The essays here were written to stand alone. More or less, they introduce themselves. The letters and interviews following them—if only because it’s somewhat unusual to include such documents in such a book—may need some intellectual context.

The first letter makes a point only in passing that is nevertheless fundamental. So I stress it now.

Though they have things in common, good writing and talented writing are not the same.

The principles of good writing can be listed. Many people learn them:

(1) Use simple words with clear meanings whenever possible. (Despite the way it sounds, this is a call for clarity, not a bid for simplicity.)

(2) Use the precise word. Don’t say “gaze” when you mean “look.” Don’t say “ambled” or “sauntered” or “stalked” when you mean “walked.” (And don’t say “walked” when you mean one of the others.) As far as the creative writer goes, the concept of synonyms should be a fiction for high school and first- and second-year college students to encourage them to improve their vocabularies. The fact is (as writers from Georg Christoff Lichtenberg [1742–99] in the eighteenth century to Alfred Bester [1913–87] in the twentieth have written), “There are no synonyms.”

(3) Whenever reasonable, avoid the passive voice.

(4) Omit unnecessary modifiers. As a rule of thumb, nouns can stand up to one modifier each; thus, if you use two—or more!—have a good reason.

(5) For strong sentences, put your subject directly against the verb. Preferably, when possible, move adverbial baggage to the beginning of the sentence—or to the end, less preferably. Don’t let it fall between subject and verb. Except for very special cases (usually having to do with the intent to sound old-fashioned), do not write “He then sat,” “She suddenly stood,” or “He at once rose.” Write “Then he sat,” “Suddenly she stood,” or “He rose at once.”

(6) Omit unnecessary chunks of received language: “From our discussion so far it is clearly evident that . . .” If it’s that evident, you needn’t tell us. “Surely we can all understand that if
...” If we can, ditto. “In the course of our considerations up till now clearly we can all see that...” If it follows that clearly and we can all see it, we'll get the connection without your telling us we'll get it. If the connection is obscure, explain it. “It goes without saying that...” If it does, don't. “Almost without exception...” If the exceptions are important enough to mention, say what they are; if they're not, skip them and omit the phrase mentioning them. Make your statements clearly and simply. If you need to include qualifications of any complexity, don't put them in awkward clauses. Give them separate sentences.

(7) Avoid stock expressions such as “the rolling hills,” “a flash of lightning,” “the raging sea.” “Hills,” “lightning,” and “sea” are perfectly good words by themselves. Good writers don't use such phrases. Talented writers find new ways to say them that have never been said before, ways that highlight aspects we have all seen but have rarely noted.

(8) Good writing rarely uses “be” or “being” as a separate verb. Don't use “be” or “being” when you mean either “becoming” (not “It had started to be stormy,” but “A storm had started”) or “acting” (Not “She was being very unpleasant,” but “She was unpleasant”), except in dialogue or in very colloquial English. By the same token, avoid “There are” and “There were” whenever possible. Except in colloquial situations, don't write “There were five kids standing in line at the counter.” Write “At the counter five kids stood in line.”

(9) Don't weigh down the end of clauses or sentences with terminal prepositional phrases reiterating information the beginning already implies.

Here’s an example of that last: “I turned from my keyboard to stack the papers on the desk.” Since the vast majority of keyboards sit on desks, you don't need that terminal prepositional phrase “on the desk.” If you turned from the keyboard to stack some papers “on the floor” or even “on the kitchen table,” that “on the floor” or “on the kitchen table” would add meaningful information to the visualization. But, in the context of the last three hundred years of office work, “on the desk” is superfluous.

You can consider this next a tenth rule, or just a general principle for good style: use a variety of sentence forms. Try to
avoid strings of three or more sentences with the same subject—especially “I.” While you want to avoid clutter, you also want to avoid thinness. Variety and specificity are the ways to achieve this. The rules for good writing are largely a set of things not to do. Basically good writing is a matter of avoiding unnecessary clutter. (Again, this is not the same as avoiding complexity.)

You can program many of these rules into a computer. Applied to pretty much any first draft, these rules will point to where you’re slipping. If you revise accordingly, clarity, readability, and liveliness will improve.

Here again we come up with an unhappy truth about those various creative writing and MFA programs. If you start with a confused, unclear, and badly written story, and apply the rules of good writing to it, you can probably turn it into a simple, logical, clearly written story. It will still not be a good one. The major fault of eighty-five to ninety-five percent of all fiction is that it is banal and dull.

Now old stories can always be told with new language. You can even add new characters to them; you can use them to dramatize new ideas. But eventually even the new language, characters, and ideas lose their ability to invigorate.

Either in content or in style, in subject matter or in rhetorical approach, fiction that is too much like other fiction is bad by definition. However paradoxical it sounds, good writing as a set of strictures (that is, when the writing is good and nothing more) produces most bad fiction. On one level or another, the realization of this is finally what turns most writers away from writing.

Talented writing is, however, something else. You need talent to write fiction.

Good writing is clear. Talented writing is energetic.

Good writing avoids errors. Talented writing makes things happen in the reader’s mind—vividly, forcefully—that good writing, which stops with clarity and logic, doesn’t.

Talent appears in many forms. Some forms are diametric to each other, even mutually exclusive. (In The Dyer’s Hand, W. H. Auden [1907–73] says most successful writers overestimate their intelligence and underestimate their talent. Often they have to do this to preserve sanity; still they do it.) The talented writer
often uses specifics and avoids generalities—generalities that his or her specifics suggest. Because they are suggested, rather than stated, they may register with the reader far more forcefully than if they were articulated. Using specifics to imply generalities—whether they are general emotions we all know or ideas we have all vaguely sensed—is dramatic writing. A trickier proposition that takes just as much talent requires the writer carefully to arrange generalities for a page or five pages, followed by a specific that makes the generalities open up and take on new resonance. Henry James (1843–1916) calls the use of such specifics “the revelatory gesture,” but it is just as great a part of Marcel Proust’s (1871–1922) art. Indeed, it might be called the opposite of “dramatic” writing, but it can be just as strong—if not, sometimes, stronger.

Here are other emblems that can designate talent:

The talented writer often uses rhetorically interesting, musical, or lyrical phrases that are briefer than the pedestrian way of saying “the same thing.”

The talented writer can explode, as with a verbal microscope, some fleeting sensation or action, tease out insights, and describe subsensations that we all recognize, even if we have rarely considered them before; that is, he or she describes them at greater length and tells more about them than other writers.

In complex sentences with multiple clauses that relate in complex ways, the talented writer will organize those clauses in the chronological order in which the referents occur, despite the logical relation grammar imposes.

Here is a badly organized narrative sentence of the sort I’ve read in dozens of student manuscripts handed in by writers who want to write, say, traditional commercial fantasy:

(A) Jenny took a cold drink from the steel dipper chained to the stone wall of the corner well, where, amidst the market’s morning bustle, the women had finished setting up their counters and laying out their tools, implements, and produce minutes after the sun had risen; she had left the sandal stall to amble over here.

The good writer would immediately want to break the above up into smaller sentences and clarify some antecedents:

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(B) Jenny took a cold drink from the steel dipper chained to the stone wall. With the market’s morning bustle, the women had finished setting up their counters and laying out their tools, implements, and produce. Only minutes after the sun had risen, Jenny had left the sandal stall and ambled over to the corner well.

Certainly that’s an improvement; and it hides some of the illogic in the narrative itself. But a writer who has a better sense of narrative would start by rearranging the whole passage chronologically:

(C) Minutes after the sun had risen above the wall, amidst the market’s morning bustle, the women finished setting up their counters and laying out their tools, implements, and produce. Jenny left the sandal stall to amble over to the corner well, where, from the steel dipper chained to the stone wall, she took a cold drink.

At this point, the two sentences still need to be broken up. But at least the various clauses now come in something like chronological order. This allows us to see that each fragment can have far more heft and vividness:

(D) Minutes after the sun cleared the market wall, footprints roughened the dust. Tent posts swung up; canvas slid down. Along the counters women laid out trowels and tomato rakes, pumpkins and pecan pickers. Jenny ambled from under the sandal stall awning. At the corner well she picked up a steel dipper chained to the mossy stones for a cold drink. As it chilled her teeth and throat, water dripped on her toes.

Talented writing tends to contain more information, sentence for sentence, clause for clause, than merely good writing. Example D exhibits a variety of sentence lengths. Yes, the images arrive in chronological order. But more than that, the passage paints its picture through specifics. It also employs rhetorical parallels and differences. (“Tent posts swung up; canvas slid down.”) It pays attention to the sounds and rhythms of its sentences (“trowels and tomato rakes, pumpkins and pecan pick-
ers”). It uses detailed sensory observation (the drink chills “her teeth and throat”). Much of the information it proffers is implied. (In D that includes both the bustle and the fact that we are in a market!) These are among the things that indicate talent.

I do not hold up D as a particularly good (or particularly talented!) piece of writing, but it shows a rhetorical awareness, a balance, a velocity, a particularity, and a liveliness that puts it way ahead of the others. Above and beyond the fact that they are logically or illogically organized, versions A through C are, by comparison, bland, formulaic, and dull. What distinguishes the writers of A, B, and C is, in fact, how good each is. But D alone shows a scrap of talent—and only a scrap.

Good writing avoids stock phrases and received language. Talented writing actively laughs at such phrases, such language. When talented writing and good writing support one another, we have the verbal glories of the ages—the work of Shakespeare, Thomas Browne, Joyce, and Nabokov.

Talented writing and good writing sometimes fight. The revisions necessary to organize the writing and unclutter it can pare away the passages or phrases that give the writing its life. As often, what the writer believes is new and vivid is just cliché confusion. From within the precincts of good writing, it’s easy to mistake talent’s complexity for clutter. From within the precincts of talent, it’s easy to mistake the clarity of good writing for simplicity—even simple-mindedness. Critics or editors can point the problems out. The way to solve them, however, is a matter of taste. And that lies in the precincts of talent.

III

The early German Romantics—Schiller (1759–1805), the Schlegel brothers, Wilhelm (1767–1845) and Friedrich (1772–1829), and Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), that is, the smart Romantics—believed something they called Begeisterung was the most important element among the processes that constituted the creative personality.

I think they were right.

Begeisterung is usually translated as “inspiration.” Geist is the German word for “spirit,” and “Begeist-erung” means literally