Overture
The Golden Rule of Writing

I don't know where I am going, but I am on my way.
—Voltaire

To go someplace, you need to know your starting point and your destination.

The first time I visited Paris, I arrived to a steady drizzle and a transit strike. I took a cab to the Left Bank but didn't know where to go; I had left my friend's contact information at home. So I schlepped around, getting soggy while carrying two bags. I studied the maps in my *Plan de Paris*, hoping I would recognize the name of my friend's street. But I didn't. I was lost.

Finally, I found help in a travel agency. An agent found a hotel and told me about nearby restaurants and sights. After I called home to get my friend's contact information, the agent found out my hotel and my friend's apartment on the map. I was just a block and a half away.

Once I knew where I was—and where I was going—everything worked well.

Writing works like that. If you know where to start and finish, you will never get lost or disoriented. Neither will your readers. But if you don't know where to begin and end, you will struggle.

Too often, writers wander without direction, like me on my first day in Paris. Struggling to get their bearings, uncertain what ideas and evidence matter, they ramble. If asked where they want to take the reader, they recite the ideas that excite them. But they do not state, clearly, where they want to take the reader.

So here's a simple rule to guide your writing: *Make everything a journey, at every level of writing*. In every sentence, paragraph, section, chapter, article, report, and book, take your reader from one point to another. Be clear about this journey. What do the readers know at the beginning? What do you want them to know by the end? How do you want to get from one place to the other?

If you can answer these questions, every time you write something, your job as a writer will be clear.

Of course, I'm not the first to understand writing as a journey. Jincy Willett talks about the "orderly march of words across the page." David Lambuth talks about "writing as a trip from a definite starting point to a definite destination." What's different here, I think, is the idea of making every level of writing—sentence, paragraphs, sections, and whole pieces—whole journeys unto themselves.

Now let's figure out a simple way to plot the journey. Consider this simple corollary: *Start strong, finish strong*. At every level of writing, start with a bang and end with a bang. Put your most important material at the beginnings and endings of sentences, paragraphs, and pieces.

I call this the Golden Rule of Writing. If you apply the Golden Rule to all of your challenges, you will succeed as a writer.

Part I: Make Everything a Journey

Make everything a journey? Really? That might seem extreme. Sure, stories matter. But is *everything*—every sentence, paragraph, section, even email or report—really a journey?

Think of it this way. We write in order to show readers something new—an observation, an image, a moment, an idea, a theory. We write, in other words, to take readers to a new place. A critic takes the reader to insights about a movie or play. A scientist takes the reader to a new understanding of how variables interact. A reporter takes the reader to a new knowledge of the day's news.

Always, the writer takes the reader on a journey from one place—one understanding of the world—to another.

Every story, every journey, involves *change*. Whoever the characters, whatever the setting, whenever the tale, something changes by the end of the story.

If everything in writing is a journey, then we should be able to map out that journey. Just as I can map out my journey from my home in Connecticut to a meeting in Manhattan—drive to New Haven's Union Station, jump on the 8:53 Metro North train to Grand Central Station, take a subway to Greenwich Village, walk five blocks, and so on—I should be able to map out the journey of every unit of writing.

To map a passage, simply draw pictures of the journey. Get out a clean piece of paper. Write down, on one side, the starting point for the journey. Then write down, on the other side, the endpoint. Between those two places, mark the steps you need to get from one place to another. If the journey is simple, a straight line will do. If the journey is more complex—if you take detours or shift your approach—show how the journey twists or veers off course.

Pick up a book or story of any of the best writers you know. Get Ernest Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf or V.S. Pritchett, Truman Capote or Tom Wolfe or Joan Didion. Plot the movement from beginning to end. You see a clear journey—usually with some tension and struggle along the way—from one state of being to another.

Case Study: Nathaniel Rich's 'When Parks Were Radical'

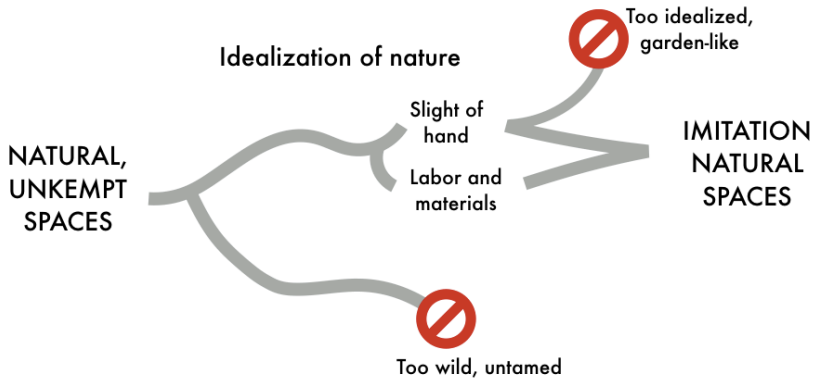
Few people have shaped America's urban landscapes more than Fred-

erick Law Olmsted, who designed and oversaw the construction of New York's Central Park and Prospect Park, Boston's Emerald Necklace, San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, and hundreds of other parks, lawns, campuses, and natural spaces.

But Olmsted's natural spaces were far from natural. Like a sculptor, Olmsted worked to tame the great outdoors. He rebelled against natural spaces that were either too natural or too tamed. Olmsted wanted spaces that appeared to be natural, but he carefully designed and built them. Here's now Nathaniel Rich describes Olmsted's approach:

> An unmistakable irony creeps vine-like through Olmsted's landscape theory: It takes a lot of artifice to create convincing "natural" scenery. Everything in Central Park is man-made; the same is true of most of Olmsted's designs. They are not imitations of nature so much as idealizations, like the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School. Each Olmsted creation was the product of painstaking sleight of hand, requiring enormous amounts of labor and expense. In his notes on Central Park, Olmsted called for thinning forests, creating artificially winding and uneven paths, and clearing away "indifferent plants," ugly rocks, and inconvenient hillocks and depressions—all in order to "induce the formation … of natural landscape scenery." He complained to his superintendents when his parks appeared "too gardenlike" and constantly demanded that they "be made more natural."

Rich provides a rich journey from the idea of irony to Olmsted's demand for an unnatural nature space. Let's map Rich's paragraph:



The journey here takes us from the natural, unkempt spaces that Olmsted first encountered to the highly stylized version of nature he created in Central Park. To create this unnatural natural space, Olmsted used certain "slights of hand," deploying countless resources and labor to overcome the extremes of wild, untamed natural spaces and excessively tamed, garden-like parks.

Part II: Start Strong, Finish Strong

Chances are that you do not want to map out every sentence, paragraph, or piece. You might want to map larger, more complicated journeys. But to guide writing sentences and paragraphs, you need a simpler approach. Hence, Part II of the Golden Rule: *Start Strong, Finish Strong*.

Look at this image, which shows where readers' eyes go when scanning webpages. Readers almost always look at the left side of the page, where the sentences begin. The eyes then leap to the ends the page. Only occasionally do eyes track all the words in a sentence.

The eyes tell you what you need to know. If readers pay the greatest attention to the beginnings and endings, where should you put your most important material? Obviously, at the beginnings and endings.

Think about your own experiences in life. Most of us remember best the first and last parts of any experience. When we come into a room, we size it up by "framing" the scene, then scanning people and activities, and then finally focusing on what matters. We remember the beginnings and endings of songs, books, movies, and events. What happens in the middle matters too, of course. But the beginnings and endings frame the whole experience.

Or consiedr tihs sohrt paargraph. You can udnrestnad the paassge eevn touhgh I hvae srcmblaed all the mddile ltteres of the wdros. To udnrstnead even splime wrdos, we uallusy jsut need the bgnneigns and ednngis of tsohe wrdos. Azamnig!

Let's explore the three parts of all journeys.

Start Strong: In the beginning, we invite the reader into our journey. To get the reader to join you, start with strong material.

Usually, that means telling the reader, right away, *who does what*. When the reader knows the subject—the focus, the point of it all—she can understand whatever follows. So we might say:

> Reagan looked out at the crowd …
> Macbeth expressed doubt …

These simple passages bring the reader into the middle of the action, right away. The reader knows exactly what's happening, without any delay or

confusion.

All too often, writers wander before getting to the point. We provide background information, define terms, and explain possible objections—before saying a word about who does what. Pick up a newspaper, magazine, or book—right now. Find a half-dozen random passages. How long does it take the writer to get to the subject and verb? I wouldn't be surprised if some sentences wandered for a dozen or more words before getting to the point. I have seen sentences meander for 40 or even 40 words before stating who does what. That's usually too much.

Of course, starting every single sentence with a subject and verb might get tedious. Also, sometimes "starting strongly" means providing a brief setup for the subject and verb. So a sentence might "start strong" like this:

> Before uttering his historic lines, Reagan looked out at the crowd …
> Appalled by the murder he was about to commit, Macbeth expressed doubt…

These openings offer important context, so we can understand the true meaning of the action.

Finish Strong: We need closure, a sense of completion, when we finish reading something. We need to know how something "turns out in the end." We feel unease when a writer fails to clinch the point. So give the reader something satisfying at the end of every sentence, paragraph, and piece. Whenever possible, then, complete your thought. So:

> Reagan looked out at the crowd and challenged Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."
> Macbeth expressed doubt about killing Duncan, prompting Lady Macbeth to question his manhood.

These sentences end with a bang—Reagan's challenge to Mikhail Gorbachev and Lady Macbeth's challenge to her husband. Each comes like a thunderbolt. Each demands a response.

You can "finish strong" in two other ways: By raising a question or offering an intriguing image. Questions and images activate the reader's mind—and help propel the piece forward, to the next sentence, paragraph, or section. Look at these two possible conclusions:

> Reagan looked out at the crowd and paused, not knowing whether Mikhail Gorbachev would make good on his promise of reform.
> Macbeth expressed doubts, stammering and pacing before his stern wife.

These endings engage the reader in different ways. The first raises a question; the second paints a picture. Both create some suspense, which makes the reader want to read on.

Bridges and Brackets in the Middle: If the beginnings and endings define the journey, the middle material offers the pathway. The middles of these sentences offer two kinds of information—what I call brackets and bridges.

First, consider brackets. Sometimes we need to provide the source of the information. General readers generally don't care about the sources; specialists and skeptics care more, since want to know whether the information is credible. See how these two sentences bracket sources in the middle:

> Reagan looked out at the crowd feeling "upbeat," according to aides who sat nearby on the podium, and challenged Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."
> Macbeth expressed doubt about killing Duncan in Act I, Scene 7, prompting Lady Macbeth to question his manhood.

The brackets here—"according to aides" and "in Act I, Scene 7"—provide the sources of information. Most readers glide over this material. But its mere presence gives the writer credibility. And for readers who want to check the passage, it offers a place to go.

Now look at another kind of bracket information—background or supporting information:

> Reagan looked out at the crowd, in one of the Cold War's most important moments, and challenged Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."
> Macbeth expressed doubt about killing Duncan—trembling and stammering with fear, fearful of the consequences of his ambition—prompting Lady Macbeth to question his manhood.

These brackets—"one of the Cold War's most important moments" and "trembling and stammering…"—provide context. If we know the story or do not care to focus on details, we will glide over these words. But if want to take in the whole scene, these details allow us to do so.

Now consider bridges. Bridges take the reader, step by step, from the beginning to the end of the passage. See how these two sentences offer a pathway for the reader's journeys:

> Reagan looked out at the Berlin crowd, gauging the mood of the crowd and pausing for effect, then challenged Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."
> Macbeth expressed doubt about killing Duncan—professing his love of the king, his qualms about the witches, and his fears of a bloody civil war—prompting Lady Macbeth to question his manhood.

Many readers skim over the middles. Some don't care about source information. Others don't care about the steps from the beginning to the end. In fact, you could delete the middles from most well-built sentences and still convey the main idea. But for readers who do care about this information, it's there.

Case Study: Stewart Brand's *How Buildings Learn*

Starting and ending strongly is not just a core element of writing; it's also a core element of design. "There is every reason why the beginnings and endings of streets should be well marked, as part of the street, to introduce us to them and to take us elsewhere," Jane Jacobs writes. In other words:

Start strong, finish strong.

Stewart Brand, the creator of the iconic *Whole Earth Catalogue* as well as an author on planning and technology, follows this edict in his writing:

> The progress from legal to illegal usage is worth study, because it shows how communities learn from their buildings.
> A few years back I lived inexpensively in a tiny cottage in an extremely affluent place called Belvedere, California.
> Two local women were pressuring the City Council to register and tax all of the town's "second units" (also called accessory apartments, granny flats, mother-in-law units) and outlaw all new ones.
> Most of the innumerable second units have been added quietly over the years without permits or official notice by the city.
> The council was about to pass the new ordinance when front-page coverage in the local paper brought the biggest crowd in memory to a City Council meeting.
> The two women sat rigid as the whole town explained in detail that second units were the salvation of Belvedere.
> They gave families the flexibility to stay in their homes, because there was a place for the aging parents, the *au pair*, the growing teenager.
> They provided affordable housing for city staff, local nurses, local shop employees—the town's whole support population.
> Rent from the second units reduced the cost of primary homes.
> A financially and socially brutal community was made broader and more adaptive by second units.
> Don't outlaw them, help them.

All but one of these sentences starts, right away, with the subject; the other starts with context. Each of the sentences holds the "clincher" idea until the end.

The middles all help to fill out the sentences. But if we cut the middles, we would still get the point of the sentences. A few examples:

> The progress … shows how communities learn from their buildings.
> I lived … in Belvedere, California.
> Two local women were pressuring … to outlaw all new ones.
> Most have been added … without official notice by the city.
> They gave families … a place for the aging parents, the *au pair*, the growing teenager.
> They provided affordable housing for … the town's whole support population.
> Rent … reduced the cost of primary homes.
> A financially and socially brutal community was … more adaptive by second units.

At every level of writing—sentence, paragraph, section, and whole—Brand takes the reader on a journey. He guides the reader from one place to another, different place. By starting and finishing strong, he gives his prose clarity and power.

Take the Landscape View

What if I offered you a simple system that would help you follow the Golden Rule, without muss or fuss, for everything you wrote?

To apply the Golden Rule of Writing, use a simple technique that I call the Landscape View. Here's how:

1. Use the landscape (horizontal) format for all your documents.
2. Write one sentence per line.
3. Single-space your document.
4. Skip a space between paragraphs.

I developed the Landscape View when I was teaching writing at Yale. Over the course of one semester, my students and I explored the Golden Rule. We parsed sentences, paragraphs, essays, and books. The students vowed to "start strong, finish strong" at all levels of their writing. But then, lacking a mechanism to discipline their writing, they slipped back into old habits.

One day, desperate for a simple way to check the beginnings and endings of sentences when I graded papers, I came up with the Landscape View. I required students to do an assignment using the format. I challenged them to pay special attention to the beginnings and endings of each line as they edited their papers.

The students' writing improved dramatically, instantly. In fact, from that point on, my students never wrote a sentence that I struggled to understand. Not only that, they wrote with greater energy and creativity than ever.

Why does the Landscape View work so well? We discovered five benefits of the Landscape View.

1. Checking starts and finishes: With the Landscape View, you can easily check to see whether you start and finish strongly. Just run your finger down the left side of the page, line by line, to see if you start strongly. Run your finger down the right side to see if you end strongly. Finally, look down the middle of the page for bridges and brackets.

Can't we check sentences in the standard blocks of text? Yes, but we don't. Finding the beginnings and endings of sentences in big paragraph blocks takes too much effort. Most people simply stop looking after three or four paragraphs. Searching for details inside large blocks of text simply takes too much time and effort. The brain, as researchers tell us, is *lazy*. If you ask the brain to do too many things, it will falter. So give your brain a shortcut. Make it easier to check the beginnings and endings of sentences with the Landscape View.

2. Controlling sentence length: The landscape format helps you to monitor sentence length. Using the TimesRoman font, with 12-point type, gives you about 20 to 24 words per line. Research has found that

readers best comprehend sentences that average 17 to 19 words. Inevitably, your sentences will vary in length; some will be more and some will be less than the average. If your sentence runs onto a new line, that's OK; it's fine to write sentences of 30, 40, or more words. If a sentence runs long, just make sure you *need* all those words to make your point. Make sure that one long sentence conveys your ideas better than two shorter sentences would.

Remember old-fashioned typewriters that sounded a bell at the end of every line? The end of a line should signal you to ask: *Should this sentence be so long?*

3. Varying sentence length: The Landscape View also shows, instantly, whether you vary sentence length.

Why does this matter? Reading a piece with all short sentences feels like water torture. And reading a piece with all long sentences requires too much work. To keep the reader engaged, vary your sentence lengths.

Varying sentence length also helps you to pace your writing. Short sentences create a sense of action, movement, and suspense. Longer sentences offer a more relaxed, reflective mood, where the reader can explore the different aspects of an issue without rushing.

4. Focusing on sentences, line by line: The one-sentence-per-line rule does something even more powerful. It forces you to pay attention to each sentence. It gives every sentence *integrity*.

When my students turned in their first papers using the Landscape View, a student named Jessica smiled and said: "It looks like *poetry*." And it does. In poetry, of course, every line matters. The line-by-line system forces us to pay attention to each sentence as if it's a line of poetry.

Academic researchers actually discovered the power of the line-by-line approach more than a century ago. In a 1901 study of the rhythm and format of language, research subjects read poetry and prose. When they read passages with the line-by-line format, they thought they were reading poetry. When they saw those passages packed into standard paragraphs, they thought they were reading prose. They lingered, paid more attention, to the line-by-line format.

5. Checking paragraphs: Can the Landscape View help us write better paragraphs, too? And better whole pieces? Yes and yes.

Since we can easily spot the first and last phrases of the paragraphs, we can check whether the "journey" begins in one clear place and ends in another, different place. And we can assess whether all the middle lines offer the brackets and bridges we need—sources and attribution, steps and context—to get from the beginning to the end.

The Landscape View offers a simple, effective mechanism to test the basic elements of writing. Once to write a draft, you can easily check whether you start and end strongly—not just sentence by sentence, but

also paragraph by paragraph.

Now let me alert you to a danger in using the landscape View.

When you try too hard to do something—when you think too much about the process—you might become too self-conscious and fail. If you try to make every line a journey, starting and ending strongly, you could lose sight of what you want to say. By concentrating on *technique*, you don't concentrate enough on what you are trying to say. That's a problem.

It's kind of like the golf fan who asks the pro: Do you breathe in or out when you start your backswing? If you think too much, you lose your focus on what matters, whether it's a golf ball or ideas you are trying to express.

The solution is simple: Don't think too much about the Golden Rule as you write. Line by line, just write one sentence after another. Don't worry about journeys or starting and ending strongly. *Just get your ideas down on paper, line by line.* Once you have written a passage, then check for the Golden Rule. The Landscape View's greatest benefit, after all, is making it easy to check the beginnings, endings, and middles *after you have written them*. So when you write, just let the lines flow, one after another. Then, once you've drafted a section, check the lines.

Over time, by composing one line at a time, you'll internalize the imperatives of the Golden Rule. And by editing, you'll develop the skill at crafting sentences with clarity and power. Constructing strong sentences and passages according to the Golden Rule—and checking them—will become automatic.

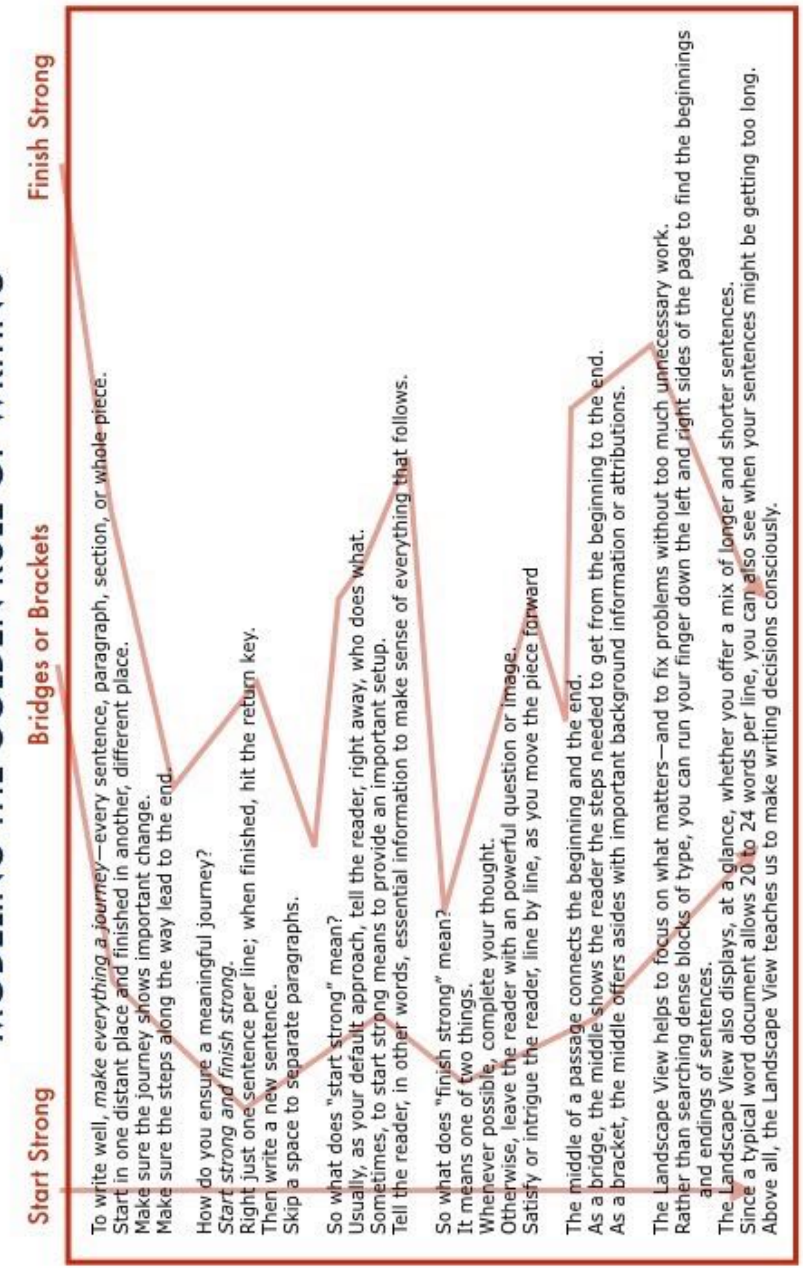
I advise students to practice the Landscape View when writing emails and social media posts. Most people who read these notes won't notice anything funky about the format. One survey found that students write 10 times as much in emails as in formal assignments. That practice makes following the Golden Rule second nature.

The Landscape View will make your writing much better, right away, even if you are a seasoned writer. The Landscape View focuses your attention on what matters—on sentences, length, variety, beginnings and endings. It also offers a *process* for both writing and editing. By using the Landscape View to apply the Golden Rule, you will develop the clarity and vibrancy that readers deserve.

Case Study: Applying the Landscape View

Take a look at the image, which explains and models the use of the Landscape View. See how easy it is to check whether you start strong? And whether you finish strong? And whether the material in the middle offers the "bridge" from beginning to end? And see how quickly you can tell whether you vary sentence length? And whether your sentences run longer than 20 words?

Finally—most important—do you see how easy it will be to fix what ails your sentences and paragraphs? When you find a clunker at the beginning of a line, you know right away. And if you know what you want to say, you will know how to fix it right away. That's the power of the Landscape View. Use it and you will never write a bad sentence again.


MODELING THE GOLDEN RULE OF WRITING
Start Strong
Bridges or Brackets
Finish Strong
To write well, make everything a journey—every sentence, paragraph, section, or whole piece.
Start in one distant place and finished in another, different place.
Make sure the journey shows important change.
Make sure the steps along the way lead to the end.
How do you ensure a meaningful journey?
Start strong and finish strong.
Right just one sentence per line; when finished, hit the return key.
Then write a new sentence.
Skip a space to separate paragraphs.
So what does "start strong" mean?
Usually, as your default approach, tell the reader, right away, who does what.
Sometimes, to start strong means to provide an important setup.
Tell the reader, in other words, essential information to make sense of everything that follows.
So what does "finish strong" mean?
It means one of two things.
Whenever possible, complete your thought.
Otherwise, leave the reader with an powerful question or image.
Satisfy or intrigue the reader, line by line, as you move the piece forward
The middle of a passage connects the beginning and the end.
As a bridge, the middle shows the reader the steps needed to get from the beginning to the end.
As a bracket, the middle offers asides with important background information or attributions.
The Landscape View helps to focus on what matters—and to fix problems without too much unnecessary work.
Rather than searching dense blocks of type, you can run your finger down the left and right sides of the page to find the beginnings and endings of sentences.
The Landscape View also displays, at a glance, whether you offer a mix of longer and shorter sentences.
Since a typical word document allows 20 to 24 words per line, you can also see when your sentences might be getting too long.
Above all, the Landscape View teaches us to make writing decisions consciously.

When you have finished your draft, you can easily switch the format back to the standard paragraph format. Just go to the beginning of the lines and hit the BACKSPACE bar. That backs one line into the previous line.

The Landscape View offers the perfect tool for checking your writing, line by line and paragraph by paragraph—instantly. But for most readers, you want to format your test in standard paragraph blocks.

And Another Thing …

The Landscape View offers a whole new approach to the basic elements of writing—the sentence, paragraph, and whole piece. Once you use this format, everything changes. Whenever you sit down to write, you will remember the need to give the reader a journey—with clear beginnings, middles, and ends—and not just spit out a bunch of facts and ideas.

A few years after developing the Golden Rule and Landscape View, I discovered *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, a book by a newspaper editor named Verlyn Klinkenborg. The book illustrates both the power and peril of the line-by-line approach.

The book is an essay on writing, written in a poetic, line-by-line format. Some lines are complete sentences; others are not. By using this simple format, Klinkenborg forces the reader to pay close attention to every line. Here's how he describes his experiment:

> Imagine it this way:
> One by one, each sentence takes the stage.
> It says the very thing that it comes into existence to say.
> Then it leaves the stage.
> It doesn't help the next one up or the previous one down.
> It doesn't wave to its friends in the audience
> Or pause to be acknowledged or applauded.
> It doesn't talk about what it's saying.
> It simply says its piece and leaves the stage.

Klinkenborg's experiment sparks some magic. But we also lose something with this approach. These short lines do not offer the kind of flow that most readers want. Although writers should construct each sentence with care, readers also want to glide, effortlessly, from sentence to sentence.

The Landscape View offers a tool to create *drafts* that express ideas clearly, with energy and verve. But that's just the beginning. As Joyce Carol Oates notes, all writing is editing. Even the best writers need to reread and edit our drafts. Only in the editing process can we turn substandard work into good work—and good work into great work. The Landscape View offers a priceless tool for that.

Once you have produced and edited your drafts, then you can put the final draft in the traditional block paragraph format. Your writing will not only be clear, but it will have energy and purpose. Every unit of writing, from the sentence up, will have a drama that carries the reader along from beginning to end.