1. **Place yourself in the background.**

Write in a way that draws the reader’s attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author. If the writing is solid and good, the mood and temper of the writer will eventually be revealed and not at the expense of the work. Therefore, the first piece of advice is this: to achieve style, begin by affecting none—that is, place yourself in the background. A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style. As you become proficient in the use of language, your style will emerge, because you yourself will emerge, and when this happens you will find it increasingly easy to break through the barriers that separate you from other minds, other hearts—which is, of course, the purpose of writing, as well as its principal reward. Fortunately, the art of composition, or creation, disciplines the mind; writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it, too.

2. **Write in a way that comes naturally.**

Write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw.

The use of language begins with imitation. The infant imitates the sounds made by its parents; the child imitates first the spoken language, then the stuff of books. The imitative life continues long after the writer is secure in the language, for it is almost impossible to avoid imitating what one admires. Never imitate consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator; take pains instead to admire what is good. Then when you write in a way that comes naturally, you will echo the hallowest that bear repeating.

3. **Work from a suitable design.**

Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature and extent of the enterprise and work from a suitable design. (See Chapter II, Rule 12.) Design informs even the simplest structure, whether of brick and steel or of prose. You raise a pup tent from one sort of vision, a cathedral from another. This does not mean that you must sit with a blueprint always in front of you, merely that you had best anticipate what you are getting into. To compose a laundry list, you can work directly from the pile of soiled garments, ticking them off one by one. But to write a biography, you will need at least a rough scheme; you cannot plunge in blindly and start ticking off fact after fact about your subject, lest you miss the forest for the trees and there be no end to your labors.

Sometimes, of course, impulse and emotion are more compelling than design. If you are deeply troubled and are composing a letter appealing for mercy or for love, you had best not attempt to organize your emotions; the prose will have a better chance if the emotions are left in disarray—which you’ll probably have to do anyway, since feelings do not usually lend themselves to rearrangement. But even the kind of writing that is essentially adventurous and impetuous will on examination be found to have a secret plan: Columbus didn’t just sail, he sailed west, and the New World took shape from this simple and, we now think, sensible design.

4. **Write with nouns and verbs.**

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place. This is not to disparage adjectives and adverbs; they are indispensable parts of speech. Occasionally they surprise us with their power, as in

- Up the airy mountain,
- Down the rushy glen,
- We daren’t go a-hunting
- For fear of little men . . .

The nouns mountain and glen are accurate enough, but had the mountain not become airy, the glen rushy, William Allingham might never have got off the ground with his poem. In
5. Revise and rewrite.

Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite often you will discover, on examining the completed work, that there are serious flaws in the arrangement of the material, calling for transpositions. When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can select material on your screen and move it to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed copy of the manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise entirely on screen. Above all, do not be afraid to experiment with what you have written. Save both the original and the revised versions; you can always use the computer to restore the manuscript to its original condition, should that course seem best. Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers.

6. Do not overstate.

Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating. If the sickly-sweet word, the overblown phrase are your natural form of expression, as is sometimes the case, you will have to compensate for it by a show of vigor, and by writing something as meritorious as the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

When writing with a computer, you must guard against wordiness. The click and flow of a word processor can be seductive, and you may find yourself adding a few unnecessary words or even a whole passage just to experience the pleasure of running your fingers over the keyboard and watching your words appear on the screen. It is always a good idea to reread your writing later and ruthlessly delete the excess.

7. Do not overstate.

When you overstate, readers will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in their minds because they have lost confidence in your judgment or your poise. Overstatement is one of the common faults. A single overstatement, wherever or however it occurs, diminishes the whole, and a single carefree superlative has the power to destroy, for readers, the object of your enthusiasm.

8. Avoid the use of qualifiers.

 Rather, very, little, pretty—these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words. The constant use of the adjective little (except to indicate size) is particularly debilitating; we should all try to do a little better, we should all be very watchful of this rule, for it is a rather important one, and we are pretty sure to violate it now and then.

9. Do not affect a breezy manner.

The volume of writing is enormous, these days, and much of it has a sort of windiness about it, almost as though the author were in a state of euphoria. "Spontaneous me," sang Whitman, and, in his innocence, let loose the hordes of uninspired scribblers who would one day confuse spontaneity with genius.

The breezy style is often the work of an egocentric, the person who imagines that everything that comes to mind is of general interest and that uninhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day. Open any alumni magazine, turn to the class notes, and you are quite likely to encounter old Spontaneous Me at work—an aging collegian who writes something like this:

Well, guys, here I am again dishing the dirt about your disorderly classmates, after passing a weekend in the Big Apple trying to catch the Columbia hoops tilt and then a cab-ride from hell through the West Side casbah. And speaking of news, how about toasting a few primo items this way?
This is an extreme example, but the same wind blows, at lesser velocities, across vast expanses of journalistic prose. The author in this case has managed in two sentences to commit most of the unpardonable sins: he obviously has nothing to say, he is showing off and directing the attention of the reader to himself, he is using slang with neither provocation nor ingenuity, he adopts a patronizing air by throwing in the word *primo*, he is humorless (though full of fun), dull, and empty. He has not done his work. Compare his opening remarks with the following—a plunge directly into the news:

Clyde Crawford, who stroked the varsity shell in 1958, is swinging an oar again after a lapse of forty years. Clyde resigned last spring as executive sales manager of the Indiana Flotex Company and is now a gondolier in Venice.

This, although conventional, is compact, informative, unpretentious. The writer has dug up an item of news and presented it in a straightforward manner. What the first writer tried to accomplish by cutting rhetorical capers and by breeziness, the second writer managed to achieve by good reporting, by keeping a tight rein on his material, and by staying out of the act.