The Elements of Story: Field Notes on Nonfiction Writing

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“A splendid book for journalists (new or old), fiction writers, essayists, and critics. But it could also be of great use to the intelligent common reader, the man or woman who wonders why it’s impossible to finish reading certain stories and why others carry the reader in a vivid rush to the end.”
—Pete Hamill, author of *A Drinking Life*

In the spirit of Strunk and White’s classic *The Elements of Style*, comes *The Elements of Story*, by Francis Flaherty, longtime story editor at *The New York Times*. A brilliant blend of memoir and how-to, *The Elements of Story* offers more than 50 principles that emphasize storytelling aspects rather than simply the mechanics of writing—a relentlessly entertaining, totally accessible writing guide for the novice and the professional alike.

The Elements of Story: Field Notes on Nonfiction Writing Details

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From Reader Review The Elements of Story: Field Notes on Nonfiction Writing for online ebook

Shane says

I was drawn to this book because it had the words "story" and "non-fiction" in the title - two opposites in the traditional view. I found the book an affirmation of what I had always suspected but had never read anywhere else: that at the end of the day, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, the power of the story is what grabs the reader, and the elements of story do not change despite the genre.

In short chapters, each covering a necessary element of story, this book banished the cobwebs and re-introduced me to concepts that were buried in the flotsam of daily writing.

A good book for the non-fiction writer, and fiction writer, may I add.

Sher says

This has been a wonderful book to savor, and , so it has taken me several years to get through it. Hundreds of short 2- 3 page chapters on all aspects of nonfiction writing. Examples are primarily journalistic. Flaherty is a super writer, so the way he expresses his concepts are a pleasure to read too. Sections on leads, endings, titles, content, telling the truth - finding authenticity in your writing -- and finally a wonderful surprise at the end where Flaherty argues why we should try writing in a form that is new to us. This book always gave me something I needed every time I picked it up.

Hanje Richards says

This was an interesting approach to the subject of writing. The author addresses 50 problems of story (as opposed to problems of style that Strunk and White focus on in the classic Elements of Style)in 50 short chapters. All the ideas a applicable to most kinds of writing. The author's background is journalism, but the reader is invited to see how the problems he addresses could be applied to fiction, non journalistic nonfiction, memoir and more.

I think this is a workhorse of a book. Not a bad book to have on the reference shelf.

Saundra Goldman says

Pearls of hard-won wisdom and experience from New York Times editor, Frances Flaherty. Every chapter delivers at least one sage piece of advice with examples from the greats. Flaherty is a wonderful writer himself and clearly enjoys playing with words. I've been reading a chapter or two before I sit down to write.

LMS says

I stayed up much too late reading this book. The length of the chapters made it easy to read just one more.

Francis Flaherty believes that every article, whether it's about finance or medicine or anything in between, is a story, with actors who feel things and do things, and the key to good writing is to identify and bring out the human elements.

The book, though aimed mostly at journalists, contains practical advice on crafting interesting stories that all writers can use. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone writing non-fiction.

Brian says

Interesting to learn what constitutes good news articles. Now I can identify why I choose not to read a given article. I'm not sure we'll be continuing our subscription to the local paper.

I enjoyed the advice on writing stories, especially the examples from the author's editing experience at the New York Times.

Kes says

Extremely readable book that zings along. The author portrays the elements of non-fiction writing very well - how to centralise on human elements, focus on the pacing, use show and not tell, and to watch the pacing of a piece. There are also chapters on each part of an article (writing leads, posing questions for the reader, incorporating transitions). Brief but enjoyable.

Erica Cresswell says

Review--The Elements of Story: Field Notes on Nonfiction Writing

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in writing nonfiction or looking to improve their nonfiction skills. It was written by Francis Flaherty, an editor at the New York Times for seventeen years. The book is heralded by the Library Journal as “an essential read for both freelance writers and students of journalism.” This book covers it all--from adding a human face to your story to add impact to nailing down just the right title. This is a book I am sure I will keep around for reference.

To start, my only real criticism of the book is that there isn’t more advice and examples. Flaherty is a wealth of knowledge and someone I’d love to sit down with and chat about writing. He makes tips about nonfiction writing accessible to the average reader and it goes without saying that the New York Times is something more than just a newspaper; it stands for superb writing and a rich history. It is the standard in writing. Flaherty truly is an expert authority on nonfiction writing.

Flaherty breaks his book down into 50 chapters. Each one highlights weak writing and provides tips to strengthen your writing whether you're struggling with a weak introduction, title, quote, or more. There's advice for everyone in here even those who think they don't need advice. Ok particularly those who know they don't need advice.

If you're struggling with the interview process his advice is to "Remember that people don't talk in straight lines, especially about emotions. Ask your questions in different ways, and let your subjects meander in their answers, and you may be surprised where you both end up." This is a great tip and dead on if you spend any time thinking about it. People (interview subjects and otherwise) don't think in straight lines either. They stop and start and go back to the beginning again and jump forward. But it's the writer's job to nail down quotes and references. And take it seriously, he advises.

He tells the reader to treat the interview – what he calls "the writer's formal act of listening" with the "deference" it deserves. He advises against parachuting into an interview "with a predetermined set of questions from which you will not be moved." In other words, he advises, do not be Bill O'Reilly. For those not familiar with American television, Bill O'Reilly is an American figure on the Fox TV network and he is known for not shutting up. The result is we hear very little from the interviewee. Flaherty is not a fan. He advises us not only to not be rigid in our questioning but to "let your source have the floor; Let him wander around…" Moreover, he explains that readers are often more attuned "to the words of real people, the people the writer is writing about, than they are to the writer's [words]." This is yet another reason to listen carefully to your source.

Why are quotes so important? Well one reason Flaherty gives us is that the reader perks up upon seeing quotation marks. The "marks signify that a new person has arrived at the party, that, to try a different image, the story has switched drivers."

Paying attention to an interviewee's actions is also important. Flaherty writes that "watching a person in action aids accuracy; the account is not filtered through the speaker's possibly faulty memory or language skills or colored by his self-interest. He advises the writer to look "until you see something new, for the writer is the watcher of the world." But as watchers of the world some writers have fallen asleep at the wheel so to speak. They have "abandoned" the role. Flaherty writes: "They bound about just as fast as their readers and consequently offer only wafer-thin forgettable descriptions."

On the topic of subjects, Flaherty explains that a subject is not a story but rather it is many possible stories. "To write is to choose, which is to exclude," he explains. He makes reference to this point several times in the book so I took note. Another way of putting it is a story isn't so much about what you put in but rather what you leave out. He loathes heavy, wordy sentences. He writes: "The further a topic is from the heart of the story, the fewer words it merits." If a main idea is set out in three paragraphs Flaherty advises the qualifications should consist of roughly one paragraph.

Flaherty provides the reader with tips on how to spice up one's writing. He advises to alternate between general statements and specific ones in order to "bestow a sense of motion" to the piece. Of the two jobs a writer must do – make a story move, and describe and explain—"movement is the more important." John Gardner called this "profluence" -- the "sense that things are moving, getting somewhere and moving forward." Of the many things the writer can do to give the story a sense of motion one that sticks out is "made-up action" (yes non-fiction writers can make up action). Another is the "mix" (which means to vary the rhythm and structure of your sentences so that your writing will "grow perky.") One way to vary the rhythm is the back and forth – the "alternation of opposite elements." According to William E. Blundell, it is the swinging from the "abstract to the concrete, from the general to the particular, from the mural to the miniature."

Let's go back to the beginning for a moment and take a look at lead sentences. Flaherty explains that the first

few paragraphs of a book may not be make or break because book readers know “the power of a book is cumulative; they are in it for the long haul.” Unlike book writing, in nonfiction the lead is absolutely crucial in feature articles and essays. Its job, “never a minor one, is to draw the reader over the threshold.” Leads must make every word count and leads must “charm, even rivet.” “Fact” leads, for instance are often “spurned in feature writing but if it is a fact that prompts the reader curiosity, the feature writer should try it.”

Have you ever read an article and wondered where it was going? You’re not alone. Flaherty explains that “setting paragraphs” are important because a reader soon feels skittish in an unplaced tale. He likens this experience to a horse “with blinders.” When a writer changes direction abruptly “the reader gets…discombobulated.”

So how does the writer smoothen the ride? According to the book one standard solution is to use a transition, “a bridge” that connects one section of an article to the next. Other methods consist of using typographical devices: subheads; bullets; skipped lines; chapter breaks. But the best way to avoid “swervy trips” is to lay out the story—to plan a route so that the curves are “gentle, not sharp.” Flaherty advises the reader that “smart story planning minimizes the need for transitions…” The reader is advised to make the transitions (also called “stitches”) short and that the more seamless a story is the better.
Another method to make a neat stitch is word repetition but Flaherty advises not to be too wordy with transitions.

What about the summary of an article? Flaherty weighs against using a “summary kicker” (the “kicker” being the end of the piece.) According to William Zinsser, author of “On Writing Well” a summary kicker “signals to the reader that you are about to repeat in compressed form what you have already said in detail.” Thus it ends up sounds like a lecture which is appropriate in academic writing but not nonfiction writing.

According to “Field notes on Writing” the kicker should be a surprise, a twist flourish. It should hint at “high ambitions.” Why are kickers so important? You guessed it-- it’s because they are the end of a story and the end can linger in the reader’s memory. Flaherty suggests some good “kicker” ideas: a compelling quote; a spellbinding image; revisiting the person or the scene that started the pieces. The kicker “like the lead is short and shorn of all the essentials.” Kickers “love commas, periods and other braking devices….[they] coax the reader to dwell on the dramatic, meaningful words, and [guide] the story to a graceful, not screeching halt.”

At the end of the book Flaherty takes the reader on a journey to find the perfect title. He shows us how to narrow down possible titles and how to avoid corny wordplay.

I have only touched the surface of the book in this short review. There’s much to be learned from this book whether you’re a beginner nonfiction writer or a seasoned veteran. There’s an excellent “sources” section where you’re sure to find more useful writing advice.

I was encouraged by something Flaherty wrote in the afterword: “Go find the stuff you love to death. When you find it, many wondrous things will happen. Time will fly. Work will become play. You will feel stoked. If you are prey to self-consciousness and general writerly heebie-jeebies, they will fade or vanish. Of course, the room you walk into may be the wrong one. But you can just walk out, nothing lost, and try a different door. If you are in love with writing (and not just with the idea of writing), there is almost certainly such a door, and it is waiting for you.”

Michael Clemens says

Though it's geared at the journalist and at non-fiction writing in general, the nature of story-telling is

applicable to fiction as well. Fiction writers, after all, have the (un)fortunate experience of seeing their characters come to life and be independent creatures, with motivations, histories, and language all their own. As a fiction writer, it takes little imagination to put yourself in the role of the roving reporter, sussing out the story from the witnesses, find the title that will grab the reader's attention, and the tone that will keep it. Writing is writing is writing, after all, and this is a surprisingly flexible volume of advice, worthy of placement on the shelf next to the Strunk & White that inspired it.

Jessica Cote says

I first came across this book in one my college courses. But like every college student I threw it in the back of my closet and never dug through it. I never opened a page of this tiny book full of miracles for a writer. It took being out of college before my hands graced the covers of this gem among my collection.
The book is a meager two hundred and seventy four paged piece of worth it. Its written to help writers learn how to form better non-fiction books or articles. But I’m finding the juicy pieces of the book hold true even for fiction writers.
“Keep exploring your subject. The more you look, the more you see.”?—?Chapter nine, Flaherty
Just when you think your book is done. You could re-read it and find pieces of detail missing or parts that give too much in your story. This book is a must have miracle that we need because its full of the advice we need. Not the advice we want. If you haven’t already picked it up. I suggest you dig your claws into this, and not put it down till your eyes are fluttering shut in the wee hours of the morning.
https://medium.com/@jessicacote66/the...

Vicky says

One of my favourite books for capturing the romance of the writing craft as well as the craft itself.
This isn't just a style guide, it's a manual for how to be a copy editor at the NY Times (as Francis Flatterly was at the time of writing). The book has stories on using language - be precise in what you show as well as showing - and editing - think of your story like a tree, pruning the branches lets the trunk grow.
I've given several copies to people as gifts.

Todd Stockslager says

A field guide to words

. . . and how to use them to tell true stories. The title of Flaherty's guide to nonfiction writing plays on Strunk and Whites The Elements of Style Illustrated which famously captured the essence of writing with precision in a very few words. Flaherty's "Elements" take a few more words to document because he is dealing with bigger subjects--story themes, characters, plot, and action that make up the whole story for non-fction writers, who for Flaherty are newpaper journalists, but the principles would apply to any style, length, and medium of nonfiction.

The book can be read quickly and profitably end to end, but will find better use on a working writer's bookshelf next to the Strunk and White's. I'd be surprised if Journalism schools (sorry-- "Communications" schools in this mediagnostic era) don't add this small gem as required reading for every student.

Renée says

A good book for nonfiction writers, especially those interested in journalism. Perhaps to cut and dry, in terms of reporting, for literary nonfiction writers.

A few thoughts from the book I found interesting to mull over:

"Only a short distance separates bright and trite."

"If writing is about anything, it is about seeing things fresh."

"'Sound' what you mean," in reference to the sonic quality of word choices.

"Every word you write, the reader must read."

"Let words bewitch you."

"Sometimes, say things sideways."

"Look until you see something new."

"Like a diamond, a story needs a setting."

"Composing a title demands a deep understanding of the text."

"Wordplay's biggest danger is staleness."

Jørgen Carling says

This was a very inspiring and enjoyable book. I read many books about writing, and this one added something distinctive, I think. On the whole, I enjoyed the author's voice. Unlike many other authors of books about writing, he takes care not to let his ego overshadow his message (thus following his own advice). All his examples are from the NY Times, and many of the issues he discusses are specific to journalism. However, I think the book has broader appeal. My own writing is primarily academic, with other ideals and restrictions, but I can still apply much of what I learned from reading this book.

Dana Sobh says

A must read for anyone who's interested in writing.

Will take with me the lessons learned from this book wherever I go... :)
