



Interview with Verlyn Klinkenborg

SARAH DOHRMANN

*Verlyn Klinkenborg is a nonfiction writer who has been a member of the New York Times editorial board since 1997. His book *The Rural Life*, published in 2003 by Hachette Digital, Inc, is a selection of columns that originally appeared on the New York Times editorial page under the heading “The Rural Life”; with vivid detail, quiet insight, and sharp observation, they document the daily challenges of life in the country, and on a farm in particular. Klinkenborg’s work is meditative and lyrical. There’s a sense of privacy to his work, as if he’s whispered the words into your ear instead of written them down. He’s also the author of *Making Hay*, *The Last Fine Time*, and *Timothy*; or, *Notes of an Abject Reptile*. He has published articles in *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *Esquire*, *National Geographic*, and *Mother Jones*, and has taught literature and creative writing at Harvard University, Pomona College, Bard College, St. Olaf College, and Bennington College. His new book, *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, due out in August from Knopf, offers no “tricks” to survive*

Sarah Dohrmann was a teaching artist for Teachers & Writers Collaborative for ten years before becoming its education director, and has been teaching creative writing in Special Programs at Sarah Lawrence College since 2003. She has been awarded a Jerome Foundation Travel and Study Grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts Award in Nonfiction Literature, and a Fulbright Fellowship. With photographer Tiana Markova-Gold, Sarah won the 2010 Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University for their joint project on prostitution in Morocco. Also in 2010, she was a finalist for both the Iowa Award in Fiction and the Iowa Award in Nonfiction.

the writing life, no strategies for structuring the essay, no words of wisdom on finishing the novel. It serves, instead, as a potent reminder that there are no good books without sentences that work. Remember the lowly sentence?

Klinkenborg was interviewed by Sarah Dohrmann on May 25, 2012.

Sarah Dohrmann: *How did you become a writer?*

Verlyn Klinkenborg: Well, I think the answer to that question is that I became a reader. I read avidly from the time I was a little kid and have continued to do so my entire life. My way of getting as close as possible to reading was to go to graduate school and get a PhD in English Literature. Indeed, it got me as close to reading as I could get. But it became clear that academics wasn’t really going to gratify that deeper need that I felt as a reader, partly because the prose I was being asked to write as an academic seemed to be almost worthless and very contorted. It was essentially of no use to me, and hardly any use to anybody else.

I wanted to teach myself to write so I took my academic prose, which is something I’d spent a lot of time learning how to do, and broke it down and took it apart and reconfigured it and essentially taught myself. I suppose I was 26, 27 when I learned how to stop writing like an academic and how to start writing for real.

SD: *Tell me about the difference between those two styles. I mean, tonally, texturally, structurally, what is the difference between writing like an academic and writing “for real”?*

VK: Let’s let broaden this so we are not just talking about academic writing, but also about writing in business, in law, in a lot of journalism—in almost any use of the language apart from literature. In these types of writing there’s absolutely no rhythm. No silence between the sentences. No space between the sentences at all. There is a persistent anxiety on the writer’s part that the reader will get lost if there aren’t lots of transitions, if the writer doesn’t huddle all the relevant ideas into a single sentence. In other words, there’s often a lack of faith in the reader’s agility. Most of the writing that I was trying to avoid is characterized by the absence of rhythm and a deep, deep fear of silence.

SD: *Why do you think that fear of silence exists? I would imagine it has a lot to do with a lack of confidence in the subject matter.*

VK: No, it’s a lack of confidence in the writer himself. It’s really an impatience, a distrust of what you find in your own brain. I think the hardest thing I’ve had to teach—and the most important—is for students to be patient in the presence of their own thoughts. In almost all my students I see the real fear that “I’m out of ideas, I have no idea what to say, I’m not confident enough to do this.” But that’s just because they’re impatient. They haven’t learned to watch and pay attention.

SD: *How do you teach them to pay attention or to be more patient?*

VK: Well, the safest way is to teach them the mechanical things first: to teach them about making very short sentences so they can find space between

the sentences, so they can find some silence, and to teach them to write with attention to rhythm. What happens when you do this is that as the mechanics of their prose clears up, they begin to see that their ideas—or what they thought were their ideas—are, in fact, a kind of muddle. And now that they have this new tool, this much sharper, much clearer prose, they start noticing things worth noticing, they start seeing that their thoughts are abundant and that, in fact, all the fear they have about writing will go away because all they have to do is be patient and there will be more to say.

SD: *Is this reflective of your own process? What is your own process?*

VK: For me it’s that composition is revision. I don’t make a distinction between the two. I want to go from the scaffold from one perfect sentence to the next perfect sentence. I’m always exploring. I never outline, I never want to know where I’m going. I don’t write drafts. But I do accept the fact that there is no such thing as complete perfection, and revision

is always ongoing, every time I look at the piece, every time I pick it up. And that’s probably because what I’m really doing is writing in my head. I’m making sentences, imagining sentences. That means that revision isn’t sacrificing at all, there’s no cost. All I have to do is reinvent the sentence that I just imagined and try to keep myself really free. I think really good writers don’t let the inertia of what they’ve already written trap them. What I see with students all the time is this desire, once they’ve written something, to want to save it because they’ve already done so much work. They want to rescue their intention.

I keep my intentions so loose that as I find better things to do in a piece, I don’t feel bound to my original intention. Because that’s a real trap. I have no qualms at all about taking a piece that I’ve

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worked on for three or four days and then, when I realize that there is nothing I like about the way it's going, just dumping what I've already done and starting over from a completely different place. That's something that most younger writers are incredibly reluctant to do.

SD: *What's the benefit to dumping and moving on and starting in a different place?*

VK: Well, if you don't move on, you're basically squandering time and energy that would be better spent on a new version. When I started out as a writer there were lots and lots of pieces where I tried to save a paragraph that I especially loved from an earlier version only to realize that the only way to finish the piece was to get rid of that paragraph. It caused a kind of gravity that bent the piece out of shape. That's where this ability to be patient with your own thoughts becomes important because you quickly begin to realize there's always more. There's always more.

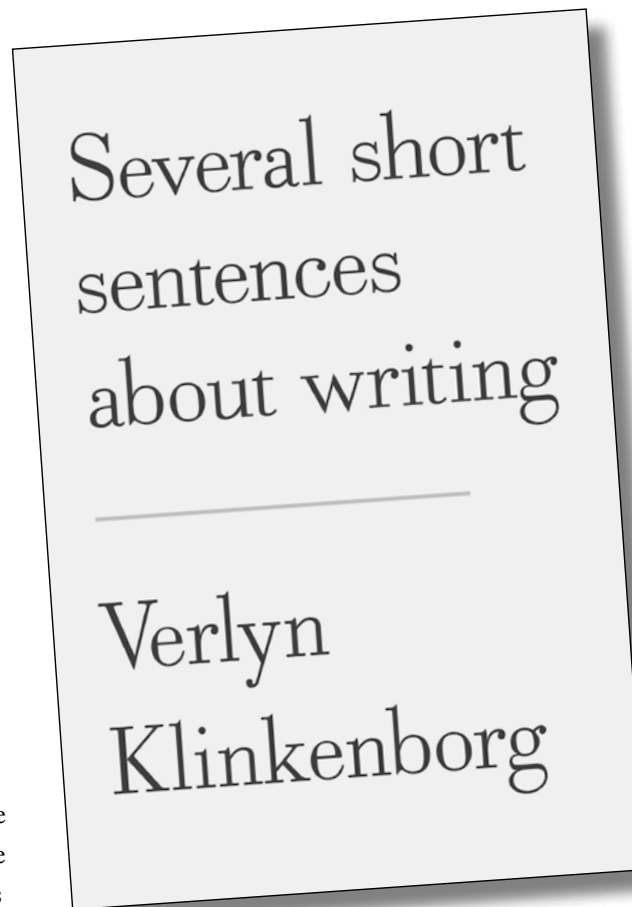
SD: *How did *Several Short Sentences About Writing* come about?*

VK: The book came into shape partly by trying really hard not to write a writing book. There are so many books on writing and some of them are really good, but most of them are really full of the same old bad advice. Most of them are really handholding. Which is true of most workshops, too. They're essentially about bathing your soul in a kind of ap-

proval, and to me, that's just nonsense. This is actually work we're doing here and it's the kind of work that goes on for years and years and years. It's not simple, it's not direct, it's not easy and the sooner you realize that this is hard work, and that you can't expect your prose to flood over, you can't expect to be inspired, and that you're going to have to carry your own weight, the sooner you'll start to feel bet-

ter about who you are and what you're doing.

I've been teaching for a long time and I've been teaching at every level. Along the way I just kept discovering that some of the things we were doing were very effective and that big changes were happening in the way students wrote. This book was an attempt to get some of the things that we talk about in the course of a semester down on paper, but also to get at some of the things that really get in the way of most writers. So, to me, it's a book as much about managing or understanding creativity as it is about making sentences.



SD: *I get the sense that I'll read and reread this book often; it's the kind of book that, when I'm working on some large pieces of my own, I'll come back to again and again, just as a stabilizer.*

VK: Yeah, I think that's a good word to use for it because what happens to a lot of people as they work is, they hear these old voices in their heads full of rules. *Don't do this. You can't do that. You must do this.* All that nonsense. And this is one of the problems

with so much of the teaching of writing in high school and earlier—it’s just theories. People are just repeating what they’ve heard and what’s too bad is that this really sticks in their students’ brains.

SD: *And what is some of that nonsense?*

VK: Well, can I begin a sentence with “and”? Can I use the first person? What if I do without this or that, what will happen? Will the world fall apart? This is a book that is meant to remind you that there are no rules; there is only what you discover about your own way of writing—and I never use the word “process.” I don’t want the students I teach to find “a” process. It’s one of those great traps that everybody falls into. It’s the first question people ask, tell me about your process. Well, actually, it’s called thinking; that’s the sum total of my process.

SD: *As education director of Teachers & Writers I oversee a lot of writers’ work in the schools, and I go to all kinds of meetings and talks and discussions around the teaching of writing. In doing so, I’ve seen a couple of things that I think have really gotten in the way of children’s writing over the last couple of years. One of them is this necessity that teachers and educators feel to ask students to do what’s called mind mapping, or to create graphic organizers to organize their thoughts, when they begin writing. I can see that for some students this might be useful, but often what I see is that it takes students so much effort and energy to fill out that graphic organizer, they almost forget what they’re saying or they forget why they wanted to sit down to write in the first place. But I also understand the need for some support and some guidance for students. What do you think?*

VK: It’s just outlining called by a different name. What that says is, the thought and the arrangement of your thoughts comes first and your job is to think all your thoughts first, and then try to write. Which

is insane. It’s absolutely insane. What we should be saying is, well, we don’t know everything. Let’s see if we can figure out what we want to say. Let’s, I don’t know, let’s make a sentence. Let’s just have a starting point. And let’s see if there’s a place we can go from there. Let’s see what the next sentence might be. In other words, rather than concentrate on some way of getting down your thoughts in a form that can then later be translated into sentences, why not just say, let’s make a sentence that has a real sense of rhythm to it? How about if we actually think about the nature of the words? How about if we look at what happens to the sentence in terms of its speed or its velocity? Why not create the sentence as a physical object and take it seriously that way? And above all,

what if we assume that you’re going to discover thoughts along the way that you cannot plan for? You don’t know what they are yet! And the way to respond to these thoughts is to be happy that they’re there. Invite them in. Talk about them instead of this nonsense of assuming that we can get it all down on paper first.

SD: *So how would you begin to teach the type of writing you’d like to see in a classroom environment? Would you give students a prompt? Would you start with an excerpt from a piece of literature?*

VK: I think would probably do something like this: I would ask them to write no more than a couple of sentences about something they noticed that day. Not something they did. Not something that happened to them but something that they found themselves paying attention to. For instance, maybe on the way to school they saw a tree that had a shape they really liked. In other words, what I would really try to do is teach them something about perception at the same time I’m trying to teach them something about how to make a sentence. Because the fact is, students don’t believe their perceptions are

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valuable. They don't believe that what they notice has a purpose. It's astonishing to me that I have to be teaching juniors and seniors at major universities that their perceptions are valid. That's something that they should be learning when they're ten years old. And, honestly, if I could teach my college classes the way I would like to, I would say, so this first time I just want you bring me forty sentences. That's it. That's the assignment. But everybody's so wedded to form and shape and structure that it's very hard to get students to do that. I would start with kids, much younger kids, by saying, let's not say that we're writing, okay? Let's just say that we're making a written object. But there's no curriculum for that, of course. There's no teacher's guidebook for that. It takes a lot of spontaneity on the part of the teacher, a lot of responsiveness to make that work. The trouble is that people want a method to teach writing just as writers want to hear about a process. There isn't a method and anybody who says there is a single way to write is just causing incredible trouble. ☹