

12 Gifts for Writers

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Introduction

I've been a professional editor for 20 years and a (paid!) writer for longer than that, and I've observed a few things over those years that many people would do well to know, so I have twelve little gifts for you. By "you" I mean anyone who writes. If you don't write, read it anyway. What the hell. You're here, aren't you?

These gifts are not *rules* – no no no no no. I don't care if you want rules. The only real rule in writing is **Write stuff your readers will be glad they've read.** (Well, there's also **Don't be a jerk**, but that's more of a rule of life.) Everything else is commentary. And so are these: insights, suggestions, ungentle nudges. But I think you'll be glad you read them.

So let's start...

1. You've outgrown your high school grammar rules.

Many people cling tightly to the advice they remember from their high school English teacher: the stern prescriptions and proscriptions, the *rules for writing*. Good grammar, bad grammar, how to structure an essay. Cross one of these directives and they'll say "But my high school English teacher taught me..."

There are two things I need to tell you about this, and I'm not going to be gentle because I'm damn tired of hearing this crap.

1. School teachers are not subject matter experts. They have their jobs because they have completed degrees in education, which means they know how to plan lessons, follow the curriculum, and generally keep a class moving through the system as it is supposed to. Your high school teachers probably knew more about their subjects than the average person, but don't take your biology teacher's word over your doctor's, don't argue with an engineer on the basis of what you recall from physics class, and don't assume that your English teacher knew more about good grammar and good writing than anyone else you will ever meet. Those stern and simple grammar rules you had drilled into you should be stuffed into your yearbook and hidden in a box in your closet. Time to pay attention instead to how the writers you actually enjoy reading do it!

2. School teaching is geared to children and adolescents. Why do I even need to say this! Kids tend to have bad writing habits, and you can't turn most of them into literary geniuses even with stern admonitions, so you just try to fix their worst habits. You give them training wheels. You get them to the introductory level with simple rules.

These are rules *you're supposed to outgrow*. Well, some of your teachers may think they're great rules for all times and places. But see point 1, right above. They're entry-level directions for simple-minded dirty smelly balls of hormones.

There's another thing about school, though, that you need to understand: **One of its main functions is socialization.** That includes teaching you to know your place in the social structure. Which means making sure you comply with authority, even when the authority's requests are arbitrary. Actually, *especially* when the authority's requests are arbitrary. That's how they demonstrate their authority and you show your compliance: by following orders that may not even make sense. Of course you also learn important facts about the world in school. But you're far more likely to get disciplined, suspended, or expelled for refusing to accept authority than you are for forgetting historical dates or mathematical equations.

Now here's the *really* bad news: **"Good grammar" is also mainly about maintaining a social order and enforcing compliance with authority.** Oh, did you think it was about clarity? Sorry. Here's a test: Say or write something that's "grammatical" but unclear, and say something that's clear but "ungrammatical," and see which one gets people more upset. (I put scare quotes on "grammatical" and "ungrammatical" because even "ungrammatical" things have grammar, it's just nonstandard.)

For instance, with no context, write "I shouldn't have eaten that thing he made." Your readers won't know what thing is or who "he" is but they probably won't scream at you. Now write "I shouldnt' of eaten that pie my cousen made." I bet your eye just twitches reading that, doesn't it? Your readers will be... unkind.

It's not about clarity. You understood it. It's about *following the rules* and not violating the *proper sense of order*. The desire for tidiness has a moral

colouring: untidy people are seen as bad, low-grade people. Transgressions of tidiness, for many people, invite social-dominance-based aggression.

I could go on about this, but I've written about it at length before. Here are some articles that amplify the points:

[Why all English speakers worry about slipping up](#)

[The ongoing demise of English](#)

[Does verbing impact the language?](#)

Does that mean you can just ignore grammar when you're writing? No, of course not; you want to write things your readers will be glad they've read, and if the writing is messy it's going to bother many of them. But good grammar won't guarantee that your story is interesting or your writing engaging. I'm sure you've read many perfectly "grammatical" things that were dull as ditchwater, and I don't doubt you've also read "ungrammatical" things that were quite exciting. (I'm put in mind of some love letters I received in my youth. They helped me understand how I had misplaced my priorities.)

I'll tell you this: In 20 years of editing, I have consistently observed that it's much easier to fix something with good structure and flow that has a few local mechanical errors than it is to fix something that's grammatically "perfect" but is boring or tiring to read.

Oh, and one more thing: **You're more likely to make an ugly error by trying too hard than by not trying hard enough.** Hypercorrection – overcorrecting something on the basis of a simplistic misapplication of a grammar rule – doesn't even have the natural feeling of a garden-variety error. It's stiff, unnatural, *and* wrong. And I see a lot of it in places where the

writers get stuck on trying too hard. A large percentage of them is journalists (see what I did there? *are* is really the word to use, not *is*, but journalists often get that one wrong because they stop and think about it).

2. You can't cast someone else's spell.

You may want to write as well as some famous successful author – or anyway, you may want to be as famous and successful as they are – but you can't write *the same* as they do, and the things that work for them won't necessarily work for you.

This is because... [a hush falls over the room; I lean in close to speak in confidence] ...*YOU'RE DIFFERENT PEOPLE!*

Many famous writers don't realize this either. They got successful by writing as they do with their own particularities. They have their habits and their personal rules and they aren't always so good at knowing which of those things made them good writers and which just made them feel less insecure.

So, for instance, Jonathan Franzen, who is a successful and generally respected novelist, recently came out with "10 Rules for Novelists." A few of them are pretty useful, but a few of them are... not. For example, one is "Never use the word *then* as a conjunction – we have *and* for this purpose." Jonathan. Jonathan, my man. Not only is that false – [here, I wrote about this years ago](#) – but it has *exactly nothing whatsoever at all at all* to do with the quality of your writing. I guarantee you that the success of Franzen's novels is unrelated to his avoidance of *then* as a conjunction.

Look. There are many people out there who are great cooks. Some of them have even published recipe books. Some of these books make a point of telling you, when a recipe calls for aluminum foil, which side of the aluminum foil to have which way. Here's a little secret for you: *It doesn't matter even the slightest little bit which side of the foil is up.* Foil has one shiny side and one dull side because, for economy, they roll two sheets at a

time, and the side towards the roller is shiny and the side towards the other sheet is not. But there's no difference in heat reflectivity or conductivity.

Here's another analogy. One time when I was younger, I was doing some community theatre, and for one rehearsal the director brought a guy in – I'll call him Walter – who must have been a community theatre luminary because there was a theatre in town named after him. What golden advice did he have for us? He spent most of his time hectoring the cast about what he considered the proper pronunciation of "palm" (a pronunciation that is not even phonemically valid in Canadian English, and he was Canadian), and he said that the best advice any director ever gave him was when one shouted at him "Stick your bum in, Walter!" Now, along with my 20 years as an editor and my MA in linguistics I have a BFA, MA, and PhD in theatre, and I can tell you with certainty that there is much greater advice for actors than "Stick your bum in!" In fact, I'll be telling you some of it in a few days, because it's also great advice for writers.

People who can do something well don't necessarily know *why* and *how* they do it well. Those who can do often can't teach.

There's also a lot of confirmation bias. For some reason, successful people who get up early like to insist that that is what made them successful: "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." This has two problems. First, there are and always have been many successful people who are night owls – they stay up late and get up late. Second, no one has made a study of how many people who get up early *aren't* successful, but go by your local coffee shop and ask the people working there at 7:30 AM when they got up and whether they would take a better job if they could get one.

All of the above notwithstanding, being able to do something well does increase the odds that your advice is worth listening to. Great figure skating

coaches can't all jump triples and quads, but in general they're pretty good skaters who would probably be even better if they had the bodies and natural aptitude of their star students. You do want some sense that the person who is giving you advice is qualified to give it. After all, there are many people who are not especially good writers *or* good editors *or* good writing coaches who nonetheless have lots of unsolicited advice for writers.

That leads me to the next gift.

3. Seek qualified advice.

If you're just writing in your journal for your own fulfillment and you don't care about anyone else's opinion of it, congratulations: You're in a happy place. On the other hand, if you want other people to read and enjoy your writing, you'll want to get some opinions on it.

Here's the problem: Your target audience may know whether they like something, but they may not know exactly why, or what you could do to make it more likeable.

We've already seen that people who are very good at writing don't necessarily know how to tell other people to be good at it. This is obviously even truer for the average reader. A further complicating factor is that being asked for advice puts people into a different frame of mind. If you give a person something to read and they know they're going to be asked for advice, they will read it with a forced-critical mindset that almost certainly won't give you useful information. If they read it just for fun and you ask them for their opinion after, you're giving them a pop quiz and they'll do what people do on pop quizzes: They'll bullshit.

What I'm saying is **Don't ask your friends**. Not unless you have good reason to believe your friends will be good sources of usable advice. Is your friend someone like Stephen King or Celeste Ng? Ask away if they don't mind, especially if you're writing in a similar vein. Is your friend someone who took a writing course once and has strong opinions on which books are good and which are bad? Hmmm, maybe don't ask.

Oh, and if you have a friend who dispenses unsolicited advice? Tells you how to write better when you didn't ask them? Corrects your grammar spontaneously? I'm not saying you should kill them and hide their body, but I *am* saying you should ask them for exactly as much advice as you would if

you *had* killed them and hid their body. In fact, avoid them. Why do you even spend time near them? Ugh.

So who do you ask?

Ask people who know, obviously. People with a good track record of helping writers write better and get their stuff published. (Be aware that “good” and “publishable” are separate questions. There are many enjoyable books that won’t find enough of a market to get picked up by a publisher – maybe the topic is crowded or too well covered, maybe it doesn’t fit into a promotable genre, maybe the target audience doesn’t buy books. And there are many dreadful and stupid articles that get published and sometimes the authors even get paid for them.)

Ask people whose advice is worth paying for. People who get paid for advice. Which means **people who will make you pay for their advice.**

Sorry! It’s true. Free advice is usually worth what you pay for it... or less. (If it makes your writing worse, it’s definitely worth less than no advice at all.) There are exceptions, of course, but the expert giving you advice will always be getting *something* out of giving it to you, even if it’s just a warm feeling of helping a friend. More often it’s self-promotion or similar business value.

In short, **hire an editor.** And don’t expect freebies. Editors make money from their skilled judgment, just as lawyers do. Do you expect free advice from a lawyer? One guy (this is a joke) stopped a lawyer on the street and said “What’s your rate for answering quick questions?” The lawyer said “Five hundred dollars for three questions.” The guy said, “That’s kind of a lot, isn’t it?” The lawyer said, “Yes, it is. What’s your third question?” Editors are kinder and cheaper but they earn their living similarly.

Don't just hire the first editor you've heard of, though. They don't all cover the same areas and they don't all have the same experience or charge the same rates. Ask around and make sure you get the right person. You can start by looking in the directories of [Editors Canada](#) and [ACES](#).

You can also **take a course** from someone who has a good track record of teaching people how to write better. This is a separate skill from editing! An editor can fix the text. A teacher has to fix the writer. Writers wriggle much more than text does.

4. Don't write from the heart. Write *for* the heart.

One time a medical editor friend told me about being introduced to someone who was “a writer.” My friend asked what kind of writing she did: technical, medical, magazine articles, fiction? She said, and my friend quoted, “I write from the heart.”

I put my hand over my mouth and said, “Oh nooooooooo.” My friend joined in.

I mean, I'm sure she has good feelings about it. But if you're writing for other people, it's not *your* heart that matters. It's *theirs*.

I have a BFA, MA, and PhD in theatre. I've directed plays, I've taught acting, I've judged acting competitions. And when I'm giving advice to a student actor, one of the first things I say is **Toy with your audience**.

Well, to be less concise, I say this: The audience doesn't want you to fail. They want you to succeed. They're hoping you will make them feel things, and they are eager to have you lead them on. It's not about what *you're* feeling, it's about what *they're* feeling. Toy with them. They *want* you to.¹

Why does this come into a writing tip? **Writing is a performance**. It's not live and unedited, but neither are movies. And the point of performance is

¹ *Some of you may be familiar with the Stanislavsky method of acting, which involves finding emotion-memories and truly feeling them. Please remember that the point of this method is to produce the most convincing portrayals of emotion so your audience will respond more strongly. If you're having your personal emoting moment up there on the stage but it's not doing anything for the audience, why are you even there? This isn't a therapy session. And from this it also follows that if you can make the audience feel things even without feeling them yourself, you have done your job as a performer. Oh, and if you're about to say “But Brecht”... go to my blog; I addressed it in the comments on this gift there.*

not the performer's experience. It's the audience's. I'm going to tell you this several times: **It's not about you, it's about your readers.**

"But I want to write from my heart to express my truth." SO WHAT! WHO CARES ABOUT YOU? The only reason your readers will care about you is if you mean something to them. And unless you *already* mean something to them (for example, if you're famous, or if you're their friend – remember, don't ask your friends for advice), the reason they'll care about you is that your writing resonates with them. You need to pluck your readers' heartstrings. They have to care about what you have to say. If you just want to write about the truth of what you feel, well, maybe it'll resonate with your readers, but maybe it won't. It comes down to whether any publisher and any reader will bet money that it will.

"This doesn't apply to me! I write nonfiction." NOPE. WRONG! PEOPLE NEED TO CARE ABOUT NONFICTION TOO. Listen: I spent *eighteen years* writing and editing health information articles. We're talking about articles on things like prescription drugs. Does that sound boring? Buddy, this is your *health*. This is your *life!* You'd better make people care about the right things!

Here, I'm going to tell you – for free – something from my lesson on communicating medical information. People pay me to tell them this, but today you get it as a gift:

Vivid is read as important. Some antibiotics have a possible side effect called "black hairy tongue." This sounds dreadful. It's actually that the little papillae on your tongue get longer, so they look like hair, and they turn black. It looks gross but it's not unduly harmful and it goes away. The odds of getting black hairy tongue are typically something under 1%. The odds of an untreated bacterial infection making you very sick for a very long time, and possibly

killing you, are much more than 1% in some cases. It is our responsibility, in communicating health information, to make sure that we present information clearly and engagingly in such a way that people will read it and will make accurate assessments. **Make statements vivid and memorable in proportion with their importance.** “Black hairy tongue” is very vivid. “Increased risk of mortality” is not very vivid. “Unpleasant changes in tongue appearance” is accurate without shocking anyone. “One in 20 people over age 65 will die from this infection if it’s not treated” may seem scary but it’s accurate.

Is what you’re writing important? Make your readers *feel* its importance. If it’s not important... why are you even writing it?

5. Professional writing is a group activity.

When you're being paid to write something, you're not the lone romantic protagonist doing everything yourself, expressing your true vision, et cetera, et cetera. You're writing a thing that other people are going to read, and you want to make sure that they'll be glad they've read it. I already told you this: **It's not about you, it's about your readers.**

If people are going to pay for your writing, it has to be worth paying for, and several people who know the business will help make sure it is. (Yes, yes, some publications have cut back their staff quite a bit, but even there it's not all about your personal vision and nothing else.) The professional publication process is a long string of professional advice. If you're writing a book, there may be a developmental editor helping you to get it all together; there will be a structural editor helping make sure your arrangement of the flow is solid; there will be a copyeditor making sure that the reading experience is not sloppy or annoying; there will be one or more proofreaders making sure that no last little mechanical errors have slipped in. If you're writing an article, you're writing it to a commission and a deadline and a target length – and you damn well better bring it in on topic, on length, and by deadline – and the commissioning editor has a say over what your topic is and the copyeditor makes sure it's suitable for the publication.

So you don't get to be the Lone Ranger. You get to be the Buddha: You have to **practice detachment**. Gladly see your shimmering prose altered or deleted. Learn to cooperate and not be a jerk to other people who are also trying to get the readers something they will be glad they've read. They all want to give the best results. They won't be right about everything, but neither will you. They cut something you really liked? That's fine – you liked it, and you read it, so it was read by someone who liked it. You'll write more

in the future that lots of people will like. Just keep going. You can produce millions of words in your lifetime; if some of them don't go, just write more.

Also, **take your turn when it's your turn**. Is the book or article with you awaiting your revisions? Get them back by deadline, or do you not want this thing to be published? This is work, you know, not a hobby. Is the book or article with someone else for editing? *Keep your damn hands off it*. Oh, you just thought of one more change you would like to make, and you're sure that they won't mind if you send this revision to them after they've already started their edits on it? *NO. NO NO NO NO NO!* You can make that revision when it's your turn again *and not before*. If I've done an hour or two or ten on your document, I don't want to have to redo all that work and I don't want to have to transfer in your changes.

I've worked with a lot of writers, and most of them have been pretty nice, but a few of them have been self-important and demanding. I have observed *no correlation* between how good the writing is and how difficult the writer is. While that does mean that you might be a great writer even if you're an asshole, it also means that the editors you're working with can get writing of equal or better quality from writers who *aren't* assholes. And they will. Remember the second rule of writing? **Don't be a jerk**.

Your name may be on the byline, but – I just said this four paragraphs ago – it's not about you. It's about your readers. They're not there for what you want, they're there for what *they* want, and you're a part of a team put together to make sure they get it. *And* you get the credit. So play nicely with others. It's not optional.

6. Good structure is made of desire.

You probably learned in high school how to structure an essay: “Say what you’re going to say, say it, then say you’ve said it.”

For high school students, this is a reasonable instruction. It helps them learn to organize their thoughts instead of just pouring their stream of consciousness onto the paper. It also makes essays easier to grade.

Just in case you missed gift one: **You’re not in high school anymore.** You can outgrow the high school rule. Your readers aren’t there to grade you. **They’re there because of desire.**

You need structure, of course. But the structure you need isn’t a stone castle, held in place by its own heaviness. **It’s a suspension bridge, held in place by tension:** the tension between desire and the obstacles to its fulfillment. And it doesn’t just let your readers walk in and stop; it gives them a route from one place to another and expects them to keep going from there.

When I was in grade 6, I had an idea for a movie about a guy who decided to break Guinness world records. My script started with the first record. He tried it, and he failed. And then he tried the second, and he failed. And then he tried the third, and he failed. And then... Anyway, after a page and a half I got bored and stopped. It would have been even *more* boring if he had succeeded in breaking every record without difficulty. Where’s the tension? Where’s the adventure?

When I say desire, I’m not talking just about the characters’ desires, either (though certainly them, if it’s fiction). I mean the readers’ desires. That’s who it’s for.

You noticed I said “If it’s fiction”? Yes, *if*. Nonfiction also needs desire and tension. It doesn’t matter how factual what you’re presenting is, if there is no desire and no tension between obstruction and fulfillment of that desire, it’s boring. And if it’s boring, you’ve failed to convey it.

This goes for all kinds of text. Even signs in washrooms. “Please wash your hands before returning to work”? The author (or the person or organization spoken for by the text, such as restaurant management) wants you (staff) to do something (maintain sanitary hands) and is afraid you won’t for some reason or other (you’re lazy; you don’t care). If they weren’t afraid, they wouldn’t bother telling you. But you also desire things (not to waste time or have gross wet hands), fear things (the grossness of the taps that all those other dirty people have touched), and face obstacles (got a job to do! time’s a-wasting!). If that sign in the washroom does its job well, it shows how fears and obstacles can be overcome and desires met, all in the service of doing what the author desires. Perhaps it suggests using a paper towel to turn off that gross dirty wet tap. Perhaps it points out that washing hands is the law and that dirty hands are gross and may cause infection and job loss.

Yes, most signs aren’t very effective. Please be aware that if you are writing signs, I will be disappointed in you if you don’t make them effective. If they’re not effective, they’re just eyesores and they waste perfectly fine words.

All good writing is an adventure. You start by presenting a topic or question that creates a need in readers: It makes them aware of an itch that you promise to scratch. But you don’t just methodically scratch it. Not if it’s more than 50 words long! In nonfiction longer than a washroom sign, there is a more detailed structure: a through line with ups and downs, playing out the tension in the course of reading. You must have peaks and setbacks to make it worthwhile. You show what looks like the clear way to the

resolution of the problem, but then... No! How about this thing! It builds up, creates tension, releases a little, creates more, releases a little more...

I told you this already: **Toy with your audience.** Everything good does. Listen to a symphony. The first movement of Beethoven's fifth is a clear example: It states a theme, develops it, plays with it, opposes it to another theme, builds up, partially resolves, builds up more, has an unexpected turn, works through that, resolves it, finally reaches a climax and summation. You need to do that in nonfiction too.

As a writer, you're doing it with words, and that's good, because **all words have emotional tones.** "Keep your hands free from soil" has a different tone than "Don't have dirty hands," and "What you're saying is inaccurate" has a different effect than "You're wrong." "Medication" is a more neutral and clinical-seeming term than "medicine" or "drug." Every word you write plucks on the heartstrings at least a little, and most of them pluck on several strings at a time. Get to know which strings each word plucks. One thing that will help you find out is that **words are known by the company they keep.** See what contexts a word is used in and what other words it's generally used with.

"But I'm dealing with facts, not feelings!" Oh, my dear, sweet, obtuse, obnoxious child. **You are always dealing with feelings.** People always have feelings about facts. If you get annoyed when someone doesn't see and accept the clear, obvious facts you are presenting, you're proving my point. You care about these facts because... you *care* about them.

But wait, there's more: **Our primary use of logic is for justifying things we desire.** I'm not going to give you a lengthy disquisition on psychology, but if you don't believe me, you can find plenty of lengthy disquisitions on psychology that support this. I'm not saying that logic is all just a mask for feeling, or that we never use logic to override our initial desires – heck, if

we desire to be logical, then logic itself *serves* that desire – but your plain, well-stated logic serves some real-world effect you desire, and it will hit a brick wall if does not serve what your readers desire.

So you have to frame things in terms of what your readers desire and fear. You don't have to be obvious about it, but you should at least be aware of what desires and fears are summoned by the words and images you use. There's a reason that some politicians talk about "family" this and "family" that so much even when they're busy harming a lot of families. There's a reason they frame so many things in terms of "safety" or "security." There's a reason racists can seem so remarkably concerned with hygiene.

You may think I'm telling you to be sneaky and manipulative. I'm not. I'm telling you to **be conscious**. Be aware of every note you're playing on readers' heartstrings; you're playing them whether you know it or not. And remember, as you lead them through ups and downs in your exposition of a factual topic, you're doing what they want you to. They're there because they want to be glad they've read what you've written, and one thing that makes them glad they've read it is a good experience of reading it.

Notwithstanding all of the foregoing, **don't waste your readers' time**. Obstacles have to be real obstacles, not bullshit. Readers don't care about what you want unless you've given them a reason to. And if your text is reference material, then the central desires are the reader's desire to find a fact and your desire for them to find the *right* fact, and the obstacles are what you present the fact as overcoming, *not* obstacles to their finding the fact in the first place.

Beyond all this, you still have to develop a sense of structure that's appropriate for the genre. Your readers are going to expect certain things to be in certain places, and if you don't do that you damn well better have a

good reason for it. So you need to get to know the rules of your genre by reflex.

Which leads to the next gift.

7. Read bad writing.

Of course, as a writer, you need to read a lot. But while you obviously should read a lot of exemplary writing, you should also read a lot of *bad* writing.

Now, in matters of taste, there is no such thing as good or bad. So what in hell do I mean? Three things:

1. Read writing that's just plain ineffective. You don't have to go out of your way to do this; you're surrounded by it. You just usually ignore it – which is how you can tell it's ineffective.

Official notices are sterling examples, because they usually use ridiculously stiff language. “Patrons are advised to abstain from the smoking of tobacco products and other products within 30 metres of the doorway.” Would you say that to someone in person? It uses indirect phrasing and adds extra words for apparent self-protection. If it said “Don't smoke or vape within 30 metres of the doorway,” would it be more effective? How about if you added “Please”? How about “Please be kind”?

Every time you see some text that you are inclined to ignore, or an article or blog entry that bores you immediately, take at least a moment to think about what makes it so ineffective and how it could be fixed. (Under no circumstances should you take out a marker and actually fix it. That's vandalism, which is not only illegal but also assholeish. And they're not paying you. Why do freebies?)

2. Read writing that other people like that you think is bad. It's fun and easy to shred books by Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*) and E.L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*), but millions of people have bought and enjoyed them. It's worth figuring out what things about them bother you – and other people –

and what things about them have made them successful. Read them and read other things that drive you nuts. Proceed on the basis that the people who enjoy them are actually decent, normal, intelligent people who are not in fact delusional barbarians. It may well be the case that the same stories could have been told even better, but the books tell them effectively enough to sell well. And that's the point of writing: **to produce an effect on the reader.**

To produce several effects, in fact, one of which is *to give you money*. Oh, stop kvetching about filthy lucre! If you're writing stuff that people are glad they've read, you deserve money.

So pick over those turkeys. Enjoy the parts you like. Chew over the parts you don't like. If it bugs you, why does it? And are you doing the same thing in your writing? Experience tells me that if there's something someone else does that annoys you, you probably do something like it yourself from time to time. It's not always true, but it's true uncomfortably often. Lap it up. If you're not learning from life, you suck at living.

3. Read writing that you like that other people think is bad. Here's the fun part. All those "genre" books that people sneer at? If you like them, enjoy them! Do you actually like Dan Brown and E.L. James? Congratulations! Life is always better when you like more things.

Some people just love picking at things and finding as many reasons as they can to hate them. The result of this little triumph of supposed superiority is being surrounded by things you hate. If you genuinely dislike something, very well; if you know why, even better; but if you also see things you like, that's better still. No one likes everything, but **the more things you find ways to like, the more things in your life that you like.** Contrary to popular belief (popular among adolescents and the more annoying kind of university students), finding things to like is not simple-minded; in fact, it

takes a much greater effort of the intellect to find positive detail in things you first disliked than it does to find negative detail in things you first liked. I've tried both, so I know: **nitpicking is as easy as farting, and about as endearing.**

If you happen to like a particular genre of writing, read as much of it as you want. This will support writers whose work you enjoy, and in the long run, one of those writers may be you. If you get to know a genre well and enjoy it well, you are more likely to be able to write it well. You won't be blundering into it trying things that have been done to death. You'll find new twists.

I guess not everyone knows this, but **a genre is a conversation.** Every story written in that genre is a new addition to that conversation: You said this? Well, how about this? Here's a twist on what you said, and here's a reference to what this other person said, and here's an answer to what that other person said. The more you've listened, the more interesting and engaged your contribution can be. If you just wander in without having paid much attention to the previous conversation, well... you'll be like that person who wanders into a conversation and makes points that have already been made and addressed.

This also applies to writing overall, since there aren't actually doorless walls between genres. The more you read, the more you see what other people have read, the more ideas you get, the more you can see what you like and what you don't, the more you know what to try and what to avoid.

The more you write, too...

8. Write whatever you want. Also write whatever you have to.

I'm sure you've heard that it takes 10,000 hours of doing something to become an expert at it. That's oversimplified, of course; some things take more time to master than others, and some people take more time to master things than others do. Some people practice a thing relentlessly for years and *still* suck at it. But as a general truism, the more you do something, the better you get at it.

There are several reasons for this. Here are three:

- **You develop good reflexes** for the thing and you can see a bigger picture of what you're doing – farther ahead, more details at a time, and more of the larger context it fits into.
- **You make all the stupid basic mistakes** and learn to avoid them most of the time. You make more interesting mistakes and learn even more each time you screw up.
- **You get bored, so you try new things.** Then you get bored with the new things you tried because you were bored, and you see details you had missed in what you were bored with at first. Then you get bored with some of those details and fiddle with them. Then you get bored with that... The longer you do it, the more you get past the stuff that people who are well experienced in your craft are bored with.

What's going to get you writing a lot? It really helps if you look forward to every chance you get to write. But everyone has to write from time to time, and everyone can build up writing skill by writing two kinds of things:

1. Whatever you want, no matter how weird and unpublishable and un-show-around-able it is. Even if it's for an audience of one, do it. Do you think

athletes only use their muscles in competition? If you think you'd enjoy writing something, do it. The important thing is that you need to enjoy the act of writing it. I've been telling you to focus on your readers, but do this for yourself. It pays off. And it's still about learning the craft so you can tickle your readers the right way.

2. Whatever you have to. Things you have to write for work. Papers for classes. Things you have committed to writing. Things other people are relying on getting from you. Desire is a great motivator, but so is fear. Even if you have a hard time getting around to writing what you really want (everyone's psychology is strange and complex, a fact you should take advantage of as a writer), you *have to* get around to writing what you're committed to writing, because there will be consequences if you don't. So promise. Pitch ideas, sign contracts, make commitments. This also forces you to focus on your reader.

These two things are not mutually exclusive. You may want to write a book but find that the only way you can motivate yourself enough to do it is to commit to publishing it live on your blog a chapter at a time. Some of us actually enjoy writing on assignment – you have an audience to please and toy with and you want to see how you can do it this time.

It also brings your writing into contact with other people. It's a conversation, remember? And it helps to have people around who can show you the way forward into new territory. I sang with a choir for fifteen years, and although I had taken voice lessons before then, my voice improved greatly over that time just by singing so many different things with good singers and a good conductor.

You also need to analyze what you do. I used to teach test prep for standardized tests (SAT, GRE, LSAT, GMAT). It was a general truism that you could improve your performance by about 10% with practice. But you

could improve your performance *more* if you looked at the results of your practice rounds and figured out why you made the mistakes you made.

With writing, what this all boils down to is that **you need to write a lot. A lot.** Write all the time. Write things for fun. Write things that you don't think anyone will ever want to read. Write things you think lots of people will want to read. Write so much that you really don't care if some part you liked gets deleted or reworded. Write until you build a mountain of writing, with each word or phrase as individually dispensable as a speck of dirt.

And every so often, **look back at stuff you wrote a while ago** – far enough back that you don't really remember it – and read it. You might really like some of it; take note of what and see how you can keep doing it. You will probably be embarrassed and annoyed by some of it; that will help you build a reflex to avoid doing the things that embarrass and annoy you.

9. You're probably wrong about how good your writing is.

Sit down. I'm going to tell you something I probably wouldn't tell you directly in person.

You're wrong about how good your writing is.

OK, you're *probably* wrong. A few of you are right, but damn few. I've been working with writers for a long time now, and I have observed two general truisms:

1. Writers who think they're great aren't. There are so few exceptions to this, the ones who actually are great are usually famous. Nearly everyone could be better, and if you're overconfident you get sloppy. If you think your writing is exactly perfect the way it flows from divine inspiration through your fingers to the page, you are just plain old wrong. Please see previous fact about writing being a team effort: other pairs of eyes will see things yours don't. Also please be aware that **perfect in writing doesn't exist**, because aesthetic qualities exist in the perception and the perceivers are messy burning balls of desire and fear, changing from moment to moment and varying wildly from perceiver to perceiver.

In fact, **"perfect" is the enemy**. It's an obstacle to effectiveness and efficiency. "Perfectionism" with other people's writing is dominance behaviour. That boss who is always saying you just need to change this and oh you just need to fix this and no that's no good you need to do it this way and why did you do that it has to be more like this? That's just boss behaviour, and by that I mean bossy behaviour, not leader behaviour. And "perfectionism" with your own writing is generally a symptom of anxiety and self-doubt. Which leads to the second truism...

2. Writers who agonize over every word and are sure it's all terrible are better than they let themselves believe. That doesn't mean it's necessarily amazing all the time, but it's usually better than the stuff put out by the people who think they're perfect. After all, these writers are concerned and conscientious enough to take the time to look over and reevaluate what they've written.

But "perfectionists" who agonize endlessly over their writing, revising it incessantly, are not really perfecting it. They're manifesting anxiety. As I said, perfect in writing doesn't exist. Sure, you can have better and worse, but there is no one perfect version; there is a nearly limitless set of more-or-less equally effective variations. I've worked with incessant revisers, and I've seen a good draft be revised by "perfectionism" to another equally good draft and then revised again to another equally good draft and then revised again to another equally good draft and... I've also seen a good draft be revised to a not-as-good draft. Sure, revise, because your first draft can almost always be improved (I revised this gift here that you're reading at least four times), but realize that you get to a point of diminishing returns.

If your writing can't be perfect, what should it be? **Effective.** Effective in what? In making readers glad they've read it. And in getting them to respond however you want them to respond.

The best approach is to reserve opinion about how good your writing is. **However good it is, you know it can probably be at least a little better, but however good it is, you're not going to make it perfect.** So set yourself a walking-away point. A deadline. Think of any piece of writing as like cooking for company: you're gonna have to serve it; you have guests waiting. Be a little creative, sure, but do things you know will work, and don't overcook it.

And don't forget: if you're doing it for money, you're part of a team. Don't waste your teammates' time and effort.

10. Do your own damn research, and do your own damn writing.

Writing involves facts and creation. You are expected to acquire the former and perform the latter; both are part of the job. The act of creation in writing is largely an act of selection, rearrangement, and re-presentation: showing a new way of seeing with not-new things. And don't forget that it's all a conversation – you're making references to other people's work as well as to well-known cultural elements (such as the twelve days of Christmas).

There are many things in the world that are matters of taste, impression, and opinion, but there are also many things that can be verified and that don't change depending on who's looking. These are what we like to call "facts." **Get your facts straight.** Get your dates right. Get your places right. Get your names right. I can't even start to count how many times a writer has gotten a name wrong – a name that the writer would have had *right there* on the screen or the page in front of them. Just look back at it! Look at it! Check it!

Holy cow. Editors are paid to check your facts, but this level of lassitude is like asking a waiter to cut your meat and wipe your chin. There was a time when you couldn't just double-check the spelling of a name or the date of an occurrence in a few seconds. That time is passed. Understand that while your editor may be paid by the hour (but also may not be), projects have budgets, and they are not for wasting fixing basic-level stuff like this. An editor who has to fix annoying little rat turds like this in your text may not have the focus or energy to fix less blatant things that could make the difference between OK text and truly sparkling prose. Copy quotes exactly correctly (the editor may not have the source readily available), copy names exactly correctly, double-check dates, and don't present things as facts that can easily be looked up and found to be false.

There are always facts. Unless you're writing fantasy fiction set in a world where every last detail is your own invention, right down to the kitchen utensils and the laws of physics, there will always be things you can get wrong if you don't bother checking, and there will always be readers who will spot those things. It's true that many genres of fiction have a fair amount of latitude for some kinds of things that don't match our known reality (faster-than-light travel is a noted example). Even in those genres, everything that's not deliberately different for the special reality of its world still has to work the way anyone who knows the thing in question expects it to. You can't caramelize onions in two minutes – unless you're literally a wizard. A piano that has been left in a barn for ten years will not be in tune – unless it's a key plot point that it somehow is. A press camera from the 1920s will not focus itself and cannot be used to take several exposures within a couple of seconds – not even in steampunk. Geeks will tear you to shreds if you get technical details wrong, and you will deserve it.

All of that obviously goes double – triple, quadruple, quintuple, etc. – if you're writing nonfiction. It's not just your responsibility to get the key facts you're writing about right, and to support your assertions with factual detail (though it's amazing how often people manage not to); it's your responsibility to get all the *incidental* facts you mention right too. Don't confuse Calicut with Calcutta (they're on opposite sides of India). Don't say most of the world's tone languages are in Asia (there are more in Africa). Be aware that a pound of feathers actually weighs more than a pound of gold (because gold is measured in troy, and a troy pound is lighter than an avoirdupois pound). Don't say Rio de Janeiro is due south of New York (it's two time zones farther east). Don't talk about the pistons in a Mazda RX-7 (it has a rotary engine). Don't put penguins at the north pole or polar bears at the south pole (doesn't everyone know this one by now?). Know which places are near each other and which aren't (no day trips from Aruba to Tahiti, OK?). Yes, editors can check this stuff, but you're supposed to be the

damn expert, or at least to have done your damn research. Don't waste other people's time.

But after you've done all that research, after you've made your notes and copied your quotes and so on, **add some value to it.** A bit of insight. Some well-turned phrases. An arrangement of facts that leads to things beyond what thirty seconds on Wikipedia will find. You are not a collage artist, and you are no longer a college student writing an essay for a boring required course. Large block quotes strung together are not an article, they're raw material. Give them to me and say they're an article and I will give you some raw eggs, flour, sugar, and water and tell you it's a cake.

And, buddy, let me tell you, **if you present something as your own writing, it had damn well better be your own writing.** It had damn well better not be someone else's words copied directly without attribution. It had damn well better not be someone else's writing changed just a little. Not even one sentence. You know that internet thingy that makes checking facts so easy? It also makes checking plagiarism easy. If you're ever tempted to pass off someone else's writing as your own, consider cutting off your hands instead. Either way you'll be finished as a writer, but at least if you maim yourself you'll still have your reputation.

11. Everyone's a writer.

Everybody writes. Did you just tweet something? Post on Facebook? Send a quick email? That's all writing. It's all using words. It's all flexing your lexical muscle. Does it seem too small to count? It still builds up habits and uses your skills. It still displays them, too.

My wife is a figure skater. She skated professionally for nearly a decade and has been coaching ever since. When we go to a public rink for open skating, she doesn't do jumps or spins (unless the rink is empty), but you can see her skill in every move she makes. She skates with more grace, poise, and fluidity – and less obvious effort – than anyone else in the rink, and she does it without even having to think about it. It is a pleasure even just to watch her skate forward. Likewise, good writers write well even in short notes. They feel the words in their blood and muscles. There is no writing that doesn't count. These are words, for heaven's sake!

But there's being a writer and being "a writer." I worked for a short time at a daily commuter newspaper, and it had a guest column open to unsolicited submissions. It didn't pay, so it didn't tend to draw people who made their living writing, but it did draw people who wished they *could* write for a living. Each column had a short bio of the person. We edited the bios, of course. The first thing we did nearly every time was delete "is a writer." As the editor-in-chief said, "Everyone's a writer."

Of course they didn't just mean they wrote, like everyone else does; that was trivially true. They wanted to be "a writer." Millions of people want to be "a writer." They want to have written great things. They want the glory, the sense of accomplishment, the validation of who they are: someone who is listened to (read) and admired.

The only thing is, most of them don't write much.

I once went to hear Terry Pratchett talk, and one thing he said that has stuck with me is “Most people don’t want to write. They want to *have written*.” In other words, they want to be “a writer” but they aren’t eager to sit down and do the actual work of researching, writing, revising, finding someone to read it, and so on. Sure, they write as much everyday stuff as anyone else does – emails, text messages, tweets, whatever – but they’ve got that *book* in them that just has to get out and when it does...

Sorry, you don’t have a book in you. Not unless you just ate one. You have *the ability to write a book*. In fact, you have the ability to write several. You also have the ability to sweep the floor, repaint the bathroom, take out the trash, go get the groceries... I mean, if you’re reasonably able-bodied, you have the ability to climb mountains, if you develop the fitness and techniques, but it sounds kind of silly to say you have a mountain in you, doesn’t it?

Maybe it doesn’t. Many people want to run a marathon, to be marathoners, so they may think they “have a marathon in them.” It’s a bucket-list accomplishment. But it’s also 26 miles 385 yards (42.195 kilometres) of running. Unless you’re an extremely unusual person, you can’t just get up one morning with no training and complete that. You’ll run out of energy and probably injure yourself before you finish. And if you do a short training course for it, you may finish it, but it will be a spectacularly unpleasant experience, may leave you injured, and will probably put you off running for life. On the other hand, if you start running shorter distances and shorter races and build up to it over the course of a couple of years, you will have something that is more thoroughly rewarding and lasting. The odds are that the marathon itself still won’t be all roses; the last 10 kilometres will probably be quite unpleasant, and you will be tired and sore for days after. But you will continue to enjoy running, and, weirdly, you will probably want to run another marathon. The same goes for writing a book,

which is a far more gruelling process than people usually suspect. If you've built up a habit of writing and you enjoy doing it, writing a book will still be hard work but you'll keep going. If you haven't, if you don't actually enjoy writing, I don't make much of your odds of finishing a book worth reading.

There's the big thing: **Do it because you want to do it.** I know that writing can be exhausting, and even some famous writers find it really takes a lot out of them. I have a friend who's a bestselling author; my wife and I were walking down the street with her one day and she said something that caused my wife to say, "Don't you like writing?" And my friend said, "Oh, no, I hate writing. I write because I have to." I'll take her word for it, but I can tell you that she's still writing, and she's over 80 now. So maybe she doesn't enjoy it, but she sure wants to do it.

It can be hard work, of course. But hard work can be enjoyable. You're figuring out a complex puzzle, and the pieces are words, and if you solve it, it unlocks a black box that is the reader's heart.

Above all, though some people may disagree with me, **if you don't want to write, don't.** Writing is an extremely crowded field. Even though many people who want to be "a writer" don't write much, there are still appallingly many people who *do* write a lot, and some of them are very good. Most of the very good ones will never get rich or famous from it. You, too, will almost certainly never get rich or famous from it. The only thing you can be sure of is that you'll enjoy doing it, and you can only be sure of that if you *do* enjoy doing it. So if you don't enjoy it, if there's nothing compelling you to do it, why in hell should you do it? Just stop. Go find something you enjoy doing and do that. You'll probably have better odds of becoming rich and famous at it too.

And if you're still itching to tell a story, find a way to enjoy doing it. Work up to it. Try different things. Blog it. Write it on posters and stick them up

around your neighbourhood. Carve it into your model airplanes. Make a map of it. If you can't be motivated to do the same thing millions of other people are doing, do something else, and feel glad that you found a way to do something new and fun.

12. You already have a voice.

Here, read this:

...Parking the car (smooth sleek shiny grey) in the heated, lit underground lot, though at least a good five-ten blocks away from my destination (I'd have to be lacking in intelligence to be parking it any closer: there are certain rules must abide by in these things), and out once again – though unprotected this time – into the night air (cold & misty) for a little bit of a walk: certainly conspicuous in this, as yer not likes to be finding much of too many anybody out on the streets this time of night (especially in this part of town) without a damn good reason: and if the Men in Pink happen to glance you, you will most certainly be inquired as to why wherefore where when what who you are doing out this time of night, which being the accurate nature of your business, and so on and so forth ad infinitum nauseum et cetera. Goes without saying this being my aim to avoid (perhaps one reason for choosing the darker shades in a suit for wear this eve?).

That bale of braided turds, my friends, is the start of a short story by a writer who's trying to find his voice. I wrote it when I was 18.

Lots of writers try really hard to “find their voice.” Lots of writers produce absolute rubbish trying to create an individual voice. A lot of “trying to find my voice” is also a stalling tactic motivated by fear of having to do the hard work of finding interesting things to write about and figuring out how to write about them effectively. I already told you: Many writers want to *be* “a writer” without actually *doing* the necessary detail work. “Finding my voice” for them means “looking for that one magic trick that will show the world I'm a genius so they'll make me famous and throw money at me.” But because this kind of “finding my voice” is rooted in avoiding doing actual

work, it typically ends up borrowing stuff from other people and doing it worse. It's like a seven-year-old trying on makeup.

You don't need to find your voice. **You already have a voice. You develop it by using it.** I sang with a very large, very good choir for years, and my singing voice improved *and* gained better character over that time. Also, my voice was good enough to get me into that choir because I had taken several years of singing lessons. Those lessons didn't corrupt it or make it less individual; they made it better to listen to. If you think raw talent is better than trained talent, come over to my place for dinner. I'll eat roast chicken with mashed potatoes, and I'll serve you raw chicken with raw potatoes.

Everything you want to do, you do better if you have better technique. You develop that technique by learning and doing. I already told you to read a lot and write a lot. I'm telling you again. It will express you individually because you're you and you're doing it. And anyway, your readers don't give a shit about your wonderful personality; they want to be glad they've read what you've written. Why are you writing? What effect are you trying to produce on your readers? What are you trying to get them to do? Focus on that. The more you do it, the more you'll do it your way.

But wait: there's more. **You don't have one voice.** You have several. Of course you do! Do you talk to a bartender in a busy bar the way you talk to your mother over dinner? Do you write business emails the same way you write on Twitter or Facebook? It's all writing! You know perfectly well how to write in different styles, with different word choices and different structures, for different audiences and different contexts. And the more you do it, the better you get at it.

You know how to tickle someone, right? You know which places are most likely to be ticklish and how to use your fingers on them, and if you don't succeed you vary the location or technique until you do. You're not thinking

“I have to have my own personal individual tickling style.” You’re just doing what it takes to tickle this person here and now. Writing is maybe a little more complex than that, but the essence is the same: focus on who’s going to be reading and what’s going to get the best response from them. You’ll do it your way because you’re you. If they need to know who’s tickling them, they’ll know.

Oh, one more thing. The difference between that unendurable drivel I wrote when I was 18 and what I write now isn’t just that I’ve written a lot and read a lot between then and now, and it’s not just that I’ve found what I’m better at and worked on what I’m worse at. It’s also that I’m 33 years older. Living life, and maturing emotionally, makes a huge difference. A couple of years after I wrote that story, I auditioned for one of my erstwhile drama teachers, who had taken on the artistic directorship of a theatre company. She told me “You need to live more.” It was true. And it’s true for writing as well as for acting, and it remains true no matter how much you’ve lived. So that’s my final suggestion for you, regardless of who you are: **Live more.**