

## Notes From Donald Hall's *On Writing Well*

### Verbs

Verbs act. Verbs move. Verbs do. Verbs strike, soothe, grin, cry, exasperate, decline, fly, hurt, and heal. Verbs make writing go, and they matter more to our language than any other part of speech.

Verbs give energy, if we use them with energy. If we don't use them with energy, they sound dull or flat:

Verbs are action. Verbs are motion. Verbs are doing.

A single verb is stronger than a strung-out verb-adjective or verb-noun combination.

I am cognizant of this situation

I know it.

Look out for the verbs be / is / are combined with nouns and adjectives.

He looked outside and became aware of the fact that it was raining.

He looked outside and saw that it was raining.

He looked outside. It was raining.

Look out for the verbs has / have.

We had a meeting.

We met.

The same advice applies to phrases that use verb forms ending in -ing (present participles).

He is clearing his throat . . .

He clears his throat . . .

Watch out for false color in verbs.

The 200-foot-high derrick was a black, latticed steel phallus raping the hot, virginal blue sky.

The train slammed to a stop in the station. Steam vomited from all apertures. Passengers gushed through the barriers and hurled into the night.

And fancy verbs.

“Depict” is inferior to “paint” or “draw” or “describe”

“Emulate” is fancy for “copy,” “ascertain” for “make sure,” and “endeavor” for “try.”

## Nouns

Nouns are the simplest parts of speech, the words least tricky to use. Nouns are the names of things, “things” in the broadest sense: table, elm, Nancy, rain, noun, nation, hunger, nine o’clock.

The more particular the noun, the clearer the pictures we make, and the more accurately we can represent feelings.

I remember a group of flowers that grew on some land near a relative’s house . . .

I remember a patch of daisies that grew on a meadow near my Cousin Annie’s farm . . .

The more abstract the noun, the more difficult it is to use well.

Emotion, love, courage, hatred, responsibility, etc.

Eliminate abstract nouns combined with adjectives.

Young love, blind faith, fierce anger, etc.

The abstraction is lazy, retrieved by the writer from the attic of Big Ideas, and the adjective strives to do the work; but adjectives themselves often are weak, and so we have two weaklings failing to budge the door that one strong noun could burst open.

## Modifiers

Modifiers—adjectives, adverbs, participles, and sometimes other words—give quality to nouns and verbs. Used well, modifiers create distinctions in meaning. They add precision.

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered on the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and empty and heavy, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

In the passage that begins “In Another Country,” Hemingway shows us the way to use adjectives and adverbs.

He says, “the war,” not “the long war” or “the distant war” or “the bloody, maiming, killing, useless, horrid, revolting war.”

He uses “always” and “any more” as adverbs in his simple predicates.

He uses restrained adjectives—cold, electric, pleasant—in the first few sentences.

Then the eye of the paragraph turns away from restrained thoughts of war, and looks at the dead animals that substitute for dead soldiers; right away the verbs and nouns become stronger and more particular: “game,” “shops,” powdered.” Then the adjectives, exact and strong, come marching in: “stiff and heavy and empty.” The last paragraph is especially vigorous. The adjectives used sparingly are used strongly and well.