* [starred review]
Pinker, Steven.
_The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century._
Viking. Sept. 2014. 368p. illus. notes. ISBN 9780670025855. $27.95; ebk. ISBN 9780698170308 COMM

Psycholinguist and cognitive scientist Pinker ( _The Language Instinct_) explains up front that his work isn’t a traditional writing manual; rather, he says, it’s designed for those who seek to improve already sturdy writing skills. He advocates using classic style, and explains what that means thoroughly. Devised by literary scholars Francis-Noel Thomas and Mark Turner and intended for writers addressing a general audience, classic style is best accomplished by the writer imagining that she (the generic gender pronoun used by Pinker) is staging a scene. The language used must be straightforward and take logical steps from one idea to the next. Pinker also describes, in detail and often with great humor, what not to do. No legalese or professionalese, for example. Also to be avoided (though the author explains why it’s so difficult to do) is assuming that your readers know what you do—a phenomenon he refers to as “the curse of knowledge.” Pinker employs the straightforwardness he recommends, and all readers will come away with ways to make their writing more vivid and accessible. Readers looking to gain a greater benefit from the book can improve their skills by digesting his advice over time; the more ambitious will spend time with Pinker’s diagrams that parse sentences to ensure that writers learn never to create—a wonderful phrase—“garden paths” that lead their readers astray. -

VERDICT A thoughtful addition for writing instruction collections; the chapter on “The Curse of Knowledge” should be mandatory reading for everyone.—Henrietta Verma, Library Journal