it himself and feeling how his hips move and how to get beneath his opponent's center of gravity and the way in which the other person's arm wedges into the crook of his arm. Once you know it, you can watch someone else doing it and say "No, that's not quite right," but you can't necessarily articulate, in formal bullet-pointed rules, *why* it's not right. If you're a really good teacher you can explain some of it, but you still won't be able to talk them through a correct technique, they have to get the motions down themselves.

Anyone who's ever beta-read a manuscript for other writers (or just read a book with unimpressive prose) and had a definite sense that something in the writing just doesn't work but had problems explaining what was wrong with it other than in vague generalities knows what I mean.

In *Building Great Sentences*, Landon tries to break down what makes a truly well-written sentence, and the techniques you need to build them.

Now, one of the common bits of wisdom you will see in almost every modern writing book is to keep your sentences short. Long sentences are *bad*, say the style mavens. They require long reader attention spans, they are potentially confusing, they lack clarity, they are not effective communication. Strip away all those dangling clauses and modifying prepositions! 40-word sentences are an abomination before Strunk & White!

Balderdash, says Landon. Longer sentences are more artful, more informative, more pleasurable to read, and better.

Now that he's up-ended that bit of conventional wisdom, he spends this book, which is really his university course in book form, explaining it. Of course not *every* sentence should be a long concatenation of clauses; short sentences are fine too, they have their place. Equally obviously, sentences aren't better just because they're longer; a bad long sentence is more painful than a bad short one.

Faulkner, that famous master of the long sentence, is mentioned frequently, but it is also pointed out that he wrote plenty of short sentences. Not all of Faulkner's prose is Faulknerian.

Nor was the famously sparse Hemingway always sparse and brief, as Landon shows us several of Hemingway's longer sentences.

So how does one go about writing good long sentences?

Did you know there is such a thing as compositional theory? And that composers and rhetoricians have an entire science of sentence construction? *Building Great Sentences* is not a nitpicky grammar guide, nor a creative writing styleguide. It's a heavy-weight study of sentence theory, with some very effective exercises at the end of each chapter, but Brooks Landon is a college professor and this book is one of the "Great Courses" offered on CD and it shows - he starts with an introduction to the science and terminology of the

"periodic sentence" and goes on to describe the different forms of cumulative and suspensive syntax: coordinate, subordinate, and mixed. Going beyond the Rule of Three, he discusses when you should go for three, when you should stick to two, and when you can go hog-wild with four or more in a pattern.

You probably know what alliteration and assonance means. Maybe you are also familiar with anaphora and parallelism. How about anadiplosis, chiasmus, epanalepsis, and polyptotic and polysyndetonic sentences? No? Well, you will know them when you see them, because every writer uses at least a few of them, but this book puts a name to a vast arsenal of constructions drawing on terminology dating back to Aristotle. Knowing the terms isn't the point, but thinking about how you can make sentences better by being deliberate in your constructions is.

So, will this book make you a better writer? Only inasmuch as it makes you think about your sentences, which I am now doing. It's a crunchy text on sentence theory and it makes a strong argument for style being a thing that actually exists in tangible and identifiable (if not quantifiable) form.

But, it's not the sort of book for the right-brained thinker who thinks their muse needs a little more book-learning. It's the sort of book for a serious stylist who approaches writing as craft as well as art, who wants to be Nabokov or Cormac McCarthy, spending a great deal of time refining and whittling away at sentences to make them masterful, like a sculptor chiseling in marble, not the sort of the writer who just unleashes words on a page and then hopes to corral them into something prettier and more grammatical on the second pass.

Things I learned from this book: invisible propositions support visible sentences. Do not be afraid of long sentences! Coordinative and subordinative structures are key. And there are techniques, with names, for writing master sentences, and being aware of them will help you determine whether you have written one or not. And give you practice writing them.

But none of this will help your plots, your characters, or whatever inner spark of genius you do or do not possess. So your master sentences need to be supported by practice and all the other writing arts. You need to come up with the words yourself.

Also, it will reinforce those of us who believe that good writing is a thing, and not some nebulous unicorn no one can see, let alone catch.

Gregg says

This course does not lend itself very well to a strict lecture format, practical application would be better. This is also a creative writing course and has relatively little application to legal writing the genre where my writing resides. The course was not clear on its scope before I purchased it.

Justin Rose says

Although I've read hundreds of books, composed scores of book reports in college and grad school, and studied about becoming a better speaker and reader, I've learned relatively little about mastering the skill of writing. Landon, a college English professor, has changed my pragmatic writing style of short, punctual sentences, by convincing me to compose longer, yet grammatically correct sentences which become a

pleasure to read and understand.

Lisa says

Professor Brooks Landon urges writers to create more elegant and stylish sentences in this book by adding free modifiers, and he provides several wonderful examples from great novelists, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, and even Earnest Hemingway. Professor Landon also discusses the use of literary techniques, such as simile, metaphor and alliteration. He especially wants writers to improve their style, and he suggests many ways in which to do this.

He provides lots of helpful exercises. One exercise which I thought was fun was changing a sentence around to see which is the best construction. I did this with my favourite quotation: 'There are always flowers for those who want to see them'. (Henri Matisse) Matisse could have said: 'Those who want to see them will always see flowers', or 'Flowers will always be there for those who want to see them'. As you can see, this wonderful artist definitely chose the best construction for this sentence!

The only issue which I had with this book was that Landon favours cumulative sentences, and I found some of the examples from writers really just too long. Perhaps, this was because I am not a big fan of stream-of-consciousness writing, or Earnest Hemingway - even when he does write longer sentences.

I thought this was an excellent book for writers, and I highly recommend it if you want to improve your writing.

SusanwithaGoodBook says

Every once in awhile when I read, I come across a sentence so well crafted, so evocative, so moving, that I just have to stop and re-read it to let the words roll over my tongue and through my mind again. Certain sentences are just a joy to the eye and a treat for the ear. This love of sentences led me to ask: What makes a good sentence, and can I learn to write such a sentence?

I still don't know the answer to that question, but after this course I have a better idea of what makes a sentence memorable, moving, and lyrical. I hope to learn more about writing, not to become a writer myself, but to better understand and enjoy what I read. Thank you to Professor Landon for sharing his vast knowledge of the subject. I will look for more of his courses as soon as possible.

Craig says

This will make you a better wordsmith.

Note: I'm basing this off the audio version of "Building Great Sentences" (which was a treat to listen to, Landon is very engaging).

What it is: Building Great Sentences is simply fantastic. It is laser focused on just sentence structure,

beautiful sentence structure, sentence structure that makes you swoon. You'll learn ways to make big, beautiful sentences, loose sentences, balanced sentences. You'll also learn a variety of tools for adding your detail to short sentences, gaining the ability to vary the way you construct almost all of your sentences. Best of all, Brooks Landon is really funny, and the course is a pure delight to listen to. I've listened to it many times and I enjoy it every time.

What it is not: I've seen this course criticized for advocating for long and complex sentences, which isn't really true. It is true that it only deals with making sentences longer and better while being long, and it is true that if you craft all or even most of your sentences to be such masterworks, you'll be writing insufferable prose, but that's not what the lecture is advocating. Landon mentions several times that the writer absolutely must vary their sentence length, that the course is focused on longer sentences because short sentences are really not all that difficult to craft (or all that teachable), and that it is important to know how to create longer, well constructed sentences when desired. This course is simply focussed on that one single aspect, a specialized tool. The course teaches you how to build those beautiful loose, balanced, or otherwise complex sentences when you want to. The course doesn't deal at all with any of the other important aspects of writing (story, characterization, pacing, etc), only how to build great sentences (when you want to).

I found this lecture series to have terrifically improved my ability to craft sentences of all variety and type. I don't often use these new tools in my toolbox to craft complex sentences, but when I want to, I know how to do them, and I'm a better writer for it. Also, many of the techniques learned are well suited to creating variety among your shorter sentences (the multitude of examples of different ways to add just one piece of detail to "the woman closed the door" are wonderfully illuminating).

TL;DR: This will make you a better wordsmith. This is an incredible tool for improving one small, but important aspect of your writing, building more complex sentences, which, when used sparingly, can add incredible richness to your writing. It will also teach you how to vary your writing, showing you the multitude of ways to add detail to your short sentences. I can't recommend it strongly enough.

Joel Gun says

This book allows a writer, or an admirer of the written word, to appreciate the intricacies of the sentence. I'm glad I stumbled upon this book, because it's helped to revived my appreciation for the craft of writing. It's easy to get trapped into a little box sometimes. Books like this serve to remind that there is a universe of limitless knowledge when it comes to writing. Most of us can only attempt to scratch the surface. I like that. For me, as a writer, that's what gives life adventure.

Lora says

A good book. I did skim some of the more technical parts sometimes, but also learned some great new terms to help anchor my writing. I love the idea of cumulative sentences. They add breath to the clay, life to the limp, and color to the dull. So many minimalist writers could use a bit more accumulation of thought. You know, meat on them barely verbal bones.

Most modern writers need some sort of soul as well. Cumulative sentences may not be enough salvation for

them.

Bruce says

Wow! Brooks Landon's Teaching Company course, "Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft," which I just now finished, is one of the most outstanding and, frankly, fun courses I've ever taken, Landon being a superbly gifted teacher who lectures with wit and clarity, with insight and imagination, with enthusiasm and verve, leading the student through not only an historical and enlightening academic discussion of the development of sentence writing but also a step-by-step examination of the process of constructing great prose (using his own lecturing, his own speech, to exemplify and model each point he makes), providing not only suggested exercises for the reader's own writing development but also insights that can enliven and enrich one's reading of the writing of others, engendering not only interest and even passion for improving one's personal writing but also an enhanced hunger - if such enhancement is even needed, a debatable point for those of us who are in love with language already - to take ever bigger bites of the vast amount of writing available to us for our delectation, threatening - or better, promising - to turn each of us into a magnificent synthesis of literary gourmet and gourmand. If you love language in and of itself, if you love to read and love to write, if you have a passion for the wonder, possibilities, and delights of written expression, consider taking this magnificent course; you'll love it!

Jason Koivu says

Indispensable! Once you've built your foundation on solid stuff like Strunk and White's *The Element of Style* and put in a good deal of practice when you first start up, then *Building Great Sentences* is your next step.

This lecture lays down a comprehensible road map for proper structure that flows like a German sports car winding along the autobahn. Before you know it, you'll be constructing high-flying sentences as amazingly acrobatic as a Cirque du Soleil act.

Just be careful you don't go too fast for too long or go flying off the trapeze, because although it might be a joy to you, forcing your passengers along on a seemingly endless ride or making them watch your overtly ornate acrobatics will eventually weary them. Landon teaches you how to correctly construct some sentence-whoppers! But be sure to use that power for the forces of good!

Newton Nitro says

Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft - Brooks Landon | #guiaparaescritores
#dicasparaescritores #resenha | The Teaching Company, 2008 | Lido de 29.08.17 a 31.08.17

RESENHA

Um dos maiores best-sellers da série The Great Courses, Building Great Sentences celebra a linguagem, e mudará para sempre a maneira como você lê e escreve. Uma excelente escrita começa com a frase. Se são apenas duas palavras ("Jesus chorou") ou a frase de William Faulkner de 1.287 palavras em "Absalão! Absalão!", as sentenças têm o poder de cativar, divertir, motivar, educar e, o mais importante, deliciar-nos.

No entanto, a abordagem orientada à construção de frases para a escrita é muitas vezes ignorada em favor de uma economia que deixa tudo bem sem graça e vago.

Construir grandes sentenças ensina você a escrever orações melhores, luxuriando-se nos prazeres da linguagem.

O premiado professor Brooks Landon baseia-se em exemplos de mestres de frases longas e elegantes - incluindo Don DeLillo, Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion e Samuel Johnson - para revelar a mecânica de como a linguagem trabalha com os pensamentos e as emoções do leitor, e fornecendo ferramentas para escrever frases poderosas e mais efetivas.

RESENHA

Estava ansioso por este livro, pela falta que sinto de orientações e sugestões para o trabalho da prosa em si, aquilo que chama-se de "boa escrita". E depois de muitas recomendações, chego nessa obra excelente desenvolvida pelo professor Brooks Landon, da universidade de Iowa.

BUILDING GREAT SENTENCES é um livro sobre estilo literário, a habilidade que os grandes escritores desenvolvem para criar frases que, não apenas narram a história mas que são belas em si mesmas. É um livro sobre o "polimento literário", a criação de um texto que seduz pelo modo como foi criado, pelo ritmo e sonoridade que possui ao ser lido.

O Professor Brooks, à semelhança do nosso mestre Raimundo Carrero (que resenhei nesse link: <https://goo.gl/Qh6j6Q> e nesse link: <https://goo.gl/uPTWUn>) destrincha frases de mestres da literatura como Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, Joyce, Hemingway, para revelar os mecanismos e a arquitetura, tirando sugestões e orientações para escritores interessados em aprimorar a própria prosa.

Ou para leitores que queiram descobrir novas camadas de apreciação de textos de alto valor literário.

A base teórica do livro é a teoria da composição, e o livro trabalha com conceitos como aliteração, assonância, paralelismo, entre outros. A explicação é bem didática, mas para leitores não familiarizados com alguns termos, recomendo uma visitinha básica na wikipedia.

O livro também oferece uma visão radicalmente diferente do que se normalmente encontra em guias para escritores: a idéia de que são os MODIFICADORES (adjetivos, advérbios, etc.) os elementos mais importantes do estilo e da prosa, ao invés dos tradicionais objetos centrais de uma frase, como VERBOS e SUBSTANTIVOS.

Brooks argumenta que, a ênfase exagerada na prosa seca, sem modificadores que a tornem única, retira o prazer da escrita e da construção de frases mais interessantes, poéticas, com mais sonoridade, e que façam uso dos inúmeros recursos de retórica disponíveis aos escritores. E ele oferece uma miríade de exemplos para sustentar essa opinião!

Recomendadíssimo para aqueles que queiram dar um "level up" na prosa! :D

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April Sataneek says

Alternate title for the book: Why I Inordinately Love Long Sentences and Why You Should Too.

Summary: This book could be 1/3 less in length and be as effective, if not more. One could say the same for this book review.

I relish an opportunity to learn more about the writing craft, since I carry with every piece I write, no formal writing instruction beyond basic college English classes. So this book came as a welcome gift.

I read the first three chapters twice in order to get the most information and instruction possible out of the material, dutifully doing the “Next Steps” writing exercises that came at the end of the chapters. But then, this happened:

“Cumulative sentences that start with a brief base clause and then start picking up new information, much as a snowball gets larger as it rolls downhill, fascinate me with their ability to add information that actually makes the sentence easier to read and more satisfying because it starts answering questions as quickly as an inquisitive reader might think of them, using each modifying phrase to clarify what has gone before, and to

reduce the need for subsequent explanatory sentences, flying in the face of the received idea that cutting words rather than adding them is the most effective way to improve writing, reminding us that while in some cases, less is indeed more, in many cases, more is more, and more is what our writing needs.”

My uncensored reaction: “I hate that sentence. By the end of it, I’ve forgotten what it was really about because of all the unneeded junk you put in it. The length of it calls unnecessary attention to its droning, not what you want to say by it.”

That offending, gaseous sentiment is like a person who wants to do everything and won’t let anyone else contribute to a project, thus stifling the creative quality of the outcome.

An apt quote came to mind:

Good books don't give up all their secrets at once. -Stephen Kings

Nor do good paragraphs give up all their secrets to one sentence.

I endured through the subsequent wordy chapters, unable to give in to my desire to throw the book across the room, because once I start a book, no matter how bad or frustrating it is, I will most definitely finish it.

The author went on to discuss, using many many unneeded words, the subjects of: cumulative syntax, coordinate, subordinate and mixed cumulative patterns, etc, suspense in sentences, balance, and rhythm.

All throughout his chapters, I noticed that I hated all the example sentences that he gave for his discussions, but when he quoted other authors’ long sentences (taken out of legitimate works), they seemed fine. The thing is, I think what he overlooks is that sentences rarely (unless you’re on Pinterest or some other frame-a-sentence-and-make-a-statement social media) occur by themselves in the wild pages of fiction and rarely in domesticated nonfiction. You don’t get only one sentence to express yourself (unless, of course, you are on Twitter).

I agree with Mr. Landon in a sense, that writers shouldn’t be afraid of long sentences; the rhythm, the cadence, the propositions, atmosphere and style they can convey are of the utmost value to any fiction writer, as a distinct tool in their pallet. But so are short sentences.

He writes that short sentences, “seem(s) to me to introduce the reader to a mind that is amazingly unreflective, almost anesthetized or so focused on one purpose that it simply refuses to think about anything else or consider alternate points of view. That mind-set is great for Rambo, but I don’t think that’s the mind we most want to introduce to our readers, unless our goal is to intimidate them.”

And I suppose I might agree with him if my goal was to stifle and limit an author’s tools of the trade.

Mr. Brooks shouldn’t let short sentences intimidate him. Don’t be scared. Unlock the cage that lies around the first word of a sentence and the period, and your paragraphs will become more varied, mysterious, attractive, breathable and a lot less crowded. Short sentences convey, contrary to his opinion expressed in the book, more than intimidation, they are a way of painting a literary picture. They leave out things an author wants the reader to figure out for himself, leaving room for mystery, awe and surprise. They let the verbs and adjectives breath on their own.

It’s like telling Seurat he should use more long strokes to paint his pictures. It’d be more pretty.

Surely Brooks has read *The Stranger* by Albert Camus? The whole book is written curtly, with short sentences, which is how Camus builds that frustratingly emotionally vacant atmosphere that has burned itself into my memory. That atmosphere was crafted by the author using stoic, terse writing which gives the book the power to make a lasting mark on the reader. It wasn't intimidating, until I realized how magnificently the author had used the technique to manipulate my readerly emotions.

So, ultimately, *Building Great Sentences* is full of support for the opinion of the author: he likes to read long sentences.

The Big BUT

Along the way he uses and explains many parts of sentence structure, how sentences are built, how they convey propositions and ideas. And this is the most useful part of the book, the grammatical instruction on the sentence level. Because if you're going to use sentences as tools, you should know a little about how they work. I'm glad to add it to my collection of writing books.

Despite my disgust at his inflated and verbose style of writing I find myself, at times, writing long sentences that unfold like origami. And then I go back and chop them up into smaller pieces.

This review can also be found on my literary blog. ajtanek.blogspot.com

Richard Gilbert says

Brooks Landon's belief in long sentences goes against decades of teaching and advice. The dominant plain style prizes simplicity and clarity over elegance and eloquence. But Landon favors elaboration, and one type of long sentence—the cumulative, a detail-packed propulsive structure that enhances delivery of information, emotion, and rhythm. Such a sentence might impel you to savor it, or to stop and marvel at its maker's skill.

Because cumulatives begin with a simple base sentence, they're easy to understand even as they add modifying phrases that lengthen them—to 40 words, 60, even 100 and more. Here's a fun one by Landon himself, from his *How to Build Great Sentences*, with the first five words being the base sentence:

"He drove the car carefully, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirror shades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk".

Landon teaches a popular class in prose style at the University of Iowa; with his focus on the sentence, and especially on the unique properties and benefits of its cumulative form, he's among a handful of distinguished holdouts against the plain style. Their research into what genius writers and highly skilled professional wordsmiths often do began with an obscure 1946 essay, "The Craft of Writing," by John Erskine. A novelist, pianist, and composer who taught at Columbia University, Erskine argued that it isn't actually the noun or the verb but the modifier that is "the essential part of any sentence."

Rhetorician Francis Christensen took up Erskine's point—and changed writing instruction for a while in the 1960s and '70s. Many high school students and college freshmen were taught to improve their writing by imitating masterful long sentences and by combining short sentences to make compound and complex ones. Although this worked, the movement crashed under an academic counter-attack in the 1980s. Landon

touches on the reasons, and cites an elegiac essay, “The Erasure of the Sentence,” by Robert J. Connors. Connors essentially says that having students imitate wasn’t sexy enough to prevail in academe. Christensen’s methods, he says, were seen as mechanistic, “lore-based,” and lacking in supporting theory.

The stunning irony, to any practitioner reading about this academic dispute, is that writers, including literary artists, have always learned by imitation. In writing classes, and certainly in creative writing workshops, the precocious stars are those who, having fallen in love with words, sentences, and stories long before, have already spent years informally studying them. In swimming through libraries, such writers absorbed structures and rhythms that make prose sing or pack a punch.

Building Great Sentences concentrates such a process and makes learning overt. Chapter Five, “The Rhythm of Cumulative Syntax,” drills down into their structure. Upon finishing it, on Page 67, you might wonder how Landon will fill his book’s remaining pages—ten subsequent chapters. Indeed, you have the gist of his point and grasp the reason for his passion. But Landon continues: to teach more about cumulatives; to consider a few other sentence patterns; to offer further insights into balance, suspense, and the rhetorical effects of using two examples, or three, or four (and more).

In other words, everything after Chapter Five is elaboration—and more nitty gritty for actual writers, who should draw near and study. The focus on one key pattern allows Landon to go deep without losing the serious student. And thankfully, Landon’s own prose is elegant and accessible. He uses as few grammatical terms as possible. This is a study of prose effects and how to achieve them—of rhetoric, that is, not grammar per se. He deftly cites other contemporary and past theorists, distilling their thought and giving motivated teachers and writers a way to locate and learn from them as well.

For me, as a memoirist, a fascinating corollary aspect of Building Better Sentences is how cumulatives can help finesse persona. The writer’s reflective persona is crucial in memoir because readers reflexively judge memoirists and the past selves they are portraying. Landon says cumulative sentences present a writer who’s trying harder, lend themselves to reflection, and remind readers “of the creative mind that crafted that sentence.” That’s “one of the functions of style: to remind us of the mind behind the sentences we read,” he says. The macho plain style, in contrast, isn’t inclined toward pursuit of deeper meaning and has a take-it-or-leave-it quality.

I don’t entirely agree with Landon about plain style’s flaws in fiction—at least his examples don’t actually illustrate his point. Yet his overall notion, based on his preference for depth of inquiry, seems valid. I’m totally on board with his championing of the cumulative sentence and with its implications for nonfiction. Especially when blended with simple and compound sentences, cumulatives offer many options for rhythmic variety and emphasis.

Landon treats Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* kindly, even though it’s an exemplar of and an advocate for plain style. Aimed at beginning writers, remember, *The Elements of Style* is a fine and bracing brief for clarity of thought and expression. And professional writers do discover the beauty of simple declarative sentences, after all. They’re always looking for places to use them. They also, of course, make sentences of other lengths and patterns.

Usually the results of learning to write by imitating great sentences are credited to individual talent. That obscures the way craft is actually acquired in a monkey-see, monkey-do process. For writers serious about improving, learning craft becomes steadily more focused and overt, as well as more self-prescribed and self-directed. After reading *Building Great Sentences*, I’ll write more and better cumulative sentences.

Landon performs a valuable service for writers, teachers, and rhetoricians in explaining his obsession with cumulatives, spotlighting their relative simplicity, their flowing beauty, their subtle but steady reassurance about the writer, and their effectiveness in conveying rhythm, emotion, and information. Building Great Sentences is one of the top writing books in my library, and it's the most useful study of the sentence I've ever read.

Aloha says

I wished I had read this a long time ago. This is a terrific exploration of different sentence structures that is beyond grammar. It gives me a greater insight into how literary greats create flow and mood in their stories. I have to go back and reread this again.

Sher says

I loved this book. Dr. Landon brings things to mind about the construction of a sentence that I had never considered before. I am very interested in writing and have done a bit of amateur writing myself. It is something I would like to do more of in the future, and having read this book, I now believe I have a better chance at being good at it.

Dr. Landon is funny and serious, having a great way about him that holds the attention, which allows the learning to take place. This book is certainly not for everyone, but even if you do not ever intend to write an interesting sentence, being a bibliophile like I am, you may like this book because of the new, more enlightened way you are bound to read books. Hahaha, my sentences are still awkward, but now I have a pattern to follow that, with practice, will help me improve.
