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## Decisions, Decisions

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*To choose wrongly is to leave the hearer or reader with a fuzzy or mistaken impression. To choose well is to give both illumination and delight.*

—S. I. HAYAKAWA, *CHOOSE THE RIGHT WORD*

William Zinsser's classic book *On Writing Well* includes a chapter called "A Writer's Decisions" in which he "dissects" one of his own articles, explaining some of the "countless successive decisions" that he made as he wrote it.<sup>169</sup> Since I found the peek into his decision-making process enriching, I offer here a peek into my own. Like Zinsser, I analyze an essay that I wrote on returning from a trip. Even if you don't write narrative nonfiction, I hope that as you read this essay and analysis, you'll find yourself thinking, *Aha! I see what's at work there, and there, and there. I see how I could use that principle myself.*

I chose this essay because it demonstrates most of the messages delivered in this book, including these: write about what you know, write about what you love, and put what's most important last.

### The Essay

#### **Coming to Terms: My Children and I Enter Foreign Territory**

Walking down the narrow sidewalk ahead of me, my son, nearly out of his teens, elbows my daughter, newly out of hers, and points to the Volcán de Agua, which has popped through the clouds as she's been promising us it would.

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169. Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 245.

“Look at that! Would you look at that volcano? Just look at it.”

He’s channeling a loopy Ed Bassmaster character. I know this because the instant we walked into the Posada Hotel Burkhard—“Wi-Fi! Yes!”—he fired up his laptop to show his sister and me his favorite Bassmaster videos on YouTube.

“Your *mom’s* a volcano,” Elizabeth says.

“Your *mom’s* a volcano,” Brian says.

I say, “Your *mom’s* your *mom*,” an in-joke that dates back to a moment of silliness years earlier, a line that any of us might say at any time.

Brian and I follow Elizabeth’s flip-flops down the wet cobblestone streets of Antigua, where we will spend the next two days. Guatemalans call this time of year (it’s July, the middle of the rainy season) *invierno*, winter, as if they were south of the equator or as if they needed parkas instead of occasional sweaters. This usage resonates with me—its upside-downness. Upside-down is how I feel in this place where I have no bearings and can neither navigate nor communicate on my own.

A year has passed since Elizabeth flew off, freshly graduated from college, to start her Peace Corps service. Even before she left the States, she started working on her brother and me to plan a visit. Neither of us hankered to see Central America. She persisted. I relented. Eventually, Brian came around. We got the passports, the shots, the airplane tickets, the raincoats, the translation apps. A few days after Brian graduated from high school, we boarded a plane in Syracuse. We flew over the Finger Lakes area, where I had spent most of my adult years, where my children had grown up, where winter was winter. *Click!* went Brian’s camera.

Now that we’ve arrived, I relax. No more planning, anticipating what-ifs. I give myself over to the moment. The rain has stopped. The Volcán passes from view as the three of us turn a corner. Sunlight welcomes us into the lush, wide-open block known as Parque Central. The sidewalk leads to a fountain. Two sparkling arcs stream from a mermaid’s breasts, which she placidly cups as if to say, “Look at them. Would you just look at them?” *Click!* goes Brian’s camera.

All around the park, grime and decay are defied by the strident colors that shout from ancient buildings, tropical flowers, *traje*-clad women, baskets full of painted trinkets, and piles of embroidered cloth goods. Electric greens, oranges, pinks, scarlets, blues, whites, purples, and yellows zing along my optic nerve to that pleasure spot just this side of pain. I can't help saying over and over, "Would you look at that?"

What a rush, sharing this jarringly rich experience with these two young people whom I brought into the world and who have so recently done what once seemed impossible: crossed over into adulthood. How freeing to realize that for this couple of weeks—maybe forever—they will need me less as a parent than as a companion.

In fact, on this trip I am mostly a follower, one who struggles to keep up. I don't mean physically. *Al contrario*, at Copán I rarely lose sight of Brian and Elizabeth as we all scramble up and down the rough, moss-covered blocks of the eerie Mayan ruins. Ditto Lake Atitlán, where we climb the seemingly endless stone steps up the hillside to our quarters. No, my struggle is mental. I'm talking about keeping up with the conversation.

We're sitting at Frida's Cocina Mexicana, drinking margaritas (which nineteen-year-old Brian can do here) and eating tacos. Elizabeth's recently bobbed brown curls stop just short of her shoulders. They hang loose and soft around her face as if to say, "What's not to like about these curls?" When she was little, she didn't want her hair short because people took her for a boy; for years she straightened it or tied it back. How far she has come. And here sits Brian, relaxed in his slim, chiseled wrestler's body, his hair the same straight, dark blond that mine used to be. When he was little, he said he'd never take any trip that required him to get shots. How far he, too, has come.

A familiar song is playing.

Brian (challenging): "Who's that?"

Elizabeth (instantly): "Adele. Which album?"

Brian (after a few seconds, deflated): "Your mom's."

We order another round of tacos. We talk. In someone else's voice, seemingly out of nowhere, Brian warns: "I don't want no

scrubs.” When our blank looks tell him that his audience doesn’t get the reference, the unappreciated artist wags his head and says, “You have to see *The Other Guys*.” Later, I’ll Google the movie, and I’ll hear the quirky delivery of the scrubs line. I’ll see that Brian nailed it. I’ll discover that the character has, in turn, borrowed the line from a TLC song, making Brian’s quote a quote within a quote.

My children are otters frolicking in the stream of pop culture.

Occasionally, I score a point. Back at our hotel, we’re playing Monopoly. Elizabeth, the banker, has just sold her brother a handful of little green houses. He spills them onto Boardwalk and Park Place.

Brian: “Zoop!”

Elizabeth: “I put you in this game. I’ll take you out.”

Mom: “Bill Cosby!”

Elizabeth: “Mom got it.” (I don’t deserve the credit—they got Cosby from me—but, hey.)

Mom: “Zoop!”

This staccato, falsetto syllable punctuates our Guatemala days. It took me a few repetitions to figure out the snappy little sound. It indicates connection, things clicking into place. The origin is an episode of *Family Guy*. (Brian played this video for us too.) A cartoon alien opens its mouth and shoots out a littler mouth that lives on the end of its tongue. The mouths exchange words. Then the big mouth retracts the little one—Zoop!—pulling its own back into itself.

I can’t pull my little ones back. Elizabeth has returned to western Guatemala, where she’s bringing computers to school-children. Brian is starting college in western New York. I’m settling in to a new life on the West Coast, thousands of miles from either of them. For the first time since they were born, I have no idea when or where I will see my children next.

I will get used to this phase: the separation, the uncertainty. For now, I pore over my vacation photos. I’d love to show them to you. Of course you’ll never see Brian and Elizabeth as I do. But oh, what splendid human beings! I mean, look at them. Would you just look at them?

## The Analysis

Let's look first at audience and purpose, the foundational decisions of any writing effort. I had in mind a broad audience and a lofty purpose. I wanted to appeal to anyone who has experienced the simultaneous forward and backward tugs of a major life transition. I wanted to transport those readers, to capture a moment in a way that would resonate. I wanted to do for them what my favorite writers do for me: heighten their sense of awe at being alive.

Next decision: genre. What type of piece would do what I hoped to do? I chose the personal essay for the same reason that Jack Hart chooses this genre: "I usually turn to personal essay when I've been emotionally affected by something I've experienced, without quite knowing why."<sup>170</sup>

As for organization scheme, I hardly needed to think about how to structure this piece. Information about a Guatemala

trip could theoretically be organized alphabetically ("A is for avocado trees, which grow in every yard...") or geographically ("First, we hit the Mayan ruins in the southeast...") or procedurally ("When planning a trip to Central America, follow these ten easy steps..."). But I had a story to tell, and I wanted to send it straight to the heart. What could I choose but narrative: someone does this, someone does that, flashback, something happens, turning point, someone realizes something, the end.

Two more high-level decisions made themselves without debate: tone (intimate, relaxed) and diction level (informal, colloquial). I used everyday words (*loopy*), contractions (*We've arrived*), phrasal verbs (*came around*), and other slang (*nailed it*) as if I were writing a letter to a friend.

For the rest of this analysis, let's move through the essay in sections.

**I wanted to do for readers  
what my favorite writers do  
for me: heighten their sense  
of awe at being alive.**

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170. Hart, *Storycraft*, 209.

**Title**

Coming to Terms: My Children and I Enter Foreign Territory

This title had many predecessors—discarded versions that said too much or too little, or that lacked play, or that simply didn't feel right. A title often takes its time arriving. A title must accomplish two things: flag readers down and convey (or at least hint at) the piece's main theme. Ideally, the sound and rhythm also hit the ear well, and the wording evokes multiple meanings.

Identifying a piece's main theme can require a surprising amount of thought. Writing coach Jack Hart urges writers (writers of narrative nonfiction at least) to hold off on choosing a title until they have created a one-sentence “theme statement”—specifically, a *noun-transitive verb-noun* statement, like “Frugality causes waste” or, in the case of his own book, “Stories wring meaning out of life.” In Hart's experience, which includes guiding several Pulitzer Prize-winning narratives to publication, this type of theme statement acts as “a kind of elixir” and “helps you find a title.” If you're writing a nonfiction piece, why not apply this elixir yourself? Before you entertain any candidates for your title, capture your theme in a sentence: “one clear, coherent sentence that expresses a story's irreducible meaning.”<sup>171</sup>

Here is my essay's theme statement: life whisks us ever onward.

I picked my title for several reasons. For starters, the phrase *coming to terms* plays on the word *terms*, as in the Spanish terms that my son and I kept bumping into, not to mention the English terms that my lingo-savvy children kept challenging me with. *Coming to terms* also applies to the main theme of coming to terms with a new phase of life. The phrase *foreign territory*, which refers, of course, to the faraway country where my children and I spent those two weeks together, also applies to the new relationship—adult to adult—that the three of us were entering into.

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171. Hart, *Storycraft*, 143–145. In the statement about “a story's irreducible meaning,” Hart is quoting “guru of narrative” Robert McKee. Hart notes that a theme statement helps writers and editors find not only a story's title but also its “shape.”

Let's turn to the body of the essay, one excerpt at a time.

**Excerpt 1**

Walking down the narrow sidewalk ahead of me, my son, nearly out of his teens, elbows my daughter, newly out of hers, and points to the Volcán de Agua, which has poked through the clouds as she's been promising us it would.

"Look at that! Would you look at that volcano? Just look at it."

He's channeling a loopy Ed Bassmaster character. I know this because the instant we walked into the Posada Hotel Burkhard—"Wi-Fi! Yes!"—he fired up his laptop to show his sister and me his favorite Bassmaster videos on YouTube.

"Your *mom's* a volcano," Elizabeth says.

"Your *mom's* a volcano," Brian says.

I say, "Your *mom's* your *mom*," an in-joke that dates back to a moment of silliness years earlier, a line that any of us might say at any time.

Several types of decisions went into writing this opening. For example, for thousands of years, storytellers have started their stories *in medias res*—in the middle of things. Homer's *Iliad* opens in the middle of the Trojan War. Similarly, the *Odyssey*, that colossal story of stories, opens seven years into Odysseus's journey home. My own essay, a reflection on a shorter odyssey, follows in this tradition of ensnaring people with a scene-in-progress rather than explaining right off who we are, where we are, or how we got there. You can open *in medias res* in almost any kind of narrative, fiction or nonfiction. If you aren't telling a story—if you have no *res* to jump into the *medias* of—you still want to figure out some way to grab readers quickly.

You could grab readers with a quotation. Spoken words, like Brian's Bassmasterisms, impart information—and draw readers—like nothing else. You could slap quotation marks around any old text, but the best quotations capture a distinct turn of phrase, nail an idiom, convey the voice of an unmistakable speaker. As the song goes, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

## Word Up!

We might as well discuss right up front a type of decision that writers face at every writing moment: word choice. When you consider all that goes into choosing even one word, you have to wonder how any writing gets done. Take the word *loopy* in “He’s channeling a loopy Ed Bassmaster character.” How did I choose this word? Slowed way down, the process goes like this:

- Does this word imply anything that I don’t mean? (From several sources, I confirm that *loopy* means exactly what I have in mind: “crazy” or “silly.” Its other meanings won’t confuse or mislead anyone.)
- Could any other word convey my meaning more accurately or more fully? (No better word comes to mind. *Goofy* could work, but it implies a foolishness that doesn’t fit. I want a word that implies simply “a bit off.” A synonym search brings up nothing that beats *loopy*.)
- Does this word have the right tone and diction level? (Yep. It’s informal and colloquial. I would say *loopy* in a letter to a friend.)
- Have I overused this word? (Oh, the beauty of electronic searching. Nope. *Loopy* appears only once in my doc.)
- How about its sound and rhythm—anything good happening there? (Yes! *Loopy* makes me think of Brian’s exaggerated gait and sing-song voice when he’s “doing” Bassmaster. I can hear him now: “Well, *loopy, loopy, loopy*. That’s some fine syllables there. Would you just listen to them!”)

Ladies and gents, we have chosen a word.

One more thing about Excerpt 1: it makes me laugh. I don’t know how to *be* funny, but I like to share things that I find funny. If you want to hit the reader’s funny bone, write with integrity. Convey what you find funny as truly as you can, leaving unstated whatever people will get on their own. The most satisfying laughter comes from recognition.

**Excerpt 2**

Brian and I follow Elizabeth’s flip-flops down the wet cobblestone streets of Antigua, where we will spend the next two days. Guatemalans call this time of year (it’s July, the middle of the rainy season) *invierno*, winter, as if they were south of the equator or as if they needed parkas instead of occasional sweaters. This usage resonates with me—its upside-downness. Upside-down is how I feel in this place where I have no bearings and can neither navigate nor communicate on my own.

Excerpt 2 brings to mind other decisions. For one thing, even though I wanted to communicate something abstract (awe, aliveness), I focused, here, on the concrete: flip-flops on wet stone streets. The way to readers’ hearts is through their senses. Readers must see it, smell it, hear it—feel it under their feet—before they can care about it.

I introduced our location surreptitiously in Excerpt 2. Rather than announce, “Hey, folks, by the way, we are in Antigua, Guatemala,” I slipped in “streets of Antigua,” and I mentioned that Guatemalans call this time of year *invierno*. You know where we are even though I didn’t tell you straight out. When you write, the less noticeably you weave in the exposition (background information) the more engaged the reader stays.

The final sentence in Excerpt 2 (“Upside-down is how I feel...”) demonstrates another technique that aids reading: transition by repetition. In general, transitions pass along the baton of thought from one sentence to another, one paragraph to another, one section to another. Standard transitions include phrases like *in the first place* and *on the other hand*. Transitions don’t have to take a standard form, though. Some of the most effective transitions simply repeat key words from previous sentences, as in the repetition of *upside-down* here: “This usage resonates with me—its upside-downness. Upside-down is how I feel in this place.” (Repetition of this type—words from the end of one sentence or clause repeated at the beginning of the next—is an example of the rhetorical device known as anadiplosis.)

My decision to put this transition word (*upside-down*) at the beginning of the second sentence involved a couple of mini-decisions. The second sentence could have read this way instead: “I feel upside-down in this place ...” But I wanted a more graceful progression, a smoother handoff. As if maneuvering one party guest toward another for an introduction, I moved *upside-down* to the beginning of its sentence, next to its predecessor, *upside-downness*. To do this, I had to use *is*: “Upside-down is how I feel ...” I squinted at this trade-off, since I avoid *be*-verbs (see “*To Be or Not To Be*” on page 13). I decided to live with this *is* because bumping *upside-down* to the beginning accomplished two things. First, it connected the two sentences instantly, as if to say, “Speaking of upside-downness...” Secondly, it emphasized the key word *upside-down*. (Strunk and White call the beginning “the other prominent position in the sentence.”<sup>172</sup>)

Writing decisions that involve conflicting guidelines (like smooth transition vs. *be*-verb) pop up all the time. In these cases, ask not, *What’s the right thing to do?* but *What’s the best thing to do here?*

Next in the narrative comes a flashback. Anyone who has read this far wonders, *Who are these people? Where are they from?*

### Excerpt 3

A year has passed since Elizabeth flew off, freshly graduated from college, to start her Peace Corps service. Even before she left the States, she started working on her brother and me to plan a visit. Neither of us hankered to see Central America. She persisted. I relented. Eventually, Brian came around too. We got the passports, the shots, the airplane tickets, the raincoats, the translation apps. A few days after Brian graduated from high school, we boarded a plane in Syracuse. We flew over the Finger Lakes area, where I had spent most of my adult years, where my children had grown up, where winter was winter. *Click!* went Brian’s camera.

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172. Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 26 (page 53 in the illustrated 3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

Many decisions came into play in Excerpt 3, including when and how to shift tenses from present to past to earlier past and then back to present. It takes effort to stitch time frames together so that the seams don't show. Verb-tense shifts proved surprisingly challenging throughout this essay (as they are proving throughout this analysis: "I chose..." in past tense vs. "Hemingway warns..." in literary present tense, for example). For the record, any verb-tense inconsistencies you find in my essay (or in this analysis) result—I mean resulted—from careful deliberation ... or from confusion, I can never tell which. If your writing requires frequent shifts in tense, you'd do well to read up on the subtleties involved in this type of decision making.<sup>173</sup>

In the middle of Excerpt 3, we come to a pair of two-worders: "She persisted. I relented." Several writerly things are going on here. First, these sentences are dramatically shorter than those around them. Spotlight! In addition to their unifyingly unique stubbiness, their similar structure—subject verb, subject verb—reinforces their pairing and their significance. (The type of parallelism shown here at this pivot point—parallel grammatical structure enhanced by the tension of logically spring-loaded contrasting ideas, namely, persisting and relenting—is an example of the rhetorical device known as antithesis.)

The end of Excerpt 3 swings us back into action: "*Click!* went Brian's camera." The narrative, although still in past tense, is moving forward again. This *Click!* also awakens readers' ears. It returns them from the world of memory to the world of the senses.

#### Excerpt 4

Now that we've arrived, I relax. No more planning, anticipating what-ifs. I give myself over to the moment. The rain has stopped. The Volcán passes from view as the three of us turn a corner. Sunlight welcomes us into the lush, wide-open block known as Parque Central. The sidewalk leads to a fountain. Two sparkling

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173. See, for example, Plotnik, "Tense: A Sticky Choice," in *Spunk & Bite*, 44–52.

arcs stream from a mermaid's breasts, which she placidly cups as if to say, "Look at them. Would you just look at them?" *Click!* goes Brian's camera.

We're back in the moment, present tense. What can I say about Excerpt 4 that I haven't already said? If a motif—an element repeated throughout a piece, like the phrase *Would you look at that?*—presents itself as you develop your draft, use it artfully. Weave it through your writing as you would an accent color through a piece of fabric, allowing it to peek out just often enough for people to recognize it and take pleasure in it. Ideally, in the end, those spots of color achieve a balanced, unifying effect that resonates in a way that no one saw coming.

Reading Excerpt 4 for not only the content but also the language, you might linger on the phrase *sparkling arcs*. Notice the dum-dee-dum rhythm. The soft *ss* at the beginning and end. The onomatopoeic sparkle of *sparkling*. The *ark-ark* echo of *sparkling arcs*, a double hit of aural loveliness: consonance plus assonance. (Assonance—here, the *a-a*—is the repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming. Consonance—here, the *rk-rk*—is the repetition of consonant sounds within words. Both assonance and consonance are kinds of alliteration in the broad sense of the term: the repetition of sounds. Used in small doses, alliteration “can put an innocent hop and skip” in your prose.<sup>174</sup>) This overall combination of sound effects, laid over a just-right meaning, takes me someplace that only beautiful language can. No phrase is inherently beautiful, of course. *Sparkling arcs* might do nothing for you. But it pleases me. I could say it over and over. I did, in fact, as I was writing this description. When you write, you must please yourself (ears and all) before you can hope to please anyone else.

Excerpt 4, like the rest of this essay, originally included more words. I constantly add and cut, add and cut. Then, when I think I'm done—sometimes with an editor's (eventually welcome) nudging—I cut some more. Here, for example, I deleted “with her hands.” How else would a mermaid cup her breasts?

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174. Plotnik, *Better than Great*, 219.

Finally, Excerpt 4 gives me a chance to make this point: action, well captured, speaks for itself. Consider the line “*Click!* goes Brian’s camera.” Readers don’t need to be told “Brian *was* looking.” Nor do readers need to be told that I smiled as he took that photo. They don’t need to be told what I felt, or even that I experienced a number of emotions too complex and too fleeting to merit explication here. As Hemingway famously says,

The greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel ... was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced. The real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion ... would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always.<sup>175</sup>

#### Excerpt 5

All around the park, grime and decay are defied by the strident colors that shout from ancient buildings, tropical flowers, *traje*-clad women, baskets full of painted trinkets, and piles of embroidered cloth goods. Electric greens, oranges, pinks, scarlets, blues, whites, purples, and yellows zing along my optic nerve to that pleasure spot just this side of pain. I can’t help saying over and over, “Would you look at that?”

The description of the park in Excerpt 5 opens with a rare instance of passive voice (“are defied”) contributing value to a sentence. In this case, passive voice enables *grime and decay* to come first so the sentence can end with an optimistic trumpeting of all the colorful things that do the defying. Not only does the passive voice put the emphatic things—the beautifully colored things—at the end (a key principle in writing powerful sentences), but it also creates a sentence whose structure mimics its meaning: “Grime and decay, you are going *down!*” Passive voice doesn’t last long, though. Active voice returns in the form of the onomatopoetic verb “zing.”

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175. Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 11–12.

What else is going on in Excerpt 5? Several things. The sentences contain the simplest of all types of parallelism: a daisy-chain of nouns (buildings, flowers, women) followed by a cascade of colors (greens, oranges, pinks). Also, this paragraph treats you to bits of cadence, as in the phrase *just this side of pain*, which practically invites you to nod along. And the motif “Would you look at that?” peeks out again, emphasized by its placement at the end of the paragraph—and by its utterance, for the first time, by me.

Excerpt 5 includes the Spanish word *traje*. We haven’t yet touched on the handling of foreign words. In this essay, and in general, I follow in the tradition of stylists who avoid foreign words unless the context cries out for them. Even then, I sprinkle them in sparingly—like dots of Picamás sauce on a burrito, you could say—and I use context to help convey meanings. (Notice that you didn’t need to be told just now that Picamás sauce is Guatemalan or that it’s hot.) Wherever possible, define terms—even English terms that some readers might not know—through context. In Excerpt 5, when readers see *traje* joined to *clad*, they gather that *traje* refers to the traditional outfits of the region. And because the phrase *traje-clad women* belongs to a series of colorful things, readers don’t need to be told that this *traje* shimmers like a box of crayons. The context says it all. When context can’t say it all, translate with minimal disruption. In an earlier sentence—“Guatemalans call this time of year ... *invierno*, winter, as if they were south of the equator”—the in-line translation for *invierno* makes hardly a ripple.

The next passage, shown in Excerpt 6, introduces the concept that my parental role is changing as my children move into adulthood.

#### Excerpt 6

What a rush, sharing this jarringly rich experience with these two young people whom I brought into the world and who have so recently done what once seemed impossible: crossed over into adulthood. How freeing to realize that for this couple of weeks—maybe forever—they will need me less as a parent than as a companion.

In fact, on this trip I am mostly a follower, one who struggles to keep up. I don't mean physically. *Al contrario*, at Copán I rarely lose sight of Brian and Elizabeth as we all scramble up and down the rough, moss-covered blocks of the eerie Mayan ruins. Ditto Lake Atitlán, where we climb the seemingly endless stone steps up the hillside to our quarters. No, my struggle is mental. I'm talking about keeping up with the conversation.

Even as Excerpt 6 touches on the abstract notion of children growing up, it stays grounded in concrete language. The reader feels those rough, moss-covered blocks, imagines running out of breath...stays engaged.

The first sentence in Excerpt 6 includes the phrase *jarringly rich experience*. Adverbs, including *-ly* words, often add no value (as in, *Frankly, I'll tell you the truth*). Adverbs do add value, though, when they contribute surprise. Since *jarringly* and *rich* don't normally go together, their pairing conveys a meaning more complex than either word conveys alone, while it pleasantly prickles the ear.

The final sentence of Excerpt 6—"I'm talking about keeping up with the conversation"—pivots into a central scene, the restaurant.

#### Excerpt 7

We're sitting at Frida's Cocina Mexicana, drinking margaritas (which nineteen-year-old Brian can do here) and eating tacos. Elizabeth's recently bobbed brown curls stop just short of her shoulders. They hang loose and soft around her face as if to say, "What's not to like about these curls?" When she was little, she didn't want her hair short because people took her for a boy; for years she straightened it or tied it back. How far she has come. And here sits Brian, relaxed in his slim, chiseled wrestler's body, his hair the same straight, dark blond that mine used to be. When he was little, he said he'd never take any trip that required him to get shots. How far he, too, has come.

Knowing that more conversation lies just ahead, readers can abide some action-stopping description here: hair color, etc. These details

help them visualize the scene while deepening their understanding of the people being described (and of my perspective on them).

*A punctuation note:* In the sentence “When she was little, she didn’t want her hair short because people took her for a boy; for years she straightened it or tied it back,” I debated whether to insert a comma after “for years.” Many style guides support omitting the comma when an introductory phrase has only two or three words. In this case, the comma would have added choppiness without adding value. I opted for the omission. Even punctuation decisions sometimes depend on context.

Next comes the awaited conversation.

### Excerpt 8

A familiar song is playing.

Brian (challenging): “Who’s that?”

Elizabeth (instantly): “Adele. Which album?”

Brian (after a few seconds, deflated): “Your mom’s.”

We order another round of tacos. We talk. In someone else’s voice, seemingly out of nowhere, Brian warns: “I don’t want no scrubs.” When our blank looks tell him that his audience doesn’t get the reference, the unappreciated artist wags his head and says, “You have to see *The Other Guys*.” Later, I’ll Google the movie, and I’ll hear the quirky delivery of the scrubs line. I’ll see that Brian nailed it. I’ll discover that the character has, in turn, borrowed the line from a TLC song, making Brian’s quote a quote within a quote.

My children are otters frolicking in the stream of pop culture.

Occasionally, I score a point. Back at our hotel, we’re playing Monopoly. Elizabeth, the banker, has just sold her brother a handful of little green houses. He spills them onto Boardwalk and Park Place.

Brian: “Zoop!”

Elizabeth: “I put you in this game. I’ll take you out.”

Mom: “Bill Cosby!”

Elizabeth: “Mom got it.” (I don’t deserve the credit—they got Cosby from me—but, hey.)

Mom: “Zoop!”

Want people to read something? Put it in dialogue. When you write dialogue, you write for the eye and the ear at once. The eye can't resist those invitingly short lines. And we all like to listen in on conversations. Words that come out of someone's mouth tell us a lot—about what's being said and about the person or character saying it. When we hear (or imagine hearing) people talking, we're instantly drawn into a moment, an interaction unfolding. We decipher meaning from the speakers' word choices and from the context of the scene. We take mental notes on ways we might want to talk—or not talk. We imagine the feelings behind the words and the things left unsaid. We wonder, *What will they say next?*

#### Excerpt 9

This staccato, falsetto syllable punctuates our Guatemala days. It took me a few repetitions to figure out the snappy little sound. It indicates connection, things clicking into place. The origin is an episode of *Family Guy*. (Brian played this video for us too.) A cartoon alien opens its mouth and shoots out a littler mouth that lives on the end of its tongue. The mouths exchange words. Then the big mouth retracts the little one—Zoop!—pulling its own back into itself.

I can't pull my little ones back. Elizabeth has returned to western Guatemala, where she's bringing computers to school-children. Brian is starting college in western New York. I'm settling in to a new life on the West Coast, thousands of miles from either of them. For the first time since they were born, I have no idea when or where I will see my children next.

I will get used to this phase: the separation, the uncertainty. For now, I pore over my vacation photos. I'd love to show them to you. Of course you'll never see Brian and Elizabeth as I do. But oh, what splendid human beings! I mean, look at them. Would you just look at them?

With this ending, I allowed myself both a “but oh” and an exclamation point. Normally, I let words pull their own weight rather than prop

them up with exclamatory punctuation, interjections, italics, or any other external cues. But here, emotion had to spill over. Sometimes the context calls for pulling out the stops. If you do it rarely, if you reserve the special effects for special occasions, you have reason to hope for a powerful impact.

### **Summary**

When you write powerfully, you make countless decisions about words, sentences, paragraphs, and the overall piece. You also make seemingly countless *types* of decisions. Here's a summary of the types that this chapter touches on—a mere sampling of the full range of possible decisions.

- **Topic:** When you have a choice, write about something you know and love.
- **Audience and purpose:** Have an audience and a purpose in mind. Sounds simple, but too many projects fail because of flawed answers to the questions, for whom? and why?
- **Genre:** Pick a genre that best suits your audience and purpose. Master that genre's conventions, if only to equip yourself to reject them intelligently.
- **Organization scheme:** Consider various possibilities before you decide.
- **Tone and diction level:** Make appropriate choices. Stick with them.
- **Title:** Write your title after your theme has emerged. (If you can't state your theme, it hasn't emerged.)
- **Opening strategy:** Jump in to the middle of a story, or find some other way to grab your reader at word one.
- **Word choice:** Choose the best word. (This process involves asking at least five questions and doing the research required to answer them.) Congratulate yourself. Repeat.

- **Imagery:** Use concrete language that appeals to all the senses.
- **Exposition:** Sneak in any necessary background information.
- **Speech:** Use quotations or dialogue to keep readers' attention and to convey character. No writing packs more oomph than the right words wrapped in quotation marks.
- **Transitions:** Create smooth, natural transitions by repeating key words. Place the repeated words close to their predecessors.
- **Trade-offs:** Accept that sometimes one writing guideline prevents you from following another. Choose your trade-offs.
- **Sentence length:** Vary it.
- **Sentence structure:** Vary it.
- **Parallelism:** Use similar structures when you want to emphasize similarities.
- **Action:** Keep things happening.
- **Emotion:** Readers feel most keenly the emotions they fill in for themselves based on what Hemingway calls the "sequence of motion and fact." Use external cues (italics, exclamation points, interjections) rarely; let the words do the work.
- **Motifs:** Use recurring elements to reinforce a theme.
- **Verbs:** Use verbs that punch. Stick with present tense for immediacy, moving backward or forward through time smoothly as needed. Use active voice everywhere except where passive contributes more value.
- **Terms that require definition:** Use obscure terms (from English or any other language) sparingly. Define them as unobtrusively as possible.
- **Punctuation:** Follow the rules, understanding that context sometimes plays a role even in punctuation decisions.
- **Conciseness:** Look hard; you'll find more to cut.
- **Humor:** Let humor happen, unforced, if you see opportunities.

## *Word Up!*

- **Cadence:** Use sound and rhythm—especially in openings and closings—to enhance meaning and to bring attentive readers some measure of pleasure.
- **Endings:** Put key words at the ends of sentences, key sentences at the ends of paragraphs, key paragraphs at the ends of sections, key chapters at the ends of books.

Powerful writing. How can I sum it up? If you gave me your business card and asked me to flip it over and jot down the secret to powerful writing—the distilled wisdom contained in this book—so you could tack it up on your wall, I would write this: “Ask each word: *Why* are you here? *Why* are *you* here? *Why* are you *here*?”