

Ernest hemingway's  
pared-down writing  
style: selections from  
in our time



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Ernest Hemingway is a profound writer who not only won the Nobel Prize, but also inspired the American writers who came after him to embrace minimalistic forms of expression. Just as Hemingway began writing, other authors also picked up his style and many books had been published with the same type of diction and syntax. By using the iceberg principle—simple text with deeper meaning—, manipulating syntax, and incorporating real life experiences into his writing, Hemingway crafts the text to reveal purpose and meaning. Within the stories of *In Our Time*, his manipulations of suggestion and syntax take a variety of forms, all of which attest to the power of a literary method that seems simple—but is only deceptively simple in reality.

Hemingway uses short, concise sentences to express his meaning. He used the iceberg principle which is only getting a small amount of information when the real information is either unavailable or hidden. Only one-tenth of an iceberg's mass shows outside while about nine-tenths of it is unseen, deep down in the water, thus the term "iceberg". Almost all of Hemingway's short stories in, *In Our Time*, use this principle; yet, the short story, "Indian Camp" displays it the most. This quote, especially, "'Ought to have a look at the proud father. They're usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs,'" (Hemingway 18) illustrates the use of the principle because if one was to skip over this minor detail, they would miss the entire plot of the story. Even the *Kansas City Star* "Rules of Writing"—that Hemingway claims he followed—states, "Use short sentences . . . Eliminate every superfluous word." (class notes). This helped shape his style and influence the deep meaning behind the simple, but rhetoric language. Carlos Baker's, "The Way it Was," also

indicates that Hemingway used this principle, "And this positive charge, which on being released plays not over, but beneath the verbal surfaces, is one phase of the underside of Hemingway's distinguished achievement in prose." (Baker 19). This implies that the significance of the story requires one to cogitate on the subject; for, the actual meaning is underneath the words on the paper. Additionally, Harry Levin does not fail to mention in his essay, "Observations on the Style of Ernest Hemingway", Hemingway's use of simple language to establish purpose and meaning, "Hemingway feels that one short spontaneous vulgarism is more honest than all those grandiloquent slogans. . ." (Levin 7). Instead of trying to sound so intelligent and extravagant, Levin suggests that Hemingway utilizes simplistic phrases to enhance his text and to produce importance and purpose. Hemingway applies the iceberg principle throughout his writing to craft the text, emitting significance. Even in his Nobel Prize speech, Hemingway apprises his audience of his simple language, "Things may not be immediately discernible in what a man writes . . . but eventually they are quite clear." (class notes) In other words, a writer will not tell the reader the meaning of their work because then it would have no purpose. For example, an author could simply state, "treat others the way you want to be treated," but a person learns from example and is interested in real life situations—which is what Hemingway essentially does.

Hemingway manipulates syntax to express purpose and meaning. Without using ribald vocabulary, Hemingway is still able to convey his messages throughout all of his writing, exercising the arrangement of words. He also attempts to keep his writing verisimilitude, keeping the false information out

and crafting sentences with truth and meaning. In "The Way it Was," Baker continues to say, "Hemingway always wrote slowly and revised carefully, cutting, eluding, substituting, experimenting with the syntax to see what sentence could economically carry, and then throwing out all words that could be spared." (Baker 19). Through the careful consideration of his writing, Hemingway does not waste any valuable factor that contributes to his text, such as syntax, to craft the writing to illustrate the effective dictum he uses. Syntax also contributes to the simplicity of his style; so, certain words have specific connotations that could indicate more meaning than other words, thus the selection of words becomes important. In the short story, "The End of Something," Hemingway chooses words with caution to showcase their symbolism, "'You don't want to take the ventral fin out,' he said. 'It'll be all right for bait but it's better with the ventral fin in.'"

(Hemingway 32). The character Nick is not talking about a ventral fin, but rather the purity of a young girl that he is planning to break up with. The selection of the word and the choice of placement depicts how Hemingway controls the syntax to achieve significance. Levin states in his essay, ". . . his syntax is informal to the point of fluidity, simplifying far as possible the already simple system of English inflections." (Levin 9). So Hemingway's language flows without effort and allows the reader to comprehend what is trying to be said; furthermore, the syntax is built simply, but brilliantly.

Based upon personal observation and feelings, almost all of Hemingway's writing creates value in the text. Baker exclaims, ". . . his aim from the beginning had been to show, if he could, the precise relationship between what he saw and what he felt." (Baker 6). Hemingway wanted an efficient

unification of his experiences in the text while avoiding his opinions. To accomplish this, he made certain characters like himself, such as Nick, especially in the short story, "Big Two-Hearted River." Relating to the iceberg principle, it is never stated in the story that Nick is recovering from war, but with close analysis, one could realize that that is what the story is ultimately about. Nick has gone to war and has come back with physical and emotional damage, likewise, so has Hemingway. Words and sentences flow and adapt agreeably together when the author has experienced first hand what he or she is writing about; but, it is connecting the experience and the feelings together that create the purpose and meaning. In this quote from the short story, ". . . he realized that the grasshoppers had all turned black from living in the burned-over land. . . . He wondered how long they would stay that way." (Hemingway 136), Hemingway eludes to Nick, but also to himself. This lets the writing achieve much more purpose. Using vignettes, Hemingway is able to incorporate his own visions—although a small part of the work—that eventually lead to the theme of the whole. In addition, Levin states, "His writing seems so intent upon the actual, so impersonal on its surfaces, that it momentarily prompts us to overlook the personality behind them. That would be a mistake . . ." (Levin 14), revealing that not everyone sees the emotion Hemingway puts into his writing. Because Hemingway included personal experience in his writing, it has more purpose and creates greater meaning.

Hemingway has success in utilizing the iceberg principle to create deeper meaning, effectively manipulates syntax to allow the reader to understand his writing, and seamlessly incorporates his observations and feelings into

his work. Through all of this, Hemingway crafts his text to produce the achievement found in almost all his works—purpose and meaning behind the text. The reader is not to be left oblivious to what is read, but rather involved in and captivated by the messages found beneath the words.