

Back to Basics

Restoring Humanity to (Legal) Writing and Storytelling

Pity the Reader: On Writing with Style

Kurt Vonnegut & Suzanne McConnell (Seven Stories Press 2020),
432 pages

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What could a book by and about Kurt Vonnegut, most known for his dark, sardonic humor, possibly have to say to students and teachers of legal communication and rhetoric? As it turns out, Vonnegut captures, in his idiosyncratic and magical way, just about everything that we hold dear. The book reminds those of us who have plied our trade of teaching legal writing for years of what we're really up to. But the book appeals not only to teachers or aspiring teachers of legal writing. It offers solace, empathy, and inspiration to all writers, including all students of legal communication—which should, at the very least, include all lawyers.

Why does this book by Vonnegut (and his medium, Suzanne McConnell) deserve this grandiose billing, you may ask? Put simply, the book's "gleaming trinkets of truth"¹ about the craft and teaching of writing, along with its substantial doses of encouragement, validation, and generosity towards all writers, and human beings, for that matter, entertain, enrich, and hearten all of us.

First, a word about the book's format. Published in its soft-cover edition in 2020, it is a posthumous collection of writing advice co-authored by one of Vonnegut's former students, Suzanne McConnell, who was one of his pupils at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the 1960s. Vonnegut and McConnell became friends and remained so until

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¹ Niklas, *Review: Suzanne McConnell and Kurt Vonnegut—“Pity the Reader”* (July 17, 2019), <https://niklasblog.com/?p=23391>.

Vonnegut's death in 2007. Acting as Vonnegut's medium is no easy task, and McConnell's efforts yield mixed results. The brilliance of the book lies in Vonnegut's unique voice that shines through in every word he writes or utters (excerpts of his speeches are included, too). However, the Vonnegut Trust, which commissioned McConnell to write the book, allotted forty percent to her words and sixty percent to his.² This arrangement makes for a necessarily fragmented approach, which some critics have found distracting.³ McConnell is left with the dilemma between exercising her own voice or trying to mimic his style. She chooses both approaches at different points in the book. Sometimes, she renders her own advice or discusses events from Vonnegut's life, which is sometimes a distraction and sometimes verges on cheerleading, or worse, worship of Vonnegut as a kind of cult hero. At other times, her "intrusions" are welcome insights into events in Vonnegut's life (like his witnessing of the bombing of Dresden, which figures prominently in his writing and world view).⁴ In contrast, when McConnell chooses to mimic Vonnegut's style, the reader is sometimes confused whether the words are hers or his.

Ultimately, the book's unevenness can be forgiven because it serves as a single repository, however fragmented, of Vonnegut's most sage advice to writers that he imparted over the course of over sixty-five years in his novels, short stories, letters, essays, speeches, lectures, and even his assignments to students at the Writer's Workshop. McConnell deserves enormous credit in bringing to us this enormous haul of wisdom, and in organizing it around coherent themes. She also includes at the end of the book oodles of exercises, which she calls "practices," which are derived directly from the advice offered in each chapter. I've starred twenty-one of them that seem useful in my legal writing classroom.

So, what is the sage wisdom of which I speak, and what are the themes around which the book is organized? Well, the book's thirty-seven chapters are roughly organized around the following topics: concrete advice about the craft of writing and "style"; the emotional, spiritual experience of writing; writers as teachers (what Vonnegut called "the noblest profession");⁵ the art of storytelling (mostly as it relates to fiction, but with applications to legal storytelling); and the rewards and pitfalls of choosing writing as a career (both spiritually and monetarily). Of course, each of these areas has spawned its own area of study and a cottage industry of

2 KURT VONNEGUT & SUZANNE MCCONNELL, *PITY THE READER: ON WRITING WITH STYLE* 3 (2020).

3 *Pity the Reader: On Writing with Style*, 87 *KIRKUS REVIEWS*, no. 2, Oct. 15, 2019, at 71, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/kurt-vonnegut/pity-the-reader>.

4 VONNEGUT & MCCONNELL, *supra* note 2, at 65–71.

5 *Id.* at 128.

articles in learned journals, such as this one. It is a testament to Vonnegut's brilliance that he manages to capture their essence so precisely, succinctly, and, along the way, so humorously. This is why reading his words is more inspiring, I would venture, than reading most manuals on style and grammar, fiction writing, or the like (with some notable exceptions). Here are some examples:

Writing and Style. Vonnegut is known, above all, for his minimalist, sardonic writing style. His voice is unmistakable. It speaks volumes about Vonnegut's writing style that the publisher Sam Lawrence was so enamored with Vonnegut's review of the unabridged edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (yes, a review of a *dictionary*), that it swayed Lawrence to pursue a three-book contract with Vonnegut.⁶ That contract resulted in Lawrence's publishing *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut's most famous novel.

So, it's unsurprising that on the subject of style, his wisdom is conveyed with flair and freshness. The book draws heavily from Vonnegut's essay, "How to Write with Style," published in 1980 as an advertisement for the International Paper Company, of all patrons. In the first paragraph of the two-page essay, Vonnegut defines "style" as "revelations [that] tell us as readers what sort of person it is with whom we are spending time."⁷ Vonnegut goes on to offer seven numbered "rules," each with its own title of six or fewer words. His first, and most important, rule is "find a subject you care about."⁸ Under this title, he remarks:

It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style. I am not urging you to write a novel, by the way A petition to the mayor about a pothole in front of your house or a love letter to the girl next door will do.⁹

It seems to me that here Vonnegut strikes at the heart of what makes some legal writing dull and lifeless, but it is rarely addressed as a "writing" problem. Of course, as legal writers, sometimes we don't have the luxury to care deeply about what we're writing, which opens a critique of the legal profession that is well outside the scope of this review. But, it seems that

⁶ Kurt Vonnegut & Suzanne McConnell, *Kurt Vonnegut on Making a Living as a Writer*, THE NATION, Nov. 11, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/vonnegut-writing-iowa-workshop>.

⁷ The essay is reproduced in full on the inside of the front cover of *Pity the Reader*.

⁸ VONNEGUT & MCCONNELL, *supra* note 2, at 12. On a related note, he questions, "Did you ever admire an empty-headed writer for his or her mastery of the language? No." Therefore, "winning style must begin with the ideas in your head." *Id.* at inside front cover.

⁹ *Id.* at 12.

what we call “professionalism” is made better by Vonnegut’s demand—that even the most ordinary letter or email “demands the generosity of your time, effort and thought.”¹⁰

Another maxim, “keep it simple,” is as old as the hills, but here’s what Vonnegut has to say about that subject:

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. “To be or not to be?” asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story “Eveline” is this one: “She was tired.” . . . Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps sacred. The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”¹¹

The rest of Vonnegut’s advice features similarly well-trodden territory with a similar wit and verve—because he cares about good writing.

The emotional and spiritual experience of writing. Vonnegut saw writing as a spiritual exercise: he says, “The primary benefit of practicing any art, whether well or badly, is that it enables one’s soul to grow.”¹² Once again, one can question how much this applies to the kinds of writing that legal writers do. However, given that legal writers are storytellers, often about matters that are critically important to themselves and their clients, I think it does very much. Once again, Vonnegut reinforces this point as only he can: “You should write for the same reasons you should take dancing lessons. For the same reason you should learn what fork to use at a fancy dinner. . . . It’s about grace.”¹³

This section of the book tracks Vonnegut’s musings on mindfulness and self-care in writings that came decades before these topics’ current popularity in the legal academy and our society generally. He writes of writing as a source of solace and refuge: “The artist says, ‘I can do very little about the chaos around me, but at least I can reduce to perfect order this square of canvas, this piece of paper, this chunk of stone.’”¹⁴ One could say the same of the brief writer, or the contract drafter, for that matter.

10 *Id.* at 18.

11 *Id.* at inside front cover.

12 *Id.* at 91.

13 *Id.* at 92.

14 *Id.* at 108.

Writers as teachers. Vonnegut says that all writers are, first and foremost, teachers.¹⁵ But, in terms of classroom teaching, Vonnegut, who spent many years teaching creative writing, had much to say about what it means to be a good teacher. He held good teachers in high regard, quipping “everything I believe I was taught in junior civics during the Great Depression.”¹⁶ In a letter to one of his former students, Vonnegut had this to say about his approach to holding private conferences:

All I did . . . was to say *Trust me*. What I’m going to do now is open your mouth, very gently, with these two fingers, and then I’m going to reach in—being very careful not to bruise your epiglottis—and catch hold of this little tape inside you and slowly, very carefully and gently, pull it out of you. It’s your tape, and it’s the only tape like that in the world.¹⁷

Again and again, his former student and “co-author” Suzanne McConnell offers up examples of Vonnegut’s teaching as less about methodology and more about generosity of spirit. She says, “All he did in those classes and conferences was to trust us. He trusted that we were working out our tapes at our own pace in our own ways. And what would come, would come. Or it wouldn’t.”¹⁸ Once again, Vonnegut puts his finger on what makes teachers great—that they empathize with and trust in their students. This is so whether one teaches creative writing, legal writing, golf, or knitting. It is true that teaching requires knowledge and a sure hand, and teaching methodologies surely come in handy, but at bottom, Vonnegut brings us back to what really matters.

The art of storytelling. It comes as no surprise to the readers of this journal that narrative shapes all that we humans feel and do. That is why Vonnegut devoted his life to storytelling. This section of the book devotes several chapters to matters of character and plot. But it also addresses matters, both mundane and profound, that legal writers can take to heart: the importance of paragraph breaks, that “writing takes a kind of demented patience,”¹⁹ and the destructiveness of self-doubt, which Vonnegut calls the “third-player.”²⁰ On the point of our sometimes harsh and demoralizing inner “judge,” he says that in writing, as in the other arts, “since the game goes well only when played by two, the [writer] and the

15 *Id.* at 127.

16 *Id.* at 128.

17 *Id.* at 141.

18 *Id.* at 145.

19 *Id.* at 163.

20 *Id.* at 168.

Great Big Everything, *three's a crowd*.”²¹ These observations are helpful and comforting to any writer, especially beginning legal writers who are trying to find their way. One of the best chapters, entitled “Much Better Stories: Re-Vision and Revision,” is replete with examples of Vonnegut’s conviction that “smart, effective writing results from the sweat equity of revision.”²² In his usual, humble style, he observes, “This is what I find most encouraging about the writing trades. They allow mediocre people who are patient and industrious to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into intelligence.”²³

So, in the end, this book not only reinforces and distills traditional ideas about what makes good writing, but it helps all of us to put the fun and humanity back into writing. For me, and for most of us, it is refreshing to go back to the simple truths that lie at the foundation of our trade. In this volume, legal writers and teachers of legal writing can, along with the broader writing community, savor Vonnegut’s knack for laying bare the truths about what it means to be and write like a human being.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 280.

²³ *Id.*