

Churchill and the Art of Writing Non-Fiction

An Annotated excerpt from *My Early Life*¹ (pp. 208-213)

By Winston S. Churchill (1874-1965)

A Writing Lesson by Eileen Bach and Suzanne Sigman

British statesman Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during the Second World War, is remembered as an intellect who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In this excerpt from the chapter titled "I Leave the Army," Churchill discusses his progress as a writer. Read this excerpt carefully and answer the questions below.

I had meanwhile been working continuously upon *The River War*². This work was extending in scope. From being a mere chronicle of the Omdurman campaign, it grew backwards into what was almost a history of the ruin and rescue of the Soudan.³ I read scores of books, indeed everything that had been published upon the subject; and I now planned a couple of fat volumes. I affected a combination of the styles of Macaulay⁴ and Gibbon⁵, the staccato antitheses of the former and the rolling sentences and genitival endings of the latter; and I stuck in a bit of my own from time to time. I began to see that writing, especially narrative, was not only an affair of sentences, but of paragraphs. Indeed I thought the paragraph no less important than the sentence. Macaulay is a master of paragraphing. Just as the sentence contains one idea in all its fullness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode; and as sentences should follow one another in harmonious sequence, so the paragraphs must fit on to one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages. Chapterization also began to dawn upon me. Each chapter must be self-contained. All the chapters should be of equal value and more or less of equal length. Some chapters define themselves naturally and obviously; but much more difficulty arises when a number of

¹ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (London: Eland Publishing Ltd., 2000), 208-213 is Churchill's autobiography of his first thirty years of life, published in 1930 when he was fifty-five years old.

² Published in 1899 when he was only twenty-five years old, Churchill's second book, *The River War*, is the history of British involvement in the Soudan and the campaign for its reconquest. The book was inspired by Churchill's own involvement as a war correspondent (an embedded journalist?) and soldier. The battle of Omdurman is often said to have been the last great cavalry charge of the British Empire. The river of the title is the Nile.

³ Note that Churchill writes in British-English, the form of English used in Great Britain.

⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was a British poet, historian and politician. As a young student Churchill won an all-school competition for reciting from memory 1800 lines of Macaulay's famous ballad *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, without error. But Macaulay's *History* judged harshly Churchill's great ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, and Churchill wrote his seventeenth book, a biography of the Duke, to clear John Churchill's name.

⁵ Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) was an English historian and a Member of Parliament (M.P.) whose most important work, the six-volume *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Churchill read during his military assignment to India as part of his program of self-education.

heterogeneous incidents none of which can be omitted have to be woven together into what looks like an integral theme. Finally the work must be surveyed as a whole and due proportion and strict order established from beginning to end. I already knew that chronology is the key to easy narrative. I already realised that 'good sense is the foundation of good writing'. I warned myself against the fault of beginning my story as some poor people do 'Four thousand years before the Deluge'⁶, and I repeated earnestly one of my best French quotations, 'L'art d'être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire'⁷. I think I will repeat it again now.

It was great fun writing a book. One lived with it. It became a companion. It built an impalpable crystal sphere around one of interests and ideas. In a sense one felt like a goldfish in a bowl; but in this case the goldfish made his own bowl. This came along everywhere with me. It never got knocked about in travelling, and there was never a moment when agreeable occupation was lacking. Either the glass had to be polished, or the structure extended or contracted, or the walls required strengthening. I have noticed in my life deep resemblances between many different kinds of things. Writing a book is not unlike building a house or planning a battle or painting a picture. The technique is different, the materials are different, but the principle is the same. The foundations have to be laid, the data assembled, and the premises must bear the weight of their conclusions. Ornaments or refinements may then be added. The whole when finished is only the successful presentation of a theme. In battles however the other fellow interferes all the time and keeps upsetting things, and the best generals are those who arrive at the results of planning without being tied to plans.

On my homeward steamer I made friends with the most brilliant man in journalism I have ever met. Mr. G. W. Steevens was the 'star' writer of a certain Mr. Harmsworth's⁸ new paper called the *Daily Mail* which had just broken upon the world, and had forced the *Daily Telegraph* to move one step nearer Victorian⁹ respectability. Harmsworth relied enormously upon Steevens in these early critical days, and being well disposed to me, told him later on to write me up, which he did in his glowing fashion. 'Boom the Boomsters' was in those days the motto of the infant Harmsworth press, and on these grounds I was selected for their favours. But I anticipate.

⁶ The Deluge is the flood in the Biblical story of Noah, Genesis 6-9, and in the Quran.

⁷ "The art of being boring is to say everything."

⁸ Alfred Charles William Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Northcliffe (1865–1922) rose from childhood poverty to become a powerful British newspaper and publishing magnate, famed for buying stolid, unprofitable newspapers and transforming them to make them lively and entertaining for the mass market. (Wikipedia)

⁹ Relating to British Queen Victoria's reign from 1837-1901

I was working in the saloon of the Indiaman¹⁰, and had reached an exciting point in my story. The Nile column had just by a forced night march reached Abu Hamed and was about to storm it. I was setting the scene in my most ceremonious style. 'The dawn was breaking and the mists, rising from the river and dispersing with the coming of the sun, revealed the outlines of the Dervish town and the half circle of rocky hills behind it. Within this stern amphitheatre one of the minor dramas of war was now to be enacted'. 'Ha! ha!' said Steevens, suddenly peering over my shoulder. 'Finish it yourself then,' I said getting up; and I went on deck. I was curious to see how he would do it, and indeed I hoped for a valuable contribution. But when I came down again I found that all he had written on my nice sheet of paper was 'Pop-pop! pop-pop! Pop! Pop!' in his tiny handwriting, and then at the bottom of the page-printed in big letters 'BANG!!!' I was disgusted at this levity. But Steevens had many other styles besides that of the jaunty, breezy, slap-dash productions which he wrote for the *Daily Mail*. About this time there had appeared an anonymous article upon the future of the British Empire called 'The New Gibbon'. One would have thought it had been lifted bodily from the pages of the Roman historian. I was astounded when Steevens confessed himself the author.

Later on Steevens was kind enough to read my proofs and offer valuable advice which I transcribe. 'The parts of the book I have read,' he wrote, 'appear to me to be a valuable supplement to the works of G. W. Steevens, indeed a valuable work altogether. I think it first rate, sound, well got up and put together, and full of most illuminating and descriptive pages. The only criticism I should make is that your philosophic reflections, while generally well expressed, often acute and sometimes true, are too devilish frequent. If I were you I should cut out the philosopher about January 1898, giving him perhaps a short innings at the very end. He will only bore people. Those who want such reflections can often supply them without assistance.' His gay, mocking spirit and rippling wit made him a delightful companion, and our acquaintance ripened into friendship during the summer months of 1899. This was the last summer he was to see. He died of typhoid fever in Ladysmith in the following February.

* * * * *

I paused in Cairo for a fortnight to collect materials for my book and enlist the co-operation of several important actors in the Soudan drama. In this

¹⁰ Indiamen were trading ships operating under charter or license to the East India Companies. They were designed to carry both passengers and goods and to defend themselves against piracy, and so constituted a special class of ship. Churchill is returning to England from his final military service in India.

way I met Girouard, the young Canadian Royal Engineer who had built the desert railway; Slatin Pasha, the little Austrian officer who had been ten years the Khalifa's prisoner and whose book *Fire and Sword in the Soudan* is a classic in its sphere; Sir Reginald Wingate, head of the Intelligence, to whom I was already indebted for an important meal; Garstin, head of the Egyptian Irrigation Service; together with a number of the leading Egyptian statesmen and personalities. All these able men had played their part in the measures of war and administration which in less than twenty years had raised Egypt from anarchy, bankruptcy and defeat to triumphant prosperity. I already knew Chief, Lord Cromer. He invited me to visit him at the British Agency, and readily undertook to read my chapters on the liberation of the Soudan and Gordon's¹¹ death, which I had already completed. Accordingly I sent him a bulky bundle of typescript, and was delighted and also startled to receive it back a few days later slashed about with blue pencil with a vigour which recalled the treatment my Latin exercises used to meet with at Harrow¹². I saw that Lord Cromer had taken an immense amount of trouble over my screed, and I therefore submitted dutifully to his comments and criticisms, which were often full and sometimes scathing. For instance I had written about General Gordon becoming private secretary to Lord Ripon at one period in his career 'the brilliant sun had become the satellite of a farthing dip'¹³. On this Lord Cromer's comment was "'brilliant sun" appears to be extravagant eulogy and "farthing dip" does less than justice to Lord Ripon's position as Viceroy. Lord Ripon would not mind, but his friends might be angry and most people would simply laugh at you'. I wrote back to say I was sacrificing this gem of which till then I had thought so highly, and I also accepted a great many other strictures in a spirit of becoming meekness. This disarmed and placated Lord Cromer, who continued to take a friendly interest in my work. He wrote 'My remarks were, I know, severe, and it is very sensible of you to take them in the spirit in which they were intended which was distinctly friendly. I did for you what I have over and over again asked others to do for myself. I always invite criticism from friends before I write or do anything important. It is very much better to have one's weak points indicated by friendly critics before one acts, rather than by hostile critics when it is too late to alter. I hope your book will be a success and I think it will. One of the very few things which still interest me in life is to see young men get on.'

¹¹ Major General Charles Gordon (1833-1885), a British army officer and Governor-General of the Sudan, was brutally killed by warriors of the Mahdi (the prophesied redeemer of Islam, Mohammed Ahmed) during the siege of Khartoum.

¹² Churchill's secondary school.

¹³ Here, a farthing dip is an archaic reference to a candle.

I saw Lord Cromer repeatedly during this fortnight and profited to the full by his knowledge and wisdom. He represented in an intense degree that phlegm and composure which used to be associated with high British administrators in the East. I was reminded of one of my best French quotations 'On ne règne sur les âmes que par le calme'¹⁴. He was never in a hurry, never anxious to make an effect or sensation. He sat still and men came to him. He watched events until their combination enabled him to intervene smoothly and decisively. He could wait a year as easily as a week, and he had often waited four or five years before getting his way. He had now reigned in Egypt for nearly sixteen years. He rejected all high-sounding titles; he remained simply the British Agent. His status was indefinite; he might be nothing; he was in fact everything. His word was law. Working through a handful of brilliant lieutenants, who were mostly young and who, like their Chief, had trained themselves to keep in the background, Cromer controlled with minute and patient care every department of the Egyptian administration and every aspect of its policy. British and Egyptian Governments had come and gone; he had seen the Soudan lost and reconquered. He had maintained a tight hold upon the purse strings and a deft control of the whole movement of Egyptian politics. It was very pleasant to see him thus with his life's work shining around him, the embodiment of supreme power without pomp or apparent effort. I felt honoured by the consideration with which he treated me. We do not see his like nowadays, though our need is grave.

¹⁴ "One can only impose one's authority on other people by being calm and confident."

Churchill and the Art of Writing Non-Fiction (Work Sheet 1)

Excerpt from *My Early Life*
By Winston S. Churchill (1874-1965)

Churchill mentions each of the following decisions he had to consider when writing his “two fat volumes” of *The River War*. From the context, explain what he means by each, using quotes, if you wish.

Scope

Sources

Style

Narrative

Sequence

Chapterization

Proportion

Theme

Chronology

Churchill and the Art of Writing Non-Fiction (Answer Key 1)

Excerpt from *My Early Life*
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Churchill mentions each of the following decisions he had to consider when writing his “two fat volumes” of *The River War*. From the context, explain what he means by each.

Scope *is the period of time covered in the piece of writing: it “grew backwards” from current or recent events (the Omdurman campaign) to include the history of “the ruin and rescue of the Sudan.”*

Sources: *To his **personal experiences** in the Omdurman campaign, Churchill added **research**, **reading** “scores of books” and **advice** from “important actors” (Steevens, Girouard, Pasha, Wingate, Garstin, Egyptian statesmen, Cromer), perhaps the “advice” resulted from interviews, as it is not clear that he shared his actual writing with all the “actors.”. Churchill mentions “**materials**” but does not give examples. Extra credit for understanding that a “score” is twenty?*

Style: *Churchill “affected a combination of the styles of Macaulay and Gibbon, the staccato antitheses of the former and the rolling sentences and genitival endings of the latter; and I stuck in a bit of my own from time to time.” He employed quick, short phrases that were opposite in meaning (Macaulay) and the long, more complicated sentence structures of Gibbon, including his avoidance of the possessive (“genitival endings”): he much preferred, for example, the “despair of Boadicea” to Boadicea’s despair, and “the slavery of their country” to their country’s slavery?*

Narrative: In this excerpt, “narrative” refers to Churchill’s story or his account of events.

Sequence *is the order in which Churchill will relate the events of the story. He uses the term “harmonious sequence” to emphasize that the sensible and natural relating of events, and even sentences and paragraphs, which must “fit on to one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages.” Extra credit for identifying the simile?*

Chapterization *is Churchill’s word for the division of the narrative into segments, i.e. chapters. Churchill feels his chapters should be **self-contained**, of **equal value** and more or less of **equal length**. Grouping **heterogeneous incidents** under the single bigger idea of a chapter may prove difficult, but must be done, in his estimation.*

Proportion *is one of Churchill’s favorite words and a measure of the proper relationships he expects between elements in many realms. In the writing of non-fiction, perhaps he is considering the relationship between the importance of the event and the amount of space the writer should devote to it.*

Theme *“A theme is a general idea contained in a text; the theme may be stated explicitly or only suggested. A theme is not just an idea; it is an idea this is developed, often over the course of a chapter or an entire book.”¹⁵ The theme integrates what might be seen as heterogeneous events under a main idea. A theme may appeal to a reader’s emotions.*

Chronology *is the arrangement of events in the order in which they occurred, by time.*

¹⁵ Richard Hartzell, Ph.D., *Cracking the AP English Language & Composition Exam 2012* (New York: The Princeton Review Random House, Inc. 2011) 92

Churchill and the Art of Writing Non-Fiction (Work Sheet 2)

Excerpt from *My Early Life*
By Winston S. Churchill (1874-1965)

1. Explain the simile that the writer “felt like a goldfish in a bowl.”
2. In the non-fiction writing Churchill is describing, what does he mean by:

Foundations:

Data:

Premises must bear the weight of their conclusions:

Ornaments or refinements:
3. What implication does Churchill’s statement that “the best generals are those who arrive at the results of planning without being tied to plans” have for writers?
4. Footnote #2 notes that Churchill as a war correspondent was "an embedded journalist." What does that term mean?
5. In this excerpt Churchill shared his writing with two people, Steevens and Cromer. Why do you think he did this and what did he gain by it?

6. How did Churchill learn enough to write two “fat volumes” on the British involvement in the Sudan?
7. What parts of this excerpt show Churchill’s sense of humor?
8. What criticism does Steevens make of Churchill’s writing style?
9. In the penultimate paragraph, Churchill writes Lord Cromer cautioned him against using a sentence “ I had written about General Gordon becoming private secretary to Lord Ripon at one period in his career 'the brilliant sun had (100) become the satellite of a farthing dip’” Why?
10. What can you gain for your own efforts at research and writing from this segment?

Churchill and the Art of Writing Non-Fiction (Answer Key 2)

Excerpt from *My Early Life*
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1. Explain the simile that the writer “felt like a goldfish in a bowl.”

This simile suggests that Churchill’s life is circumscribed by his project; he is contained, confined by this work, a situation he found “agreeable.” This simile is NOT used in the sense of living a life observed by all, with no privacy.

2. “Writing a book is not unlike building a house or planning a battle or painting a picture. The technique is different, the materials are different, but the principle is the same. The foundations have to be laid, the data assembled, and the premises must bear the weight of their conclusions. Ornaments or refinements may then be added.”

In the non-fiction writing Churchill is describing, what does he mean by:

Foundations:

The main idea, purpose, or theme; the overall plan, governed by “Good sense” (see p.2) and context

Data:

The details: Proof, facts, information, corroboration, witnesses

Premises must bear the weight of their conclusions:

The thesis must be supported well. Assumptions and propositions in the writer’s thesis must be legitimate, perhaps even generally accepted, to justify using them as a basis for opinions, decisions or results.

Ornaments or refinements:

Rhetorical flourishes, such as metaphors and imagery and other creative aspects of word craft.

3. What implication does Churchill’s statement that “the best generals are those who arrive at the results of planning without being tied to plans” have for writers?

The best writers revise their work, making changes to improve things. It’s a good idea before you begin writing to have a mental, if not written, outline of the main points you wish your reader to grasp as that is the reason you are writing. However if a better approach or explanation occurs to you, with the same result, be flexible and revise.

4. Footnote #2 notes that Churchill was “an embedded journalist.” What does that term mean?

An “embedded journalist” travels with the troops and is an eyewitness who sees everything first-hand rather than gathering second-hand reports. In Churchill’s day such reporters were called war correspondents.

5. In this excerpt Churchill shared his writing with two people, Steevens and Cromer. Why do you think he did this and what did he gain by it?

As Lord Cromer notes, "It is very much better to have one's weak points indicated by friendly critics before one acts, rather than by hostile critics when it is too late to alter"

Steevens was "the most brilliant man in journalism," and "the 'star' writer of a newspaper. (Why is "star" in quotes?) His writing apparently appealed to large numbers of people and Churchill hoped his book would, too. Further, Steevens was apparently a good imitator of Gibbon, among others, whose style Churchill proposed to imitate. Cromer had "reigned in Egypt for nearly sixteen years" and could offer first hand experience with "every aspect" of the Egyptian administration and its policies. He was witness to historical events. Churchill hoped to profit "to the full by his knowledge and wisdom." Churchill sought the opinions of respected and more experienced men. Cromer, in particular, knew many of the "actors" in Churchill's story and tempered Churchill's remarks and conclusions.

6. How did Churchill learn enough to write two "fat volumes" on the British involvement in the Sudan?

*Churchill did extensive research, reading widely and interviewing principal players, including the Canadian Royal Engineer; the Austrian officer who had been a prisoner; head of the Intelligence; head of the Egyptian Irrigation Service; and the chief, Lord Cromer. See also **Sources** in Answer Key 1.*

7. Which parts of this excerpt show Churchill's sense of humor? Examples:

"I warned myself against the fault of beginning my story as some poor people do 'Four thousand years before the Deluge and I repeated earnestly one of my best French quotations, 'L'art d'être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire' I think I will repeat it again now. "

"In battles however the other fellow interferes all the time and keeps upsetting things."

"Mr. G. W. Steevens was the 'star' writer of a certain Mr. Harmsworth's new paper called the Daily Mail which had just broken upon the world, and had forced the Daily Telegraph to move one step nearer Victorian respectability." (i.e. the Daily Mail was the least respectable newspaper in London)

"I wrote back to say I was sacrificing this gem of which till then I had thought so highly."

8. What criticism does Steevens make of Churchill's writing style?

Steevens suggests Churchill limit his "philosophic reflections" because "while generally well expressed, often acute and sometimes true," they "are too devilish frequent." Churchill is apparently boring to read when he wanders off topic with his thoughts and opinions on the world in general.

9. Lord Cromer cautioned against using a sentence Churchill "had written about General Gordon becoming private secretary to Lord Ripon at one period in his career 'the brilliant sun had become the satellite of a farthing dip'"

Why?

On this Lord Cromer's comment was "'brilliant sun" appears to be extravagant eulogy and "farthing dip" does less than justice to Lord Ripon's position as Viceroy. Lord Ripon would not mind, but his friends might be angry and most people would simply laugh at you'. Cromer warns Churchill that his critical (smart-aleck?) comment may not be fair or accurate, it might offend some readers and his work might not be taken seriously. In general, perhaps Cromer is warning Churchill to be more judicious in print with his criticisms.

10. What can you gain for your own efforts at research and writing from this segment?

My students noted these gains: the value of research including interviews, the value of peer review of one's writing, seeking the advice of older and more experienced people, the need for flexibility and revision.