

WRITING PRACTISE

Reading Yehong Zhu's writing—analysis 1

- starting sentences with a verb (winded)
- power of simile comes from specificity, even if it's not relatable
- expand your vocabulary to be able to use words like "sardonic" sparingly, but with flair
- **SARDONIC = grimly mocking/cynical, derisively teasing**
- use metaphors and then extend them over several sentences:
 - *Right before landing in Belgium, you marvel at the setting sun's Midas touch. How easily it washes the heavens in gold.*
- really think about how you want to describe an image to bring it to life before you write about it—relive it in your mind before even starting to think about describing it:
 - *Two years had passed and yet he sported that same burnished tan, his glance searching and a little uncertain until you beamed in recognition.*
- Find little phrases that you love as poetic constructs, that indelibly ring in your mind, and note the use of "roguish", an uncommon and weirdly specific word:
 - *In matters of love he was patient and roguish, singular and intense. Being with him feels like the slowest of surrenders, the kind you want to relive over and over again.*
- a lot of the meaning of words and the feelings they evoke are derived from how it **sounds to pronounce them—I don't even know what "coquettishly" means but somehow I can still feel the connotations it's intended to evoke**
- **SUFFUSED = spread over/imbued/permeated "drinks were suffused with nostalgia"**
- sustained use of a metaphor (in this case, about drinking/alcohol/intoxication) is powerful, touched on again and again—
 - *Drinks that summer were sweeter than you remembered, suffused with nostalgia, imbibed in the hazy diffused glow of a million city lights. You are young and immortal and living in Manhattan. You are drunk on possibility, and nothing in the world can bring you down. On a rooftop bar by the seaport, Matthias is toying with his mojito, puckering his mouth at the lime.*
- a useful detail to touch on is the **edges** of things—the edges of someone's accent, someone's smile, someone's thoughts. it really adds a sense of specificity and detail to a certain description.
- **IMBIBE = drink alcohol OR absorb, assimilate, digest**
- SPRITZ = spray something in short bursts
- GAMUT = complete range, spectrum of something
- when drafting, take every sentence and make each word more specific. for example, note how each phrase in each sentence in the following is very, very, specific, as if they were under trial under oath to recount each minute detail in their mind. Instead of saying (before you quit ballet):
 - *Before you fractured your **fibula** on a **poorly landed grand jeté**, putting your **pointe shoes** in **the closet** forever.*
- A lot of good writing comes from genuinely experience a vivid emotion in your mind before you can even attempt to translate it into paper. I don't think I'd ever felt what she articulates here, but I feel it now as I read her writing, painting a vivid image of a kind, understanding, player after she told him she loves him (note unsurprised vs not as if he were surprised):
 - *He looks at you, not unkindly, not as if he were surprised, but as if it were inevitable. Or rather, unoriginal. A compliment he had heard before and was reluctant to accept again. He kisses you gently on the forehead, but says nothing in return.*
- SCRABBLE = to gnaw, scratch, frantically search for something
- this phrase really describes the deep ache you feel but can't quite articulate in intense moments:
 - *something hot and dark and wordless settles deep inside you*
- THROES = intense pain during a time of great change; *he convulsed against the throes of death*
- use "as if" to describe how someone or something looks by comparing it to something completely different, random, unrelated, but very specific
- 80% of Yehong's mastery comes from specificity. She imagines a situation several times before writing about it, summons both the most important details and some unimportant ones, and then

weaves them together using sustained metaphors that are oh-so-specific that you can't help but feel like you're experiencing what she's describing. For example:

- *You imagine him taking your heart in his hands, **still warm and beating** from the cavity in your chest, and plunging **a carving knife** into **the aortic valve**. You can feel it already, the **gasp**ing wound, your blood spurting in **red rivulets**. Un couteau dans le coeur, as the French would say.*
- PETER OUT = gradually diminish, decrease, fade
- QUIXOTIC = idealistic, romantic

Analysis 2—Sketches of a City (Beijing)

- specificity, specificity—she doesn't say "delicious \$1 breakfast", she says:
 - *For less than \$1 you can get delicious homemade scallion pancakes with peanut sauce, sausage, vegetables and fried egg rolled together in this glorious crepe-style breakfast.*
- vocabulary is important because a very specific, intentioned, and received word choice and completely transform a setting in a readers mind. I got a specific image when she outlines a Beijing cafe for artists and Instagrammers, but when she used the phrase *pastel pot*, and I looked up the colour pastel, it immediately stuck in my mind and I had a very vivid picture.

Analysis 3—A Taste of Italy: On Milan, Siena, and Studying Abroad

- WANDERLUST = desire to travel, as it says on the tin
- sometimes literally listing things can be a powerful form of imagery. when describing her culinary experience in Beijing, she lists 5 exotic fruits—almost excessively—to force the reader to grapple with *exactly* what she experienced.
- when going off listing phrases describing an experience, the most powerful ones are ones where the reader has something insanely come to mind; for example, *I've swum in shimmering aquamarine waters next to ancient ruins* is more powerful than *I've admired priceless pieces of haute couture at the Emporio Armani Silos* since the reader doesn't have anything specific in mind when you mention "haute couture". Instead, force a very specific (and intentional) image down the readers throat.

Analysis 4—When in Beijing

- IMPERIAL = relating to monarchs, royalty, empires
- UNDERLIE = the cause or basis of something else
- PROCESSION = number of people or things moving forward in an orderly manner at a parade
- RAVISH = 1) to seize and forcefully take away 2) to be overcome with emotion 3) plunder, rob
- SWANKY = stylishly luxurious and expensive, showy but in an impressive way
- RITZY = similar to swanky, expensive and stylish
- when you're trying to describe the scale or magnitude of something, don't describe that directly "*a horde of tourists*", instead describe something that indirectly makes people think of the original thing, and the scale of it "*a procession of coloured umbrellas pulsing through the colossal doors at the head of the building*".
- Be very thoughtful and careful with your words. misusing a word in a certain context can make the experienced writer doubt your abilities—"Aware of the historical significance of what we were seeing, we were inundated with an underlying sense of wonder"—her misuse of "underlying" makes me question whether she had really mastered her wide lexicon at this stage of her literary development. Most of the time, use simple words, make your prose beautiful with specificity and imagery and structure, not word choice, and sprinkle in exotic words exactly when they're needed.
- when you're re-imagining an experience in your head before writing in down, make not of any surprising details. For example: "*Many glorious crepes later, we ventured out into the cool, semi-acidic Beijing drizzle, sated, ready to shop*". Use of the phrase "semi-acidic" adds an immense amount of value to the sentence, helping us imagine the pollution levels in the city, and to almost feel what she felt at the time.

- she often couples the principle of triplets with alliteration “contradiction, complexity, and capture” or “tourist treasure trove”.
- WRIGGLING = squirm, writhe, flounder
- when describing Beijing nightlife: “*Neon lights spilled into the evening streets, accentuated by the boom, boom of the live artists performing from the open-air bars; dry ice unfurled onto the sidewalks, where promoters hustled to lure you into their respective establishments (each purportedly better than the last); the river glowed with life, Technicolor from the brightness of the boulevard, and when you closed your eyes against the world you felt the pulse of the city beat in your fingertips, and you remembered how good it felt to be young.*”
- **Analysis 4—A Tale of Five Cities**
 - using unusual words like *gaggle*
 - DISMAY = alarm, shock, distress
 - BOURGEOISIE/BOUJEE = flashy and expensive, in a materialistic sort of way
 - “*strolling through a boulevard of glitter and grime*” powerful alliterative contrast at the end
 - FRIGID = cold
 - RARING = (as a verb) enthusiastic and ready to go
 - again, specificity when you least expect it, and when it’s least needed, to paint a clear picture — “*the kind of ambition that scares you with its intensity.*”
 - she makes a lot of use of cultural references—french and italian words for romantic emphasis, references to chinese emperors and specific cultural images, to convey more nuance than any one description might otherwise be able to: “*Instead of coming to the once-fabled United States, perhaps future émigrés will come to China to stake their fortunes instead.*”
 - instead of being explicit when describing Cambridge, and saying she had dinner by the candlelight, and maybe describing the exotic silverware and pretentious crockery, she combines both into one image an a clean fell swoop—“*Candlelight bounces off the silverware in the hush before the fellows are seated.*”
 - HALLOWED = holy, sacred
 - again, unusual specificity is the cornerstone of her writing—and it’s the sort of specificity that makes you think she’s literally describing off an image of Oxford in front of her, but really she’s describing from an equally clear image stamped into her mind’s eye. “*The dining hall is dark and hallowed, with vaulted ceilings and long mahogany tables.*”
 - KEYSTONE/CORNERSTONE = foundational/important/distinguishing quality or feature of something
 - she uses a lot of specific adjectives—types of clothes, shades of colours, and more. I guess this falls under “an extensive vocabulary”. The word “plaid cloth” is much more incisive and powerful (to those who know what it means) than “checkered or tartan twilled cloth”, which is what it means. use “maroon” and “plaid” and “mahogany” to describe things, places, people, rather than their definitions. again, this only comes with a vast lexicon.
 - sometimes—read: SOMETIMES, read: SPARINGLY—you can use phrases simply because they sound good. Literally, because they sound elegant and make your writing seem poetic—as long as they don’t look out of place. This is because most people aren’t reading as deeply or critically as you might think—just glossing and getting the superficial meaning out of what you’re writing, and so a phrase like “bleeding from my ribs” as a method of conveying that you didn’t feel at home technically doesn’t make any sense at all if you think about it, but it sounds BEAUTIFUL, and that’s important for the 90% of the readers just glossing over what you’re writing.
 - ABSOLUTION = religious/moral release from sin/guilt
 - CONSECRATED = make or declare something as sacred
 - HAUTE = fashionably elegant/high class (hate couture/cuisine)
 - while writing with a wide vocabulary can be powerful, it should be used with intention and great care. if I, an educated reader, is having to look up words literally every sentence or two, I can’t help but thinking the prose is a little purple. I think her writing, with some words swapped out, and some unnecessarily poetic phrases removed, would be perfect.
 - IMPUNITY = exemption from punishment
 - SWILL = drink greedily

- Miscellaneous notes

- *"I had her face stamped onto the back of my eyelids"*
- use metaphors and then extend them over several sentences:
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STRING THEORY—ANALYSIS—DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley

DAINTINESS = delicate beauty

HITHER AND DITHER = to go to and fro in various random directions

FRIVOLITY = lightheartedness, playfulness

BROODING = showing deep unhappiness or seriousness of thought

ENTREAT = implore, beg

EXULT = rejoice

YEARN = long, desire, crave

A short aside on Wittgenstein's philosophy, whom DFW references often: His philosophy opposes Socrates, who believed that all words, since they served as labels for concrete ideas or objects, must have clear definitions, birthing 'name theory' (impossible for things like justice, knowledge). Wittgenstein countered that you must characterise words by analogy, birthing 'family theory', where not all words corresponded to real world objects or ideas. Wittgenstein believed that philosophical problems are not solved by brilliant logical insight and argument, but by breaking down our understandings of the words comprising the problem, and starting to see why a question is either fundamentally unanswerable in that framework, or utterly nonsensical. He believed that philosophy was trying to separate our thoughts and arguments from the sticky strands of language, a task he believed was fundamentally impossible, and hence most philosophical questions useless. He believed that words were only meaningful in a context ('language-game') like 'apple' being the word to get you to give me that piece of food, or to demonstrate I know the first letter of the alphabet.

When philosophers take these words out of context, they kill them, void them of meaning. Just as how a pawn taken off a chessboard doesn't 'mean' anything--and is just a dead symbol. Ultimately, for him, it comes down to how we think of words--and if we choose to define them, what definitions we choose as axioms for argument. There is nothing more to philosophy, in his opinion, and I would agree. The study of language, how it came about, how other animals communicate without it, how it evolves, and why it's not natural like vision yet so integral to culture and humanity, is, to me, genuinely interesting. I hope to learn more about this by taking a smattering of linguistics,

psychology, philosophy, evolutionary biology, sociology classes under Pinker and Chomsky at college.

Often, DFW describes things using unusual combinations of words--words one would not normally see paired, and therefore conjure a novel and specific image, for example "boxed township" makes me think of something very specific, and it isn't something I'd dreamt up before. Same for the "lurid jutting Berkshires".

(developing a) JONES = desire, craving for something

ATHWART = across, against the grain of

A big part of writing well is patience while crafting prose, required mainly to sit and reflect on an object or experience to really internalize what makes it special and interesting and worth writing about in the first place--to come up with that and have a strong intuition for that before you even set about writing about it at all. EG him describing the humidity of central America as "wet mitten"--he really had to sit back and reflect on how it felt to come up with that feeling.

MIDGE = a small fly found in wet areas, like marshes

FURROW = a line or trench made in the ground for seeding

SOBRIQUET = a nickname

INTERCALATED = insert something in between things

TRUNCHEON = club, baton, stick

Practise hinting at things through imagery of a vector, or an effect that thing has. For example, DFW wants to talk about how windy his hometown is, he uses the vector of women's hair. He talked about how East Coast ladies don't wear plastic wraps over their head to protect their newfound hairdoes that their hair, without this protection from the wind, looked naked and misplaced to him. This tells us oodles about his culture, attitude, personality, outlook, as well as being remarkably specific about how windy Philo, Illinois is, without once mentioning the wind itself. This is a very powerful technique that I must practise again and again.

VISTA = view, panorama

MISCEGINATING = the mixing of different racial groups through marriage or sex

ZEPHYR = a soft, gentle breeze

SPECTRAL = like a ghost

To expand on the platitude 'show, don't tell': DFW shows us how windy the courts are by describing this image: [of his friend who was spectrally thin] 'we had to tie him down to stop him from becoming a projectile' which shows us the strong gusts on the court, as well as the skeleton of his friend wobbling amidst them.

Another example of imagery through vectors/effects is: 'when [the sound of the wind] went away, I was left with the squeak of the blood in my head and the aural glitter of all those little eardrum hairs quivering like a drunk in withdrawal'. What a beautiful sentence. For one thing, he had to sit back and reflect on the experience to even come up with the importance of the sound of wind, and then goes further into specificity with that by talking about the blood in his head and then further into THAT by talking about that hairs on his eardrums, then giving us a specific simile that is less a comparison and more an exact description--much like. Steven Pinker shows us Brian Greene doing in his expository writing: giving exact analogies rather than hand-wavey comparisons. Except, for DFW it's embedded in two layers of amazing specificity and wacky detail that he had to pull out of the hat by really immersing himself in what it was like in a day of strong gusts.

PUSSIFY = to make weak and effeminate

SEXTANT = archer navigation instrument for gauging angles

FOLIATE = decorated with leaf-like motifs, or leaves themselves

PRETERNATURAL = extraordinary

He makes lots of quick metaphors in succession—each wacky, to ingrain an image in the readers' minds—“billiards with balls that won't hold still”, “chess on the run”.

SHIMMERING = glistening, shining

SKITTISH = excitable, easily scared, animated

CRUCIFORM = shaped like a cross

ENWEBBED = wrapped in web-like patterns

A lot of his writing comes across as borderline demented. The amount of detail writes with hints at how much richness and intricacy there is to his imagination, and the analogies he makes are sometimes twisted and far-fetched, making us think his mind is genius, but scattered too. It's like when you're reading a passage and it gets increasingly more intense until you just can't keep up or understand but the pace continues to increase, almost like a madman talking to himself in his room at night frantically.

He was a renaissance man! He describes the combinatorics of tennis shots in terms of hyperbolic trigonometric functions, having studied complex analysis, as well as done degrees in English and philosophy. This means he can think like a philosopher, poet, mathematician, and more, blending these lenses to give an unprecedented understanding ('show') of reality.

APOPLECTIC = furious, overcome with anger

VERVE = enthusiasm, energy

PANACHE = flamboyance

COUNTENANCE = face or facial expression

POCKED = a dot-type scar left as a mark on an object or skin

CANDENT = white-hot glowing, incandescent

HUBRIS = arrogance, conceit

AUTONOMIC = involuntary, unconscious

RECALCITRANT = obstinately uncooperative towards authority

GLADBROUS = hairless, smooth

LUMBER = move in a slow, awkward way

FESTOON = garland (of flowers)

THRENODY = elegy, lamentation song

One of the things, as Pinker says, that makes writing so powerfully expository and clear, is not giving analogies for the sake of comparative intuition, but an exact analogy—playing in a large set of courts wrapped with tarp to stop gusts of air, was, to DFW, akin to “living at the bottom of a well”—you can see the exact analogy here in the staleness of the air. Actionably, I need to think more carefully about the similes and metaphors I give to make sure they really help and have a 1:1 comparison.

SAPROGENIC = caused or produced by decay

How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart

RABID = extreme, fanatical

HIGHBROW = intellectual, scholarly

INSIPID = tasteless, bland

PRIVATION = poverty, hardship

LINIMENT = pain-relieving lotion to rub on the body

INCARNATE = in human form, in the flesh

Each word is thoughtfully optimised. When he describes the beauty of sport:

“Jordan hanging in midair *like a Chagall bride*, Sampras laying down a touch volley at an *angle that defies Euclid*. And they're inspiring. There is about world-class athletes *carving out* exemptions from physical laws a transcendent beauty that *makes manifest God in man*. So actually more than one theory, then. Great athletes are profundity in motion. They enable abstractions like *power* and *grace* and *control* to become notably *incarnate but televisable*. To be a top athlete, performing, is to be that *exquisite hybrid of animal and angel* that we average unbeautiful watchers have such a hard time seeing in ourselves.”

It's conversational in pace, and has a clear voice (someone is on the other end of the line), but evokes wildly specific images, extended metaphor of God, and is thoughtfully crafted to be relatable for anyone that has seen a beautiful moment of sport on TV.

CARNAL = sexual, lustful

DFW, like all great humanists, has flair that masks oodles and oodles of rigor, structure, practise. Beautiful art is not without structure, and doesn't come about naturally. His writing, too, has been honed to conform to many techniques that he subtly employs (often-times without even knowing it!) And iterated on again and again with graduate rigor backing it. Success is not an accident.

INGÉNUÉ = an innocent, often unsophisticated, young woman

FACETED = having many sides

NYMPHET = an attractive, sexually mature young girl

A good thing to do when you're really trying to drive a point home is to use a long list of literally 6-7 CSVs to hammer intuition about a topic into the reader's skull, as they can reason by analogy when they have loads of examples to use.

LUXATE = dislocate

STACCATO = clearly separated (of musical notes)

DEADAN = stifle, mask, make something less intense

BANAL = dull, unoriginal

VAPIDITY = offering nothing that is stimulating or challenging

PERFORCE = necessarily, inevitably

As always, beauty is not a trait emergent from the writing on a page, but from the complexity of meaning stored within the words that leave the mind. In other words, DFW puts forward genuinely insightful and subtle points—like the fact that perhaps the reason most sports biographies are dull are because the very traits that make an athlete successful (not overthinking) are the very traits that make them unreliable and poor at fleshing out the juicy stories of their lives. He also writes loads and loads about specific details, but the writing seldom feels unnecessary—he wrote several pages about this one concept, but each sentence added nuance, and none were redundant. Exercise to practice—take a specific point and write 5x more than you can about it, and then go back and make it so that each sentence genuinely adds more value to the page—making you have to flesh out the point in more detail instead of 'bullshitting'. This teaches you to think rigorously, too.

Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness

PARADIGM = the prototypical, quintessential example of something

CIRCUMORAL = encircling or situated around the mouth

TACIT = implicitly understood

LUGUBRIOUS = mournful, gloomy

Before describing a scene, he imagines it, again and again. When describing the amateur tennis players, he describes their girlfriends, going into deep detail even about *them*—as if they have “something indefinable about them that suggests wealthy parents whom the girls are trying to piss off by hooking up with obscure tennis players”. I would agree and imagine that myself, but never go to the length of pointing it out.

NOMOLOGICAL = relating to dogmatic, axiomatic principles

ALSORAN = finishers, losers by a large margin

SUBDERMAL = under the skin

AFFECTLESS = emotionless, dead

ENDO/MESO/ECTOMORPHIC = naturally skinny, jacked, fat

LINCHPIN = someone or something vital to an organization or enterprise

CONTRAPPOSTO = 'counter-pose', referring to the symmetry between arms and legs in a standing humanoid figure

SKILLET = frying pan

NUBILE = sexually mature, attractive young girl

HITCH = jerk something into a certain position

ABANDON = lack of inhibition, restraint

SCHIZOID = having crazy, inconsistent, chaotic elements

EPIGRAM = a witticism, pithy expression

ANALGESIA = inability to feel pain

SUBSUMPTION = the act of one thing swallowing another one

UNAFFRONTED = uninsulted, unreactive, unoffended

CRAVEN = cowardly

A good exercise is to practice crafting extended metaphors by mixing contexts. EG—task yourself to write a paragraph comparing tennis hierarchies to food webs in the jungle to give a reader a

sense of how Federer>Agassi>Joyce>D1 College Kid>>Rest of Us, or images of war and tribalism when describing rallies across court.

REPLETE = well fed, sated, full

FOWL = a rooster or hen

VERDIGRIS = blue-green copper colour

DUTIFUL = dedicated, devoted, obedient

CATATONIC = paralyzed, in a state of immobile stupor

NACREOUS = shiny, like a pearl

Zeugma is using a word in both its contexts alongside each other—eg. John and his license expired last week, adds flair and complexity, the moment to think about the statement presents a clear image.

GROTESQUE = malformed, distorted

Democracy and Commerce at the US Open

VERTIGINOUS = causing vertigo, dizziness

POINTILLIST = painting style involving making pictures out of dots

HULKING = large, heavy, clumsy

SPITTOON = metal pot used literally for spitting into

HALTER = rope or noose used to tether to a pulling animal

Another example of saying something without explicit saying anything is “something indefinable about the crowd that suggests Connecticut license plates and very green lawns”—so think of what you want to say about a particular character or thing, then think about other things that evoke the same image, and describe how looking at the character or thing makes you think about those *other* things instead of just calling him, say, a Wall Street-looking man.

VIVISECT = cutting a living animal up for experimental purposes

BONELESS = lacking physical or mental strength

One thing I do really admire about DFW is his scholarly but unpretentious approach to analogy—he will compare a man to Danny DeVito, and then a conflict to the ‘postmodern Peloponnesian War’, showcasing how much he intends on getting his message across, and isn’t so much worried about sounding fancy—he’ll just choose whichever analogy helps him get there. This is the epitome of both a deep thinker, but also a renaissance man and intellectual who can breakdance.

It’s also interesting to explore why I think DFW’s writing is engaging and impressive and nuanced compared to Richard Westfall’s *The Life of Isaac Newton*, which I found depressingly and frustratingly impenetrable, because they both require me looking up inane amounts of words per page. Maybe it’s because tennis is more engaging content? Or because of DFW’s pop-culture references I get the points he’s getting at, and they’re genuinely relatable and insightful, whereas Westfall is more historical narrative without commentary? Or some combination?

INCONTINENCE = lack of discipline, self-restraint (pissing your pants)

He makes the weirdest (and best) comparisons—comparing clay court players’ elbow to ‘joints of mutton’—exercise—try to make a random as fuck comparison and see if you can edit it to make it work.

SERPENTINE = winding, twisty

When doing descriptive writing of any kind, it may be useful to imagine the scene in your head, with absolute detail and clarity, and then to describe it systematically, much like how Leonardo would describe paintings piece-by-piece.

STOLID = calm, reliable, impassive

FLINTY = (of a person/their expression) hard and unyielding—laser focused

A trait that sophisticated writers share is using simple words in unexpected ways, as well as exploiting little-known meanings (attends, idle, etc.). Learn *all* the definitions of words, and experiment with using simple words in novel contexts (*pedestrian*) being a good elementary example.

One criticism I would have is that sometimes he 1) makes words up by refactoring existing words and 2) sometimes uses meanings of current words in such obscure ways that you can’t see what he means even by looking him up. So, sure, it might be the perfect word for the moment, but

if people can't find out what it means easily then is it really doing its job? My ideal writing style would be a little more palatable than his in terms of lexical range.

QUIESCENT = inactive, at rest

ACID-WASHED = discoloured, faded appearance

BELABORING = argue in excessive detail / beat, hit

APERCU = a comment that makes an interesting or entertaining point

REEFER = a blunt

FURTIVE = secretive, surreptitious

COMMUNITARIAN = a social system around small communities

INSOUCIANT = nonchalant, indifferent

Federer Both Flesh and Not

Unbeknownst to many, Wallace was an avid amateur tennis player, and combines his quirky flair for writing with his youthful lust to the sport in this long essay about Roger Federer's brilliance on the court. I played tennis at a competitive level from the ages of 11-14, before Golf took over, and thus chose to breakdown this resonant piece.

Instead of just saying "moments when the jaw drops", he adds "sounds are made that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you're O.K.", a powerfully specific phrase that isn't often used to denote surprise, but makes complete sense once spelled out that way. Take-away: specificity is key, but also look for compelling specific examples from your own experience that are surprisingly underused.

When describing Fed's inside out forehand winner in the 2005 US Open final against Agassi, he uses one sentence that continues for about 100 words. Sustained use of commas and deliberately placed adjectives that becomes incrementally more emotive as the sentence meanders on create large amounts of suspense towards the end of the paragraph.

LARGESS = generosity, philanthropy

"overheated tropes" is a good phrase to describe something clichéd

Wallace makes frequent use of analogies. Not quite similes or metaphors, but direct analogies, and very thoughtful ones at that. He compares watching tennis on TV vs live to porn compared to human love. He compares the expression of beauty in sport to the expression of courage in war.

Like Yehong, Wallace doesn't use long sets of adjectives when a cultural reference/proper-noun will encapsulate that instead. He thusly describes Nadal's style as "Kabuki".

MESOMORPHIC = hunky build

Nadal did not "beat" or even "dismantle" Agassi. He "disemboweled" him.

The paragraph going "July 9's men's final, though...going to be a war" was a level of prose I'd seldom previously encountered. It was perhaps the single best-written paragraph I've ever read. Majesterial writing; really, I mean it. For starters, he writes as if he was speaking excitedly. Varying sentence length, powerful adjectives. But still pretty basic here.

Adds sophistication via quirky specificity, labelling linesmen as donning "new Ralph Lauren uniforms that look so much like children's navalwear".

He then describes the Federer-Nadal rivalry in several subtly different ways all playing on the same theme. Each comparison is specific, and weirdly, not clichéd at all--adding yet another kick to the prose. By way of example, I mean "king-versus-regicide dynamic", "the passionate machismo of southern Europe versus the intricate clinical artistry of the north" (that was particularly beautiful), "Apollo and Dionysus. Scalpel and cleaver. Righty and southpaw." At this point, he's made his case. We get it.

ANNEALED = heat then allow to cool, toughening a material

EXHORTATIONS = urges, encouragements, calls to action

TRANSFIGURE = transform into something better, elevate to a higher level

SPATTERY = scattered messily in drops/puddles

EVERTED = turn inside out/outwards (antonym of invert)

Wallace then plays on colour, describing Federer's coat as "buttermilk", reflecting his soothing, placed personality. Take-away, use specific colours that evoke a certain feeling upon being read.

ESCHEW = deliberately avoid using/abstain from

Wallace uses language that might only otherwise be used to describe a medieval joust or ancient gladiator fight, but to describe a tennis match. He never makes the comparison explicit, which only serves to make it all the more powerfully resonant.

When Wallace describes the "tic's" (idiosyncracies) of each player, he has a way of articulating it that I wouldn't quite be able to. When I read it--I know exactly what he's referring to, but I wouldn't have picked up on describing these subtle behavioural features in the first place. And even if I did, I'm not sure I'd be capable of articulating them as clearly as he did. This is a gentle reminder that writing well is not merely a question of having an extensive vocabulary, reading widely, and being specific. Much of the beauty we see captured in prose is beauty that was present in the authors mind. Writing was just the mechanism by which that beauty was captured on paper. You have to think beautifully to be able to write beautifully. Analysing great works is not enough.

The tip of the tongue, back of the neck, all of these are good places to emphasize emotive feelings.

COUP DE GRACE = death blow/final strike to end suffering mercifully

STODGY = dull and uninspired

DOGMA = principles asserted to be axiomatically, undeniably, true, by some authoratative power

ETIOLOGY = cause of something

METAPHYSICS = while this refers to knowing and being, it also refers to time and space

Wallace posits an interesting point when he explains how, for people like Federer, who are undeniably born with supernatural genetics that confer him with outlier reflexes and co-ordination, the tennis ball, even when moving at >100mph, to him seems like what, to us laypeople, would be a bowling-ball-sized-object.

Because of how his neurones fire action potentials sooner than ours after his eyes process the incoming serve, it's not an exaggeration to say that, for him, time seems to be moving slower. Because it literally does. So his level of tennis is, to him, pretty normal, because of this. Must be an interesting perspective to have.

NIGGARDLY = unfortunately named, but means stingy/miserly

Wallace takes time to draw out one of his central positions: that watching Federer is not religious because of just how magically he conjures shots that seem impossible, but because he's quite literally transfiguring the game. He has the baseline firepower that characterises modern tennis (due to modern rackets being lighter, with a larger sweet spot), but equally--the subtlety and finesse that would only be possible with rackets like those used half a century ago. It's not just that his game is unique or different. It's easy to be different. It's that he's different, and still the best. Because of him, junior tennis involves brute-force rallies, sure, but now also angled baseline shots, unexpected feints, drop shots as approaches, adding dimensionality to modern tennis that people thought had been lost forever. He has quite literally transcended the game, which is why he is, and always will be, legendary.

MULTIFORM = what it says on the tin; existing in many forms--except I haven't heard it put this way before.

RECONCILED = aside from its canonical use case, this word can be used to express the sentiment of feeling resigned, powerless, for example to one's fate.

EXULTATION = celebration, jubilance

LITHE = supple, agile

SHANKED = makeshift knife

RASP = (as a verb) scrape, file, rub

PROPRIOCEPTION = awareness of the position o the body in 3D

FLAGGED = tired, weary

PROGENITOR = ancestor, forefather

OCCULT = supernatural, paranormal

Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama

Consider the Lobster

