BEST WRITING ADVICE QUOTES

Learn to write well, or not to write at all.  

--John Dryden and John Sheffield

Write while the heat is in you….The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled.  

--Henry David Thoreau

Never fall in love with your first draft.  

--Herb Williams

Formula: 2nd Draft = 1st Draft −10%.  

—Stephen King

The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.  

--Thomas Jefferson

Avoid using the word ‘very’ because it’s lazy. A man is not very tired, he is exhausted. Don’t use very sad, use morose.  

—John Keating, Dead Poet’s Society

I never write in (a) pokey way....I have to turn loose like the blowing wind. I’ve got to get going. I’ve got to roll. I can’t halt. When I get started, I’m like a flowing stream or a wind that blows over the meadow. I’ve got to move....  

I never hang up on a word....If I can’t find the word I want at that time, I just keep going. I’ll hang up when I revise. But I want to get the story down on paper first. I want to get the mood of the poem down. I can think about words later.  

--Jesse Stuart

I see but one rule: to be clear. If I am not clear, all my world crumbles to nothing.  

--Stendhal

Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light.  

--Joseph Pulitzer
If you want to refurbish your grammar, go to your local used-book store and find a copy of *Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition*—the same book most of us took home and dutifully covered with brown paper shopping-bags when we were sophomores and juniors in high school. You’ll be relieved and delighted, I think, to find that almost all you need is summarized on the front and back endpapers of the book.

—Stephen King

If you would be pungent, be brief; for it is with words as with sunbeams—the more they are condensed, the deeper they burn.

—Robert Southey

Don’t say you were a bit confused and sort of tired and a little depressed and somewhat annoyed. Be tired. Be confused. Be depressed. Be annoyed. Don’t hedge your prose with little timidities. Good writing is lean and confident.

--William Zinsser

If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second-greatest favor you can do them is to present them with copies of *The Elements of Style*. The first greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they’re happy.

--Dorothy Parker

Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

--William Strunk, Jr.

When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be done.

--Stephen King

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

--William Strunk, Jr.

& E. B. White
When you face writer’s block, just lower your standards and keep going.
—Sandra Tsing Loh

Ignore people who say you can’t do it, even if this person is yourself.
—Martha Reed

Hard writing makes easy reading.
—Wallace Stegner

Always carry a note-book. And I mean always. The short-term memory only retains information for three minutes; unless it is committed to paper you can lose an idea for ever.
—Will Self

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon… But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components.
—William K. Zinsser

Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite often you will discover, on examining the completed work, that there are serious flaws in the arrangement of the material, calling for transpositions....Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers.
—William Strunk, Jr. & E. B. White

Rejection is the norm. If you cannot accept rejection and still go on, it would be better to find another way to live.
—David C. Taylor

Why punctuation matters. Some people find inspiration in cooking their families and their dogs. Others find inspiration in cooking, their families, and their dogs.
—Unknown

—Mary Karr

Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
—Kurt Vonnegut
If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it. Only then will it have the sound of speech.

—John Steinbeck

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they’re doing it.

—Anne Lamott

The finest language is mostly made up of simple unimposing words.

--George Eliot

Above all, have a good time. If you aren’t enjoying writing it, you can hardly expect someone else to enjoy reading it.

--Tom Robbins

Get all of your ideas out of your head and on to paper. Once you have finished this bad first draft, you will really have written a very detailed outline. Now you can spend time rewriting and editing to make the bad outline into a good book.

--Phillip Margolin

You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.

--Ray Bradbury

I make a very tight outline of everything I write before I write it….By writing an outline you really are writing in a way, because you’re creating the structure of what you’re going to do. Once I really know what I’m going to write, I don’t find the actual writing takes all that long.

--Tom Wolfe

Everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.

—Sylvia Plath

The more you do it, whatever you do, the better you become at it. And if you love it, you become even better.

—Sergio Aragonés
None of us—not one person in this entire business—became successful without help.
—Ray Bradbury

I didn’t know anything about fatherhood or middle age, but I wrote poems about them anyway. And as I revised, I considered a possible twist to that old writer’s rule, to write what you know. Instead, I landed on: Write what you’re learning.
—Michael Henry

I do not revise as I write. I just go and go and go until I finish the draft. If I feel there’s something I need to take care of, I make a note on a pad and go back and fix it when I’m done.

--Stuart M. Kaminsky

On a wall calendar mark an X every day you get some writing done, gradually creating a chain of X’s. Your only job...is to not break the chain.

--Jerry Seinfeld

One of the bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re...ashamed of your short ones.

--Stephen King

You cannot correct your work well until you’ve forgotten it.

—Voltaire

I know how utterly I should have failed myself had my bread not been earned elsewhere while I was making my efforts. Get a steady job, and then in such leisure hours as may belong to you...persevere in your literary attempts. Should you fail, then your failure will not be fatal—and what better could you have done with the leisure hours had you not so failed? Such double toil, you will say is severe. Yes; but if you want this thing, you must submit to severe toil.

--Anthony Trollope

If you want to give up, then perhaps you should give up. The real writer doesn’t consider that an option.

--Marianne Williamson

To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.

--Joseph Chilton Pearce
Don’t let indolence, the forerunner of death take over. Enough has happened, enough people entered your life, to make stories, many stories, even a book. So let them onto the page and let them work out their destinies.

--Sylvia Plath

Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.

—Unknown

Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others.

--Virginia Woolf

Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.

--Anton Chekhov

A manuscript, like a fetus, is never improved by showing it to somebody before it is completed.

—Unknown

Write something every day.

--Roger Zelazny

Verbose writing creates comatose readers.

--Elyse Sommer

Planning to write is not writing. Outlining...researching, talking to people about what you’re doing, none of that is writing. Writing is writing.

--E. L. Doctorow

I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person, and write to that one.

--John Steinbeck

The true writer is not a talker; at least he doesn’t talk about his writing. Or shouldn’t. The blood runs out of his writing veins if he spills, orally, what he is doing, or sounds off about his problems.

--William Targ

A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.

—E. B. White
Misspelled words mar a page. They’re as noticeable and as unfortunate as a run in a pair of nylons or a fumble on the football field....When you take the trouble to write something, you do so because you feel it’s worth reading....But misspelling undermines your purpose....Good spelling, on the other hand, seems clear and easy to read. It’s good form. In short, good spelling communicates.

--Edna G. Furness

The simple declarative sentence is the soul of good writing.

--David Rosenbaum

Dante never went to hell. Shakespeare never went to ancient Rome. Writers have the right to exercise their imaginations in any area they think appropriate. I think possibly a book gains by its writer not having been through the experience, rather than the other way around. Experience itself doesn’t authenticate good writing.

--William Styron

That great principle of writing which Mark Twain enunciated so simply: Don’t say the old lady screamed—bring her on and let her scream.

--Winfield Townley Scott

‘I’ll never forget this idea’ is the devil’s whisper. Catch everything that matters in your notebook.

--Richard Bach

Don’t write about what you know—what you know may bore you, and thus bore your readers. Write about what interests you—and interests you deeply—and your readers will catch fire at your words.

--Valerie Sherwood

The beautiful part of writing is that you don’t have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon. You can always do it better, find the exact word, the apt phrase, the leaping simile.

--Robert Cormier

If the noun is good and the verb is strong, you almost never need an adjective.

--J. Anthony Lukas

Avoid depicting the hero’s state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero’s actions.

--Anton Chekhov
The best writing is rewriting.  
--E. B. White

I like a writer who uses adjectives sparingly; who uses action verbs to give his story the punch and power he wants it to have.  
--Murlin B. Spencer

Simplify, simplify, simplify.  
--Henry David Thoreau

Weak verbs are the lazy writer’s crutch and the reader’s despair.  
--William E. Unger

Write tight.  
--Helen Newton

Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you’re doomed.  
--Ray Bradbury

Be merciless on yourself. If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.  
--Kurt Vonnegut

What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.  
--Samuel Johnson

As to the adjective; when in doubt, strike it out.  
--Mark Twain

The writer’s only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one. He has a dream. It anguishes him so much he must get rid of it. He has no peace until then. Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written. If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is worth any number of old ladies.  
--William Faulkner

Writing is one of the few areas in life where ‘Do it right the first time or don’t do it at all’ doesn’t apply. If we tried to do it right the first time, most of us would never finish a sentence.  
--Ronald John Donovan
Writing is a solitary occupation. Family, friends and society are the natural enemies of a writer. He must be alone, uninterrupted and slightly savage if he is to sustain and complete an undertaking.

--Laurence Clark Powell

I think it’s bad to talk about one’s present work, for it spoils something at the root of the creative act. It discharges the tension.

--Norman Mailer

Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it is good, you’ll find out. If it’s not, throw it out the window.

--William Faulkner

‘Get black on white’ used to be Maupassant’s advice—that’s what I always do. I don’t give a hoot what the writing’s like, I write any sort of rubbish which will cover the main outline of the story, then I can begin to see it.

--Frank O'Connor

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
3. Never use the passive voice where you can use the active.
4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous.

--George Orwell

If your story has only suspense, it probably isn’t a very good story. But if it has no suspense, you don’t have a story at all.

--E. M. Forster

The wastebasket is the writer’s best friend.

--Thornton Wilder

Do one thing...imagine what you’re writing about. See it and live it. Don’t think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it.

--Ted Hughes

Just get it down on paper, and then we’ll see what to do with it.

--Maxwell Perkins
The idea is to get the pencil moving quickly. 

--Bernard Malamud

One doesn’t become a writer by thinking about being a writer; one becomes a writer by writing. It’s very easy for writers to feel that we’re collecting material by living in the world and relating to other people or that we’re learning our craft by reading other good writers. But basically you have to get down to the hard chore of writing.

--P. D. James

Mark Twain once said that the man who does not read good books has no advantage over the one who cannot read them...(I)f you want to write well, then you have to read good writers. If you confine yourself to mediocre writers, then that’s the style you’re going to assimilate.

--William Least Heat Moon

Don’t use a big vocabulary, either general or technical. SESQUIPEDALIANISM OBFUSCATES PELLUCIDITY. If you get my drift.

--David Viscott

You can be a writer without talent. But without the desire, every word you write will come hard and leaden. You won’t last.

--Art Spikol

Of all sad words of the writer’s pen, saddest are these, ‘I didn’t jot it when!’

--Laurence J. Peter

In order to write and to write well—especially poetry—it is better to hear your own language spoken every day—in grocery stores, in streetcars, in bed.

--Joseph Brodsky

Most beginning writers cannot go forward because they insist upon making every sentence clean before going on to the next. Somehow I learned to live with the chaos of a first draft.

--Mark Harris

The secret in writing detail is to become more observant. Look at your shoes. They are not merely shoes; they are dirty tennis sneakers, pumps, clogs, oxfords, sandals, or galoshes. The ring on your finger is a diamond, a turquoise, gold wedding band, or a five-and-dime special that turns your finger green. As you remember back, try to remember specifics instead of general terms.

--Janice T. Dixon and Dora D. Flack
When you write, don’t think about how smart you are; think about how smart the readers are. Write to communicate with readers, not to impress them.

--Gary Provost

I don’t see how it’s possible to attempt extended creative work with ink or ballpoint. Pen work is so laborious that it can give you a totally misleading notion of the amount of graft (work) you’ve done: that pile of ink-scrawl looks and feels a lot, but it’s often very little. With pen and pad you’re tempted to write crouched by the fire in an armchair, and slackness comes out in your prose. With a typewriter you have to sit upright and use both hands like a real manual worker—no nonsense about eating lunch with one hand while you scratch away with the other. Most important, the mere fact that you’re printing your work while you compose gives that work an objective, separated look: it’s not an effluvium from your body, a sort of heart’s blood too precious for the harsh world’s spilling; it’s something you’re making, like a chair, and, like a chair, it’s for somebody else’s use.

--Anthony Burgess

Some writers are self-centered to the point of failing their audiences. Their writing is so complex, so filled with ambiguity and obscurity, so turgid with hidden and private meanings, that most readers may reject the communication process altogether....The mature writer, on the other hand, masters the forms and techniques of whatever genre he is working in, so that his words will do what he intends them to do....Until the writer’s statement is understood, communication cannot begin.

--Thomas E. Sanders

Listen to yourself. If you want to write, write. You’ll hear discouraging voices urging you to do the sane thing and get a job. Sometimes the voice will come from within. Listen to that one and see if it’s stronger than the voice within that prompts you to write. You may have to do this many times, but a pattern will emerge. If you decide to write, kindly thank those who love you for their concern, tune out their advice (you don’t need to announce that you’re doing this) and write.

--Peggy Anderson

I took a number of stories by popular writers as well as others by Maupassant, O. Henry, Stevenson, etc., and studied them carefully. Modifying what I learned over the next few years, I began to sell.

--Louis L’Amour

You learn by writing short stories. Keep writing short stories. The money’s in novels, but writing short stories keeps your writing lean and pointed.

--Larry Niven
The first thing the young writer should do is to read everything, and read all the time. Poetry, philosophy, economics, Sears Roebuck catalogs, history, novels. Reading that’s good, bad, and indifferent, but infinitely varied.

He should also travel as far as his feet, his time, and his finances will carry him.

He should submit everything he sees, hears, reads, or believes to a most searching examination, as if his salvation depends upon it, as indeed it does.

He should write one book, again, good, bad, or indifferent, to prove to himself that he can fill 350 pages with a connected composition, that he has enough stamina to finish the course. The world is full of writers who have ‘not quite finished’ a book for twenty years.

Finally, he should set out to share, observe, and record the experience and the vision of this very wonderful world.

--Morris L. West

Any advice, ideas or suggestions about writing from people not in the creative world should be staunchly ignored and the damaging mental vibrations quelled with a good hot fudge sundae.

--Nancy Winslow Parker

Perhaps you have heard of the Scheherazade Syndrome: ‘If you bore me, you die.’ Authors have to defy that syndrome, an increasing pressure in a TV-consuming society.

--Brian W. Aldiss

I advise everyone who asks about the career of writing to get himself all the books he can carry before he buys a typewriter. Library cards are more important than pencils. Read everything, I say. Good books, bad books, hard books, easy books, underground books, popular books, square books, hip books—never stop reading and you will become a fortiori writer.

--Harry Golden

I read everything I write out loud before I do the final typing, because my ear is a lot better than my eye.

--John Sayles

The primary job of a writer is to be a good storyteller; tell it with humor, tell it with rousing fun and tell it with romance.

--Marilyn K. Dickerson
Writing is not a full-time occupation.  

--Ernest Hemingway

In my experience, novelists and others who complain of a mysterious disease called Writer’s Block should be treated with suspicion.

This inexplicable failure to write anything can be the result of two conditions—simple laziness or having nothing to say. Writers are sometimes encouraged to treat their laziness as if it were a rare and beautiful neurosis, proof of their artistic temperament if not of their genius. Only the sourest Philistine would deny that one has to be in the right mood to write creatively, they plead.

On the contrary, one needs only to develop a certain power of concentration and have something to say. These writers who, quite genuinely, have nothing to say, no perception to impart, would be better employed in some other occupation like selling hairbrushes or driving buses.

--Auberon Waugh

A regimen is absolutely crucial to a writer of fiction. Much of a writer’s inspiration derives from this: You write—and find you have something to say.

--Wright Morris

I always believed in hooking the reader as fast as possible and never letting him off the hook, the theory being that the minute you relax and let a reader get a little bored you may lose him.

--Ernest Lehman

One mark of an unsure writer is that he seems to tire quickly of the word say, and to feel that he must turn to a synonym: ‘I’m going for a walk,’ said Tom. ‘So am I,’ averred Dick. ‘You can come with me, then,’ rejoined Tom. ‘Okay,’ Dick stated. It isn’t always that the words are misused, but rather that they become conspicuous by their very variety, their needless variety.

--Theodore M. Bernstein

If you are a real writer you know that what you put down on the page isn’t sacred. You just keep throwing out what isn’t any good and keep writing. The point of writing isn’t self-therapy. You have what amounts to a contract with the reader, and the reader has the right to quit at any time.

--Charles Johnson
It makes good sense to have published a few things here and there in magazines just to have some credentials with which to approach a book publisher.

--John Barth

Try not to become so interested in fancy phrases and dramatic language that you begin to write...flowery passages so obviously artificial, insincere, and roundabout that they annoy the reader....

Euphemisms are part of flowery language. Today we call the undertaker a ‘mortician’... ‘a grief therapist.’ The former janitor or custodian is now ‘a disposal engineer!’

--William Folprecht

I type with my back to the window—always have. Can’t afford to be distracted all the time by looking out the window.

--Hal Borland

There are only two ways to learn to write—read, write.

--Mark Medoff

There is no subject so old that something new cannot be said about it.

—Dostoyevsky

You must keep sending work out; you must never let a manuscript do nothing but eat its head off in a drawer. You send that work out again and again, while you’re working on another one. If you have talent, you will receive some measure of success—but only if you persist.

--Isaac Asimov

Long sentences in a short composition are like large rooms in a little house.

—Shenstone

If I didn’t know the ending of a story, I wouldn’t begin. I always write my last line, my last paragraphs, my last page first.

--Katherine Anne Porter

A part of every successful writer is, and must be, amoral. Detached. Unfeeling. As nonjudgmental as a tape recorder or camera. It is this capacity to stare at pain or ugliness without flinching, at beauty without swooning, at flattery and truth without succumbing to the lure of either, which provides the mortar, the observable details, to strengthen a story and make it a cohesive unit. This capacity I call the writer’s eye.

--Randall Silvis
An absolutely necessary part of a writer’s equipment, almost as necessary as talent, is the ability to stand up under punishment, both the punishment the world hands out and the punishment he inflicts upon himself.

--Irwin Shaw

All you need is a room without any particular interruptions.

--John Dos Passos

It is by sitting down to write every morning that one becomes a writer. Those who do not do this remain amateurs.

--Gerald Brenan

Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on.

--John Steinbeck

Nice writing isn’t enough. It isn’t enough to have smooth and pretty language. You have to surprise the reader frequently, you can’t just be nice all the time. Provoke the reader. Astonish the reader. Writing that has no surprises is as bland as oatmeal. Surprise the reader with the unexpected verb or adjective. Use one startling adjective per page.

--Anne Bernays

If you can tell stories, create characters, devise incidents, and have sincerity and passion, it doesn’t matter a damn how you write.

--W. Somerset Maugham

I don’t see how anybody starts a novel without knowing how it’s going to end. I usually make detailed outlines: how many chapters it will be and so forth.

--John Barth

I don’t care to talk about a novel I’m doing because if I communicate the magic spell, even in an abbreviated form, it loses it’s force for me. Once you have talked, the act of communication has been made.

--Angus Wilson

When I feel difficulty coming on, I switch to another book I’m writing. When I get back to the problem, my unconscious has solved it.

--Isaac Asimov
Three hours a day will produce as much as a man ought to write.  
--Anthony Trollope

Create, artist! Do not talk!  
--Johann Wolfgang van Goethe

Write a novel if you must, but think of money as an unlikely accident. Get your reward out of writing it, and try to be content with that.  
--Pearl Buck

A really great novel is made with a knife and not a pen. A novelist must have the intestinal fortitude to cut out even the most brilliant passage so long as it doesn’t advance the story.  
--Frank Yerby

I believe the saddest news one has to give any young writer just setting out is that very few good writers are able to support themselves by their writing.  
--Peter Taylor

Writers who concentrate on pleasing all the time don’t have much ultimate impact. One of the functions of an author is to arouse.  
--William Styron

It is not of so much consequence what you say, as how you say it. Memorable sentences are memorable on account of some single irradiating word.  
--Alexander Smith

You learn to write the same way you learn to play golf. You do it, and keep doing it until you get it right. A lot of people think something mystical happens to you, that maybe the muse kisses you on the ear. But writing isn’t divinely inspired—it’s hard work.  
--Tom Clancy

Stop being lazy! Lazy in doing research! Lazy in your outlining of your piece! Lazy in your thinking! Lazy in your writing! Writing is work! Thinking is work! Writing means rewriting. There is a correct word to express a precise idea. Precision, precision, precision! Accuracy, accuracy, accuracy!  
--Gini Kopecky

Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing.  
--Robert Frost
I can’t emphasize too strongly the importance of being absolutely relentless about submissions. Once you’ve got a story to the point where you think it’s worth submitting, you must submit it and submit it and submit it until someone somewhere breaks down and buys it.

—Lawrence Block

If you write one story, it may be bad; if you write a hundred, you have the odds in your favor.

—Edgar Riche Burroughs

Proper words in proper places, make the true definition of a style.

—Jonathan Swift

Borrowed thoughts, like borrowed money, only show the poverty of the borrower.

—Lady Blessington

A great number of people just wait at the idea station and never board a creative train of thought. But all about them are thought starters. Obviously, these thought starters do not tell you in so many words, ‘Here is the beginning of an idea that if pursued further—often much further—will be a whale of an idea….’ Newspapers and magazines, not to mention your own observation along the street, give you hundreds of tidbits with which to start. Different minds see different possibilities....Ideas sparkle everywhere. Watch for them, particularly in your own mind.

—Robert P. Crawford

A safe rule is, the first wording is always the best.

—Dick Cavett

If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead, either write things worth reading or do things worth writing.

—Benjamin Franklin

Get used to the process of rejection. There are very few professional writers who have never had a rejection slip. Don’t let it bother you. All you have to do is sell your book to one person who’s in a position to buy it.

—Bill Pronzini

Writing is like crabgrass: You have to keep weeding it.

—Elyse Sommer
Cure for writer’s block: write anything—a shopping list, a letter to a friend—and before you know it, you’ll be back on a creative high.

--Elyse Sommer

Read.
Write.
Rewrite.
All three. Forever and ad nauseum. And then some more.

--Joe Gores

Don’t stop because you’ve hit a block. Finish the page, even if you write nothing but your own name. The block will break if you don’t give in to it. Remember, writing is a physical habit as well as whatever you want to think it is—calling, avocation, talent, genius, art.

--Isabelle Holland

If I were a plumber, I’d be out five days a week laying pipe and fixing drains. I’m a writer, so five days a week (sometimes seven or eight) I lay words down on paper and try to fix them into stories.

--Jean Brody

I needed to find my way to write. I need about six hours of uninterrupted time in order to produce about two hours of writing, and when I accepted that and found the way to do it—then I was able to write.

--Robert B. Parker

Writing = ass in chair.

--Oliver Stone

Writing should be like breathing. You don’t think about breathing, you just do it. I write every day, including all holidays and weekends—for at least two hours a day.

--William F. Nolan

Translate the stuff of headlines into fictionalized yarns. Any daily small-town newspaper in the US has the stuffings of at least one smashing bestseller buried in its pages.

--Catherine Breslin

Finish the thing before you start revising. If you’re working on chapter 3 and you discover that you have to go back and plant the butler in chapter 1, scribble a note to yourself and keep working on chapter 3. Otherwise, you run the risk of having 20 versions of Chapter 1—and nothing else at all.

--Marta Randall
How many good books suffer neglect through the inefficiency of their beginnings!

--Edgar Allan Poe

They’re fancy talkers about themselves, writers. If I had to give young writers advice, I would say don’t listen to writers talking about writing or themselves.

--Lillian Hellman

There is nothing more dangerous to the formation of a prose style than the endeavour to make it poetic.

--J. Middleton Murry

It’s an author’s primary duty to entertain. Sling out all the philosophical terms, but keep the reader turning the page.

--Susan Howatch

Writing is 1% illumination and 99% elimination.

--Louise Brooks

I write in the seclusion of my attic. I sit at a desk; I face the wall. If you sit facing the wall, the only way out is through the sentences.

--E. L. Doctorow

Where strictness of grammar does not weaken expression, it should be attended to in complaisance to the purists of New England. But where by small grammatical negligences the energy of an idea is condensed, or a word stands for a sentence, I hold grammatical rigor in contempt.

--Thomas Jefferson

When creative juices flow
Catch them with a pen
Cause if you don’t
You may find you can’t
Recapture them again.

--June Shanahan

Nighttime is really the best time to work. All the ideas are there to be yours because everyone else is asleep.

--Catherine O’Hara

To write well, express yourself like the common people, but think like a wise man.

—Aristotle
First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not . . . Habit is persistence in practice.

--Octavia E. Butler

One couldn't carry on life comfortably without a little blindness to the fact that everything has been said better than we can put it ourselves.

--George Eliot

I sometimes doubt that a writer should refine or improve his workroom by so much as a dictionary; one thing leads to another and the first thing you know he has a stuffed chair and is fast asleep in it.

--E. B. White

I would prefer a phrase that was easy and unaffected to a phrase that was grammatical.

--Somerset Maugham

The subjunctive mood is in its death throes, and the best thing to do is to put it out of its misery.

--Somerset Maugham

If you are in difficulties with a book, try the element of surprise: attack it at an hour when it isn’t expecting it.

--H. G. Wells

It’s not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them.

--T. S. Eliot

Unless one is a genius, it is best to aim at being intelligible.

--Anthony Hope

Hawkins

A trite word is an overused word which has lost its identity like an old coat in a second-hand shop. The familiar grows dull and we no longer see, hear, or taste it.

--Anaïs Nin

Good writing should be like a woman’s skirt: long enough to cover the subject but short enough to keep it interesting.

—Winston S. Churchill

Writing is learned by imitation. I learned to write mainly by reading writers who were doing the kind of writing I wanted to do.

--William Zinsser
What if our work isn’t good enough? We get rejections. Isn’t this the world’s telling us we shouldn’t bother to be writers? How can we know if we work now hard and develop ourselves we will be more than mediocre? Isn’t this the world’s revenge on us for sticking our neck out? We can never know until we’ve worked, written. We have no guarantee we’ll get a Writer’s Degree. Weren’t the mothers and businessmen right after all? Shouldn’t we have avoided these disquieting questions and taken steady jobs and secured a good future for the kiddies?

Not unless we want to be bitter all our lives. Not unless we want to feel wistfully: What a writer I might have been, if only. If only I’d had the guts to try and work and shoulder the insecurity all that trial and work implied.

--Sylvia Plath

Story: someone wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it.

--Frank Daniel

If you read your work out loud, it helps to know what’s bad.

--Garrison Keillor

The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.

--Linus Pauling

Writers, and particularly female writers, have to fight for the conditions they need to work.

--Doris Lessing

The first page sells the book. The last page sells the next book.

--Mickey Spillane

A preface, being the entrance of a book, should invite by its beauty.

—Disraeli

In my first draft, I never censor myself. I let everything in my head and heart spill out—raw—onto the page. I let it be a mess. I don’t worry about grammar or spelling. I just let the ideas flow until I run out of words. Then, in the second draft, I clean up spelling and grammar. I add whatever I forgot to include in the first draft and take out whatever isn’t working. In the third draft, I polish sentences and paragraphs for style. I always need a minimum of three drafts for a story or nonfiction work to approach finished form....My ratio of ‘throw away’ to ‘keep’ can go as high as 20 to 1.

--Charles Johnson
I always stop at a point where I know precisely what’s going to happen next. So I don’t have to crank up every day.

--Ernest Hemingway

The best work anyone ever writes is the work that is on the verge of embarrassing them. Always.

—Arthur Miller

I’m not really interested to write about a subject that’s deep and complex and intense without using comedy to some extent. Comedy is a huge, integral part of our lives. And it’s also something that makes us human. It’s too big to leave out. Comedy is not dessert. It’s not like, oh, let’s have a little comedy.

— Winnie Holzman

I have a pattern of falling into routines that seem to decline in their productivity over time. As a result, I have to revise my routines to maintain productivity. Changing my routines might mean writing at different times of day, shifting from morning to afternoon writing, or shifting the locations where I write. Of course, if you have a routine for writing that works, don’t fix what ain’t broke. But you may still want to experiment. Perhaps you’re not as productive as you think you are, or not as productive as you are capable of being.

—Nate Kreuter

If you’re waiting to make stuff because you lack the perfect pen or paper or subject or block of time...get over it. We all make crap every day. If we didn’t we’d die. Or at least be really cranky.

—Danny Gregory

If you stuff yourself full of poems, essays, plays, stories, novels, films, comic strips, magazines, music, you automatically explode every morning like Old Faithful. I have never had a dry spell in my life, mainly because I feed myself well, to the point of bursting. I wake early and hear my morning voices leaping around in my head like jumping beans. I get out of bed quickly, to trap them before they escape.

--Ray Bradbury

Stop mythologizing the life of a writer. Don’t wait for the muse to whisper in your ear. Don’t cultivate an affected personality. Put your butt in a chair and write. A writer is no different than a plumber, a landscaper or a dental hygienist. We are doing what we are called to do and what we are suited for. You don’t need to escape to a cabin and write in a parchment diary with a special pen. Sit at a Starbucks or at home or in the middle of traffic and just write.

--Jonathan Maberry
When you start to write, accept that you’re going to make mistakes. A lot of writers get blocked trying to perfect the work in their head. They want to avoid making a mess on the page, but you actually have to make a mess, that’s the genuine process.

--Eric Maisel

As against having beautiful workshops, studios, etc., one writes best in a cellar on a rainy day.

—Van Wyck Brooks

Never write for money. It’s a good idea to have a job on the side so that you’re not forced to compromise on your writing for the sake of money. If you have a job which is paying the bills, then you can be fearless.

--Mridu Khullar Relph

I love to hike alone with a specific question in mind, and the deal I make with myself is that I can’t go home until I figure out the answer. Inevitably, on these walks, the ideas flood in, and when they do, I take my phone out of my pocket, hit the voice memo button and ‘write’ the scene.

--Susan Henderson

When I’m asked how I make things seem real, I answer, ‘by appealing to the five senses.’...It is simple enough to appeal to the visual sense, but how often do we include a smell, a sound (other than in dialogue), something tactile or a taste?

--LaVyrle Spencer

While I rewrite heavily as I go along, this is a dangerous procedure for most beginning writers. I have met so many who have spent years rewriting, over and over again, their first 100 pages, so that they never reached page 101, and never will, and have never written a completed book and never will. It is much preferable to write a book through from start to finish, to do it all, and then go back and redo it or revise it, rather than regale one’s friends with an eternal work-in-progress.

--Irving Wallace

I would advise anyone who aspires to a writing career that before developing his talent he would be wise to develop a thick hide.

--Harper Lee

Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very’; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.

--Mark Twain
No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.

--Robert Frost

Cut out all these exclamation points. An exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke.

--F. Scott Fitzgerald

Make your novel readable. Make it easy to read, pleasant to read. This doesn’t mean flowery passages, ambitious flights of pyrotechnic verbiage; it means strong, simple, natural sentences.

--Laurence D’Orsay

If you tell the reader that Bull Beezley is a brutal-faced, loose-lipped bully with snake’s blood in his veins, the reader’s reaction me be, ‘Oh, yeah!’ But if you show the reader bull Beezley raking the bloodied flanks of his weary, sweat-encrusted pony, and flogging the tottering, red-eyed animal with a quirt, or have him booting in the protruding ribs of a starved mongrel and, boy, the reader believes!

--Fred East

You’re never going to tell an original story. The world is a very old place and all the stories that matter to people have been told over and over again—and if you want to write fiction, study myth [the archetypal stories], because those are the stories that have withstood the test of time.

--Suzy Spencer

If you don’t have a conflict or a challenge, you don’t have a story.

--Tom Kellner

Have people who can give you cold and honest feedback. You can’t get better in a vacuum. You need to have people read your work and not just tell you that they like it.

--Tanis Rideout

The hardest part about being a writer is that you don’t have to do it ever. You’re not going to a factory. There’s no time clock. Its’ just you and your computer, and you could walk away any time and make a peanut butter sandwich or 10. The best way to deal with that is to not have peanut butter in your home. The truth is the fundamental discipline that is just as important as any specific writing skill, [and that] is the discipline of sitting down and doing it. That’s where most people fail at becoming a professional writer.

--Dave Barry
If you don't have the time to read, you don't have the time or the tools to write.

--Stephen King

I've always been suspicious of those people who say they don't read when they're writing. I, on the other hand, have learned that it's really important to be reading as much as possible, to not be afraid of the influence of other writers. In fact, I'll have 10 or 12 books open on my desk and dip into them randomly for inspiration along the way....Reading other people’s work helps me as a writer by reminding me that there’s always someone better out there. I'll use an analogy. You know in basketball, the only way you get better is when you play against better players, and you have to up your game. So, if you’ve got Phillip Roth, Lorrie Moore, Hemingway and Kathryn Harrison on your desk with you, you’ve got to up your game.

--Sherman Alexie

It’s also critical that you not edit yourself as you go. If you do, you’ll likely never get past the first paragraph.

--Christina Hamlett
Pasadena

While it's important to write every day if possible, writers should also be flexible and roll with life’s punches. It’s true that if you have a set schedule, there’s more of a writing flow, but I think it’s necessary to write at other odd times during the day (or night) so that you don’t get boxed in by your schedule and can write no other time. Don’t restrict yourself to your own cozy writing corner. Be able to write on the go, on the back of napkins, late at night, on lunch breaks and days and weeks apart, if necessary. Train yourself to write anywhere and everywhere, so you’re not tied to a single muse.

--Eleanor Hyde

Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.

--Pablo Picasso

Being a good writer is 3% talent and 97% not being distracted by the internet.

—Ashi Labouisse

Handwriting allows you to set aside typed page count and concentrate on what’s important: words and story. Stephen King has reported writing Dreamcatcher with ‘the world’s finest word processor, a Waterman cartridge fountain pen.’ By slowing down, writers may write more scenes that matter with less conscious effort at style. And once you start writing longhand, you’ll be surprised how many words you can scribble.

—Michael Cahlin
In order to write, you have to read other people. That’s how you get inspired. Those writers are your teachers. You’re studying the mind of the author you’re reading.

--Natalie Goldberg

The Internet is like a beach with grains of sand. People won’t pick up the same grain that you will. Put your finger on something that has changed since the last time it was written about.

—Barry Newman

I want my prose to be as clear as a pane of glass.

—Tracy Kidder

As a beginning writer, you hear it over and over again. Rule number one: Write what you know....How, if I am supposed to write only what I know, is this possible? Easy. I have an imagination, possess a fair amount of empathy, have easy access to Google and like asking questions. If I were limited to writing what I know, I’d be in big trouble because the truth is, I don’t know all that much.

—Charles Salzberg

Guard your writing time like a dragon’s gold. My husband and I live in a one-bedroom apartment, and my studio doubles as our kitchen table. I made a tag that reads ‘Stay away from me, and stay way from my desk’...to hang over the back of the chair so that my husband knows not to start a conversation. When that hour is done, I take off my headphones and give him a hug so he knows I’m back in the ‘real world.’

—Libby Cudmore

I don’t believe in inspiration. I believe that you sit at your desk, and you push your pencil around, and you feel lousy about yourself for a while, and eventually, you just start writing. Everyone I know who’s lucky in this business is lucky because they’re working really hard, and then good stuff happens.

—Dinty W. Moore

I discovered what I’ve come to see as the one true rule of writing: When in doubt, add a dog....If you want to signal to the reader that the hour is late, or that you know the chapter is dragging, have the dog stretch and yawn. If you need to make things more exciting, let the dog stir up trouble. If you aim to tug readers’ heartstrings so hard that a few might break—and get your book on award lists and best-seller lists in the process—well, you’ve heard the advice ‘Kill your darlings,’ right? So kiss that pooch goodbye.

—Anica Mrose Rissi
In a good novel, the first five words make you forget you’re reading.
—John Gardner

Usually, when people get to the end of a chapter, they close the book and go to sleep. I deliberately write a book so when the reader gets to the end of the chapter, he or she must turn one more page.
—Sidney Sheldon

The only way...to learn to write short stories is to write them, and then to try to discover what you have done.
—Flannery O’Connor

Don’t use a big word when a singularly unloquacious and diminutive linguistic expression will satisfactorily accomplish the contemporary necessity.
—Internet Meme

It is possible to overuse the well-turned fragment...but frags can also work beautifully to streamline narration, create clear images, and create tension as well as to vary the prose-line. A series of grammatically proper sentences can stiffen that line, make it less pliable. Purists hate to hear that and will deny it to their dying breath, but it’s true. Language does not always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes. The object of fiction isn’t grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story.
—Stephen King

Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader—not the fact that it is raining, but the feeling of being rained upon.
—E. L. Doctorow

When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.
—Raymond Chandler

I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find fifty the next day...fifty the day after that...and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it’s—GASP!—too late.
—Stephen King

If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.
—Stephen King
Write a short story every week. It’s not possible to write 52 bad short stories in a row.

—Ray Bradbury

Now let’s talk about revising the work—how much and how many drafts? For me the answer has always been two drafts and a polish (with the advent of word-processing technology, my polishes have become closer to a third draft).

—Stephen King

One of the dumbest things you were ever taught was to write what you know, because what you know is usually dull. Remember when you first wanted to be a writer: Eight or 10 years old, reading about thin-lipped heroes flying over mysterious viny jungles toward untold wonders? That’s what you wanted to write about, about what you didn’t know. So. What mysterious time and place don’t we know?

—Ken Kesey

Writing is not like dancing or modeling; it’s not something where—if you missed it by age 19—you’re finished. It’s never too late. Your writing will only get better as you get older and wiser. If you write something beautiful and important, and the right person somehow discovers it, they will clear room for you on the bookshelves of the world—at any age. At least try.

—Elizabeth Gilbert

Write quickly and you will never write well; write well, and you will soon write quickly.

—Marcus Fabius

Quintilianus

You can always edit a bad page. You can’t edit a blank page.

—Jodi Picoult

Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched. Prefer the concrete word to the abstract. Prefer the single word to the circumlocution. Prefer the short word to the long. Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.

—Henry Fowler

Upon the one thing every writer absolutely must have, and that is intellectual curiosity.

—Philip Athans
...a writer should not so much write as embroider on paper; the work should be painstaking, laborious.

—Anton Chekhov

First drafts don’t have to be perfect. They just have to be written.

—Unknown

Question marks are shaped like hooks for a reason: they will hook the reader and drag them deeper into the story.

—Chuck Wendig

All writing is difficult. The most you can hope for is a day when it goes reasonably easily. Plumbers don’t get plumber’s block, and doctors don’t get doctor’s block; why should writers be the only profession that gives a special name to the difficulty of working, and then expects sympathy for it?

—Philip Pullman

I don’t get writer's block because I don’t believe in it. I believe you sit in front of the computer and force your fingers to get something on the screen.

—Janet Evanovich

There is a muse, but he’s not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station. He lives in the ground. He’s a basement guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all the grunt labor, in other words, while the muse sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you.

—Stephen King

When it comes to writing, clarity trumps all rules.

—C. E. McLean

Make time to write every day. The writing muscle is like any other muscle; the more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes.

—Judy Penz Sheluk

...and above all, you should not think of writing as a way of earning your living. If you do, your work will smell of your poverty. It will be colored by your weakness and be as thin as your hunger. There are other trades which you can take up: make boots, not books.

—Marquis de Sade
Aspiring novelists should be taught that the old adage, 'Write about what you know,' isn’t limited to what you have personally experienced. Vicarious experience is also a great part of what you know. Read a lot of history and it becomes part of your store of knowledge, part of what you’re prepared to write about. The same goes for stories and memories that other people share with you.

—James Carlos Blake

In fact, ‘talent’ is as common as mud; what’s rare is the motivation to sit down and actually do something with one’s talent, the discipline to do it regularly, and the persistence to stick with it until it’s finished.

—Patricia C. Wrede

I think the first duty of all art, including fiction of any kind, is to entertain. That is to say, to hold interest. No matter how worthy the message of something, if it’s dull, you’re just not communicating.

—Poul Anderson

The more time you can put between you and your manuscript, the more fresh your eyes become and the more mistakes you’ll catch. Let a chapter rest for a day, you’ll see ways to improve it. Let your completed book rest a month or more and you’ll see stuff that’s long or that you want to skip. Read it out loud to get rid of awkward phrases and listen to your critique partners if they are good.

—Dan Alatorre

...what makes the story so tired is the failure of the writer to reach for anything but the nearest cliche’. ‘Shouldered his way,’ ‘only to be met,’ ‘crashing into his face,’ ‘waging a lonely war,’ ‘corruption that is rife,’ ‘sending shock waves,’ ‘New York's finest,’ - these dreary phrases constitute writing at its most banal. We know just what to expect. No surprise awaits us in the form of an unusual word, an oblique look. We are in the hands of a hack, and we know it right away. We stop reading.

—William Zinsser

Beware, then, of the long word that’s no better than the short word: ‘assistance’ (help), ‘numerous’ (many), ‘facilitate’ (ease), ‘Individual’ (man or woman), ‘remainder’ (rest), ‘initial’ (first), ‘implement’ (do), ‘sufficient’ (enough), ‘attempt’ (try), ‘referred to as’ (called), and hundreds more. Beware of all the slippery new fad words: paradigm and parameter, prioritize and potentialize. They are all weeds that will smother what you write. Don’t dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don’t interface with anybody.

—William Zinsser

About clichés. Avoid them like the plague.

—Khaled Hosseini
When writing, I uncage KAT: Keep Adding Tension. Even if I don’t know where the story’s going, petting the KAT keeps it purring.

—Don Roff

Keystrokes are hammer taps. Get words on paper. Don’t worry about connections, character or plot. Work for an hour. Promise yourself an hour. Do nothing else but move your fingers. Make coarse shapes. Follow any emotion that pops up but never impose emotion, never fake it, and don’t make up your mind or your heart ahead of time. Understand you don’t know what you’re doing. That’s why you’re here. Rough it out. Anything goes. You can decide later what any piece of text looks like, what it might mean. Don’t stop. Don’t question. Don’t quit. Don’t stop to read what you wrote. Move your fingers. Your mind will have no other option but to keep up. Remember that writer’s block is merely the cold marble waiting for the chisel to heat up.

—Bob Thurber

Most writers sow adjectives almost unconsciously into the soil of their prose to make it more lush and pretty, and the sentences become longer and longer as they fill up with stately elms and frisky kittens and hard-bitten detectives and sleepy lagoons. This is adjective-by-habit - a habit you should get rid of. Not every oak has to be gnarled. The adjective that exists solely as a decoration is a self-indulgence for the writer and a burden for the reader.

—William Zinsser

Nouns and verbs are the guts of the language. Beware of covering up with adjectives and adverbs.

— A. B. Guthrie Jr.

Let the writer take up surgery or bricklaying if he is interested in technique. There is no mechanical way to get the writing done, no shortcut. The young writer would be a fool to follow a theory. Teach yourself by your own mistakes; people learn only by error. The good artist believes that nobody is good enough to give him advice. He has supreme vanity. No matter how much he admires the old writer, he wants to beat him.

—William Faulkner

Let grammar, punctuation, and spelling into your life! Even the most energetic and wonderful mess has to be turned into sentences.

—Terry Pratchett

Don’t get it right, get it written.

—Ally Carter
Don’t say it was delightful; make us say delightful when we’ve read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers ‘Please will you do the job for me?’

—C. S. Lewis

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place.

—William Strunk, Jr.
& E. B. White

Write with an imaginary machete strapped to your thigh. This is not wishy-washy, polite, drinking-tea-with-your-pinkie-sticking-out stuff. It’s who you want to be, your most powerful self. Write your books. Finish them. Then make them better. Find the way. No one will make this dream come true for you BUT YOU.

—Laini Taylor

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. ‘To be or not to be?’ asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long.

—Kurt Vonnegut

DECIDES. During my years of teaching graduate MFA candidates, this was the word that was the most overused. ‘I decided to go talk to her.’ ‘She decided it was time to…’ Don’t have someone ‘decide’ to do something. The decision is implied in the action. Skip the decision and go to the deed itself.

—Michelle Richmond

The first draft is the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, ‘Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?,’ you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grownup means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you’re supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go – but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

—Anne Lamott
When in doubt, make trouble for your character. Don’t let her stand on the edge of the pool, dipping her toe. Come up behind her and give her a good hard shove. That’s my advice to you now. Make trouble for your character. In life we try to avoid trouble. We chew on our choices endlessly. We go to shrinks, we talk to our friends. In fiction, this is deadly. Protagonists need to screw up, act impulsively, have enemies, get into TROUBLE.

—Jane Fitch

The only people who have time to write are in prison. The rest of us make time.

—Vanessa Martir

A page of Addison or of Irving will teach more of style than a whole manual of rules, whilst a story of Poe’s will impress upon the mind a more vivid notion of powerful and correct description and narration than will ten dry chapters of a bulky textbook.

—H. P. Lovecraft

The cutting of the gem has to be finished before you can see whether it shines.

—Leonard Cohen

Writing is hard for every last one of us... Coal mining is harder. Do you think miners stand around all day talking about how hard it is to mine for coal? They do not. They simply dig.

—Cheryl Strayed

Never use an adverb to modify the verb ‘said’... he admonished gravely. To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange. I have a character in one of my books tell how she used to write historical romances ‘full of rape and adverbs.’

—Elmore Leonard

Avoid detailed descriptions of characters....In Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’ what do the ‘American and the girl with him’ look like? ‘She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.’ That’s the only reference to a physical description in the story.

—Elmore Leonard

Don’t go into great detail describing places and things, unless you’re Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language. You don’t want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.

—Elmore Leonard
You most likely need a thesaurus, a rudimentary grammar book, and a grip on reality. This latter means: there's no free lunch. Writing is work. It's also gambling. You don't get a pension plan. Other people can help you a bit, but essentially you're on your own. Nobody is making you do this: you chose it, so don't whine.  
—Margaret Atwood

Do not place a photograph of your favourite author on your desk, especially if the author is one of the famous ones who committed suicide.
—Roddy Doyle

Do give the work a name as quickly as possible. Own it, and see it. Dickens knew *Bleak House* was going to be called *Bleak House* before he started writing it. The rest must have been easy.
—Roddy Doyle

Finish the day's writing when you still want to continue.
—Helen Dunmore

Increase your word power. Words are the raw material of our craft. The greater your vocabulary the more effective your writing. We who write in English are fortunate to have the richest and most versatile language in the world. Respect it.  
—P. D. James

Do keep a thesaurus, but in the shed at the back of the garden or behind the fridge, somewhere that demands travel or effort. Chances are the words that come into your head will do fine, e.g. ‘horse’, ‘ran’, ‘said’.
—Roddy Doyle

You can never read your own book with the innocent anticipation that comes with that first delicious page of a new book, because you wrote the thing. You've been backstage. You've seen how the rabbits were smuggled into the hat. Therefore ask a reading friend or two to look at it before you give it to anyone in the publishing business. This friend should not be someone with whom you have a romantic relationship, unless you want to break up.
—Margaret Atwood

Don't sit down in the middle of the woods. If you're lost in the plot or blocked, retrace your steps to where you went wrong. Then take the other road. And/or change the person. Change the tense. Change the opening page.
—Margaret Atwood
Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose. If you have the knack of playing with exclaimers the way Tom Wolfe does, you can throw them in by the handful.
―Elmore Leonard

My belief of book writing is much the same as my belief as to shoemaking. The man who will work the hardest at it, and will work with the most honest purpose, will work the best.
―Anthony Trollope

No art ever came out of not risking your neck.
―Eudora Welty

Writing is something you do alone. It’s a profession for introverts who want to tell you a story but don’t want to make eye contact while doing it.
―John Green

People say to write about what you know. I’m here to tell you, no one wants to read that, cos you don’t know anything. So write about something you don’t know. And don’t be scared, ever.
―Toni Morrison

10 Steps to Becoming a Better Writer

Write.
Write more.
Write even more.
Write even more than that.
Write when you don’t want to.
Write when you do.
Write when you have something to say.
Write when you don’t.
Write every day.
Keep writing.

―Brian Clark

You are going to feel like hell if you never write the stuff that is tugging on the sleeves in your heart--your stories, visions, memories, songs: your truth, your version of things, in your voice. That is really all you have to offer us, and it's why you were born.
―Anne Lamott
Don’t have every dialog go in a straight line to solve the problem. Let your characters argue, be sarcastic, disagree or joke around.

—Dan Alatorre

For every idea that’s been done to DEATH, there’s a child being BORN who hasn’t read it yet. Don’t kill your dragons.

—J. N. Race

Theoretically there’s no reason one should get [writer’s block], if one understands that writing, after all, is only writing, neither something one ought to feel deeply guilty about nor something one ought to be inordinately proud of.

—John Gardner

Keep working. Keep trying. Keep believing. You still might not make it, but at least you gave it your best shot. If you don’t have calluses on your soul, this isn’t for you. Take up knitting instead.

—David Eddings

An author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterwards.

--F. Scott Fitzgerald

If I had to give young writers advice, I’d say don’t listen to writers talking about writing.

--Lillian Hellman

I never write metropolis for seven cents because I can get the same price for city. I never write policeman because I can get the same money for cop.

--Mark Twain

The best thing I think a writer can do—a young would-be writer—is to learn to do something besides write, to get some experience in the world, something as romantic, perhaps, as the Peace Corps, or something as practical as being doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief. The American writer is an isolated man; he’s morally isolated from other Americans. He needs a sense of cause or responsibility to others. He’s caught in a life which, if he make a living by his writing, means that he doesn’t run in rush-hour traffic, he had no responsibility to staff. While he is undoubtedly doing something of importance, something socially useful, he has a sense of isolation. The result can become, as one novel follows the next, the hollow echo of words, not the resounding echo of life.

--Herbert Gold
Reality is only for people with no imagination.
—Gavin Freeman

The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof shit detector.
--Ernest Hemingway

No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.
--Samuel Johnson

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written: you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.
--Sydney Smith

In composition I do not think second thoughts are best.
—Lord Byron

If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut.
--Stephen King

The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book.
--Samuel Johnson

If you wish to be a writer, write.
—Epictetus

He that uses many words for the explaining of any subject, doth like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part in his own ink.
--John Ray

What comes from the heart goes to the heart.
--Samuel Taylor Coleridge

It is only by writing ill that you can attain to write well.
--Samuel Johnson

The more a man writes, the more he can write.
--William Hazlitt

Too much polishing weakens rather than improves a work.
--Pliny the Younger
No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.  

--Robert Frost

A man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it.  

--Samuel Johnson

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, then remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.  

--Ernest Hemingway

The main thing to remember in autobiography is not to let any damn modesty creep in to spoil the story.  

--Margery Allingham

The day you write to please everyone you no longer are in journalism. You are in show business.  

--Frank Miller, Jr.

There should be two main objectives in ordinary prose writing: to convey a message and to include in it nothing that will distract the reader's attention or check his habitual pace of reading—he should feel that he is seated at ease in a taxi, not riding a temperamental horse through traffic.  

--Robert Graves and Allan Hodge

If you would be a reader, read; if a writer, write.  

--Epictetus

Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self.  

--Cyril Connolly

You have to throw yourself away when you write.  

--Maxwell Perkins

As for my next book, I am going to hold myself from writing it till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear, pendant, gravid, asking to be cut or it will fall.  

--Virginia Woolf
You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That’s why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.

--Octavia E. Butler

The job of the novelist is to entertain....To entertain...you need more than clarity. You need eloquence. You need flair. You need the whole gamut of words and sentence structures—the involved and the complex as well as the bare bones simple.

--Melvin J. Grayson

A writer’s life is his crucible. First you draw on your own experience. When you have drained your own experience or have stopped experiencing in quantity, you must draw on the experience of others through observation and research. Research is vital.

--Paddy Chayefsky

What another would have done as well as you, do not do it. What another would have said as well as you, do not say it. What another would have written as well, do not write it. Be faithful to that which exists nowhere but in yourself—and thus make yourself indispensable.

--Andre Gide

The idea is to get the pencil moving quickly....To write a scene, work up feeling: ride in on it.

--Bernard Malamud

Be still when you have nothing to say; when genuine passion moves you, say what you’ve got to say, and say it hot.

--D. H. Lawrence

All this advice from senior writers to establish a discipline—always to get down a thousand words a day whatever one’s mood—I find an absurdly puritanical and impractical approach. Write, if you must, because you feel like writing, never because you feel you ought to write.

--John Fowles

I think it’s a pretty good rule not to tell what a thing is about until it’s finished. If you do you always seem to lose some of it. It never quite belongs to you so much again.

--F. Scott Fitzgerald
Advice to young readers who want to get ahead without any annoying delays: don't write about Man, write about a man.

--E. B. White

Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.

William Butler Yeats

You have to assume that the act of writing is the most important of all. If you start worrying about people's feelings then you get nowhere at all.

--Norman Mailer

Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them.

--John Ruskin

Never allow the integrity of your own way of seeing things and saying things to be swamped by the influence of a master, however great.

--George P. Lathrop

Write something to suit yourself and many people will like it; write something to suit everybody and scarcely anyone will care for it.

--Jesse Stuart

I would advise any writer trying to achieve success to ignore popular fashion as much as possible, and write what he or she really wants to write. Of course, it helps to remember that writing is an act of communication. The more accessible your work is, the more people will want to read it.

--Stephen King

No genuine piece of writing ever happens without the author’s total emotional belief and involvement in what he or she is writing about. It must germinate inside his own unconscious and consciousness and emotions if it is to be a truly fine book.

--Charlotte Zolotow

One may write from the outside of his mind, as it were; write and write, learnedly and eloquently, and make no impression; but when he speaks from real insight and conviction of his own, men are always glad to hear him, whether they agree with him or not. Get down to your real self...and let that speak. One's real self is always vital, and gives the impression of vitality.

--John Burroughs
Keep your hands from literary picking and stealing. But if you cannot refrain from this kind of stealth, abstain from murdering what you steal.

--Augustus Toplady

The ability to write simple, direct prose that says precisely what you want it to say in the fewest words has always been the mark of an educated person.

--Business Week

Give me a condor’s quill! Give me Vesuvius’ crater for an inkstand!...To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be that have tried it.

--Herman Melville

The best writing, both prose and poetry, as Shakespeare pre-eminently shows, makes use, with condensation and selection, of playful, impassioned, imaginative talk.

--Sidney Cox

It is much easier to sit at a desk and read plans for a billion gallons of water a day, and look at maps and photographs; but you will write a better article if you heave yourself out of a comfortable chair and go down in tunnel 3 and get soaked.

--Stuart Chase

Think of and look at your work as though it were done by your enemy. If you look at it to admire it you are lost...If we look at it to see where it is wrong, we shall see this and make it righter. If we look at it to see where it is right, we shall see this and shall not make it righter. We cannot see it both wrong and right at the same time.

--Samuel Butler

The mere act of reading aloud put his work before him in a new light and, by constraining his attention to every line, made him judge it more rigorously. I always intend to read, and generally do read, what I write aloud to some one; any one almost will do, but he should not be so clever that I am afraid of him. I feel weak places at once when I read aloud where I thought, as long as I read to myself only, that the passage was all right.

--Samuel Butler

It is the task not only of the actor but of the artist as well to find the sort of expression that will arouse in others what is going on in himself.

--George Herbert Mead

Less is more, in prose as in architecture.

--Donald Hall
Writing must be as immediate as life, or there are no juices, no chance to involve yourself or others in your vitality.  

--Ray Bradbury

I have often at the beginning of a book found myself very uncertain what I would do, and appalled at the difficulty of knowing what to put where, and how to develop my incidents. I never have that feeling now because I have always found that there is some one point or other in which I can see my way. I immediately set to work at that point and before I have done and settled it, I invariably find that there is another point which I can also see and settle, etc., etc....

--Samuel Butler

You writers, choose a subject that is within your powers, and ponder long what your shoulders can and cannot bear. He who makes every effort to select his theme aright will be at no loss for choice of words or lucid arrangement.

—Horace

Wherever you write is supposed to be a little bit of a refuge, a place where you can get away from the world. The more closed in you are, the more you're forced back on your own imagination.

--Stephen King

Just because people work for an institution they don’t have to write like one. Institutions can be warmed up. Administrators and executives can be turned into human beings. Information can be imparted clearly and without pompous verbosity.

--William Zinsser

When you are not practicing, remember, someone somewhere is practicing, and when you meet him he will win.

--Ed Macauley

If you’re not failing now and again, it’s a sign you’re playing it safe.

--Woody Allen

There is no justification for being a writer. You have to give yourself a reason to write every day. You have to say to yourself, ‘No matter what, I deserve to write for one more day.’

--Norman Mailer

There is only one trait that marks the writer. He is always watching.

--Morley Callaghan
Too much polishing and you spoil things. There’s a limit to the expressibility of ideas. You have a new thought, and interesting one. Then, as you try to perfect it, it ceases to be new and interesting, and loses the freshness with which it first occurred to you. You’re spoiling it.

--Leo Tolstoy

Write out of love, write out of instinct, write out of reason. But always for money.
—Louis Untermeyer

Enjoy good reviews for a day or so, but don’t believe them. If you do, you’re morally obliged to believe bad reviews, which is preposterous.

--Stephen Becker

We must labour to be beautiful.

--W. B. Yeats

Actually if a writer needs a dictionary he should not write. He should have read the dictionary at least three times from beginning to end and then loaned it to someone who needs it.

--Ernest Hemingway

Better far write twaddle or anything, anything, than nothing at all.

--Katherine Mansfield

If you can't annoy somebody with what you write, I think there's little point in writing.

--Kingsley Amis

Any writer overwhelmingly honest about pleasing himself is almost sure to please others.

--Marianne Moore

If you want to get rich from writing, write the sort of thing that’s read by persons who move their lips when they’re reading to themselves.

--Don Marquis

Grammar ‘rules’ are to be obeyed only when they contribute to the sense and rhythm of the prose....A well-split infinitive, produced for a purpose like honest cordwood, is much more effective than any number of sapless ‘correct’ sentences.

--Paul Darcy Boles

Ideas won’t keep: something must be done about them.

--Alfred North Whitehead
If you mean to be a writer, then decide what you want to write and write it. Talking about it, dreaming about it, will get you nowhere. It will probably take years for you to get the hang of it. It took me years. If you can find a working writer whose product you respect and who is willing and able to share some of his know-how with you, take his classes. But in the end it’s up to you. I’d say that in today’s tough publishing climate, you have to want to be a writer very, very much in order to succeed.

--Joseph Hansen

Though there are exceptions, as a rule, the good novelist does not worry primarily about linguistic brilliance—at least not brilliance of the showy, immediately obvious kind—but instead worries about telling his story in a moving way, making the reader laugh or cry or endure suspense, whatever it is that this particular story, told at its best, will incline the reader to do.

--John Gardner

The advice I would offer to any writer is that even when you think you have revised your book to the point where you cannot look at it again, it is time to sit down and revise it some more.

--Michael Korda

The editor must try to broker between what he senses happening in a culture at large and the mechanisms that exist for purveying what is happening. There is a fine line between responding to what the market demands and printing what the house feels the audience should have or needs. If you don’t supply demand, you’ll be out of business. But if you don’t create, you won’t be very alive. So you must have both.

--Jonathan Galassi

What matters is the honorableness of the craft. You should write your best no matter whatever or whoever you’re writing for.

--William Zinsser

All you can write about is what you know, but then you have to put your imagination to work.

--Harriet Doerr

There’s a story in every man. The challenge is to find it. Then the problem is to tell it without putting the customers to sleep.

--Jim Murray
I'll put a couple of characters together and see if they do something. If they just stand there and smile at each other, that doesn't work. So I get rid of one and bring in another that's a little more antagonistic or something.

--Carolyn Chute

Style is simply how you string your words together. It doesn't have to be unique; in fact, when it is it can get in the way: unique gets tiresome.

--Art Spikol

Writing is discipline. It is planting the seat of your pants—or your skirt—in a chair and hanging in there through all the pain and loneliness of creation.

--Sidney Sheldon

How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live!

--Henry David Thoreau

The ideas I stand for are not mine. I borrowed them from Socrates. I swiped them from Chesterfield. I stole them from Jesus. And I put them in a book. If you don't like their rules, whose would you use?

--Dale Carnegie

When a thing has been said and well said, have no scruple; take it and copy it. Give reference? Why should you? Either your readers know where you have taken the passage and the precaution is needless, or they do not know and you humiliate them.

--Anatole France

If you're going to write, don't pretend to write down. It's going to be the best you can do, and it's the fact that it's the best you can do that kills you.

--Dorothy Parker

Write down the thoughts of the moment. Those that come unsought for are commonly the most valuable.

--Francis Bacon

I always write the last chapters of my books before I write the beginning....It's always nice to know where you're going, is my theory.

--Truman Capote

If I don't know the ending of a story, I wouldn't begin.

--Katherine Anne Porter
I believe that we who presume to write for children have a number of obligations. The first is to write as well as we can. The second is to be honest. The third (and if we get by the first two it is here that we are truly measured) is that we hold out a vision of life that is both challenge and achievement. It does not matter if the vision is happy or tragic, witty or somber. What matters, and matters desperately, is that we proclaim that life is worth living, that the struggle we undertake together must be one that fulfills the promise of ourselves.

--Avi

Lives are sometimes saved by novels, but generally fiction doesn’t have that much effect. Nevertheless, when you’re a writer you have to pretend, believe that writing has an enormous effect. You have to convince yourself that every story you write is something wonderful.

--John Gardner

You’ve got to get an education from somewhere if you’re going to write. I don’t believe in unlettered, untutored writers. It seems to me literature springs from literature. But whether you have the formal degree or not; that’s empty as far as your writing goes. Your writing depends on the quality of the work—wherever it comes from. Have you ever heard of an unlettered, untutored writer who was a good writer? They might be good storytellers, and if what they say is taken down it might make what they call oral literature.

--Elizabeth Spencer

Swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any prejudgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress.

--Bill Stafford

I quit writing if I feel inspired, because I know I’m going to have to throw that away. Writing a novel is like building a wall brick by brick; only amateurs believe in inspiration.

--Frank Yerby

I keep poems for months at a time before I let them go. I rework them a lot. I wouldn’t want to give the impression that I dash off some poem a day. Even to change a line a day, that’s something. And I have kept poems for thirty years back.

--Robert Penn Warren

Never throw away anything you’ve written. Some time you can find a place for it.

--Joe Gores
Virtually every beginning poet hurts himself by an addiction to adjectives. Verbs are by far the most important things for poems—especially wonderful tough monosyllables like ‘gasp’ and ‘cry.’ Nouns are the next most important. Adjectives tend to be useless.

--Donald Hall

In order to write a novel you have to be terribly bossy. You have to be so convinced that the way you see things is right, that you can sit down and write a whole book out of that vision without even stopping to consider that there might be another point of view. And you have to tell all your characters what to do all the time. It’s do this, do that....You create these people, and then you push them around.

--Susan Cheever

When you’re writing novels you’re not in business to create propaganda. You’re showing patterns in people’s lives and the consequences of choosing one thing over another. It’s a way of raising people’s consciousnesses. And it has to be done truthfully or it doesn’t work.

--Marge Piercy

Every author has to have some Pavlovian dog trick, some little routine to set him off every day. Mine is, if I can get past page 20, I feel I’m on my way—either in a screenplay or a book.

I write all the time, and I think about it all the time, so when I come to the typewriter in the morning that’s just the time when I put it down. It’s too late to think about it then. This is not uncommon among writers who realize that they’re working out a thing when their conscious minds are otherwise occupied by mechanical tasks—shaving, driving a car.

--James K. Feibleman

You have to be clear on what your motives are and what you want to do in writing a novel: whether you want to make a living at it, whether you want to make a lot of money, or whether you really don't want to write at all but want to go to a psychiatrist or find a lover and the writing is a substitute. I wanted to make some money.

--Bari Wood

I blame myself for not often enough seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. Somewhere in his journals Dostoevsky remarks that a writer can begin anywhere, at the most commonplace thing, scratch around in it long enough, pry and dig away long enough, and, lo!, soon he will hit upon the marvelous.

--Saul Bellow
Writing is one art form that can be practiced almost anywhere at almost any time. Normally, you cannot paint in the office, or sculpture in the classroom or play the piano in a plane or the trumpet on a train. But, given some paper and a writing element, one can write in any of these places. What emerges will not always be a work of art; yet it could be.

--Theodore M. Bernstein

Good books, good painting and sculpture and graphics, good music, have all come from those studios at MacDowell and Yaddo. But other good work has also been produced at dining room tables or at basement desks or in the car parked at the suburban railroad station waiting for the 5:03 from New York or on the lid of the toilet seat. Stay home or go to a colony with its sometimes frustrating perfection. It really doesn’t matter as long as your vision is clear, your motivation strong, and you have something important to say.

--Doris Grumbach

Agatha Christie once described to me her own particular method of getting down to work...She would...repair to a very bad hotel. In a bad hotel, there was nothing to do but to write, and plenty of time to do it in. The beds were so uncomfortable that you had no inclination to retire early or to get up late...the meals were so bad that there was no temptation to linger over them....So the book would be done in a matter of weeks and you could pack up the few dull clothes which were all you need bother to take with you, and go off triumphantly home.

--Christianna Brand

You should never try to write anything you wouldn’t enjoy reading.

--Alison Lurie

The first requirement for writing at all: a belief that one has significant testimony nobody else can provide.

--Shirley Hazzard

It’s worth considering why some gifted writers have careers and others don’t. It doesn’t appear to be a matter of the talent itself....As far as I can tell, the decisive factor is durability. For the gifted writer, durability seems to be directly connected to how one deals with uncertainty, rejection, and disappointment, from within as well as without, and how effectively one incorporates them into the creative process itself, particularly in the prolonged first stage of a career.

--Ted Solotaroff

No one who cannot limit himself has ever been able to write.

--Nicolas Boileau
An outstanding writer is one who becomes, over time, a seasoned editor of his or her own material.

--Deborah Purcell

Before I was a writer, I was an actor and then a producer. What I learned in the theater is that if you don’t keep the audience interested, the show closes—theater without pacing is a bore. So I consistently sharpen, sharpen, sharpen. I mull over ten or fifteen pages at a time, and then I eliminate, eliminate, eliminate. You have to put yourself in the readers’ position.

--Robert Ludlum

What is style?...The art of clear, effective, and readable writing. The rhythm that makes a sentence sound right to the mental ear. The ruthless cutting out of phrases that only clutter and impede this special music. And always, always, the patient, painstaking search for the perfect combination of words and phrases that will create this mental music and express what is to be said in the most moving and effective way.

--Marjorie Holmes

You write as you write, in your time, as you see your world. One form is as good as another. There are a thousand ways to write, and each is as good as the other if it fits you, if you are any good.

--Lillian Hellman

As a novelist, it is a good part of my job to attempt to formulate, as dramatically and as precisely as I can, the pain and anguish that we all feel. Now more than ever, it seems to me, it becomes the writer’s job to remind people of their common humanity—of the fact, if you will, that they have souls.

--Saul Bellow

You should never try to write about anything too long after your experience of it. Little bits of yourself rub off in this kind of writing.

--Beryl Bainbridge

The novelist’s first exercise is to conjugate the verb ‘to see.’ The next is to conjugate ‘to feel.’ The next is to conjugate ‘to form.’

--Paul Horgan

The rule...for revision: keep going at a reasonable pace to the end, skipping the impossible; then start afresh until you have solved the true problems and removed the insoluble.

--Jacques Barzun
First I pick a locale, then I populate it with people, and then the people start messing each other up.

--Mary Ellin Barrett

Like anything else that happens on its own, the act of writing is beyond currency. Money is great stuff to have, but when it comes to the act of creation, the best thing is not to think of money too much. It constipates the whole process.

--Stephen King

It is the job of the writer to make the inarticulate intelligent.

--Ralph Ellison

The plays which have lasted are about people not in total accord with their time or with society—Oedipus, Macbeth, Hamlet. It is dangerous for society to have only writing that confirms our own optimistic view of ourselves and the world.

--Edward Albee

I hold that the writer has a duty, sink or swim, to be lucid. To be, when it is fitting, profound, subtle, allusive, sincere, startling, difficult, but to struggle with all his energy to be clear. Not concise, not correct, not simple, not single-stranded—but lucid, as lucid as possible. A lucid sentence may not convey the truth; there may, at a given point, be no expressible truth. But incoherence, confusion, obscurity, which do not yield to hard effort to grasp what is being said, are always the work of a charlatan, a self-deceiving humbug or a clumsy idiot.

--Storm Jameson

What writers sometimes forget is that it is their responsibility, with the help of conscientious editors, to observe what is logical and accepted in usage, not to make their own rules, arbitrarily, and reject, pompously, the editor’s efforts to maintain conformity as interference or ‘censorship.’

What editors sometimes forget is that their rules of accepted usage are not dicta arbitrarily proclaimed by dictionaries and style books, to be superficially imposed, but are drawn from the practices of good writers, past and present.

--Margaret Nicholson

My point to young writers is to socialize. Don’t just go up to a pine cabin all alone and brood and write. You reach that stage soon enough anyway.

--Truman Capote

It is not necessary to portray many characters. The centre of gravity should be in two persons; him and her.

--Anton Chekhov
In my opinion, a true description of Nature should be very brief and have a character of relevance. Commonplaces such as, ‘the setting sun bathing in the waves of the darkening sea, poured its purple gold, etc.’...one ought to abandon. In descriptions of nature one ought to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture....Nature becomes animated if you are not squeamish about employing comparisons of her phenomena with ordinary human activities.

--Anton Chekhov

Good writing must have a poetic faculty whether you write in prose or in verse. When those words come down on wings, they have the same kind of value no matter what form they wind up in.

--Katherine Anne Porter

If a writer’s style is really good, it will hang in the reader’s memory and continue to bring wonder to the mind.

--Sheridan Baker

A writer should like words the way some people like stones. He should like phrasing and syntax, and the very punctuation that keeps them straight. His interest in language should equal his interest in what he has to say, or he will never get the two together in any way he can call his own. He will never convince or delight, or get a second look.

--Sheridan Baker

A writer, thinking of himself rather than his reader, may have included material to impress the reader with the writer’s knowledge, ability, or diligence. He may even have written an entirely unnecessary paper just to produce another publication. To discard his own writing ruthlessly is the first lesson he must learn. A good writer fills his own wastebasket rather than his reader’s.

--H. J. Tichy

The art of writing true dramatic dialogue is an austere art, denying itself all license, grudging every sentence devoted to the mere machinery of the play, suppressing all jokes and epigrams severed from character, relying for fun and pathos on the fun and tears of life. From start to finish good dialogue is handmade, like good lace; clear, of fine texture, furthering with each thread the harmony and strength of a design to which all must be subordinated.

--John Galsworthy

In art, truth lies in surprising.

--Julian Green
We can only say about a thousandth of what we think and what we feel. We can’t get much of that on paper.

--Katherine Anne Porter

One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way. And, to be sure, the style makes the value of the prose.

--Jean-Paul Sartre

The work of a writer is only a kind of optical instrument he offers the reader in order to permit him to discern in himself something he might never have seen without this book.

--Marcel Proust

Only one thing is asked of the writer: that he tell his story as best he can, and having done so, curiously enough, get on with another.

--John le Carre

During the long, long haul of work on a full-length play there are periods when I am obliged to read what I’ve been writing to see how it is or isn’t shaping up. Almost invariably I am so disappointed or repulsed by what I read that I am unable, for a while, to continue work on it, to start a second, third, or fourth draft of the pachydermous project, and then, since I can’t just stop working, I divert myself with some shorter project, a story, a poem, or a less ponderous play. These diversions are undertaken simply as that, as diversions, and they nearly always have a quality in common, which is experimentation in content and in style, particularly in style. The fatigue I felt before this escapade is lifted. I find myself enjoying my work again. The inside weather changes; even the outside weather seems to get lighter and brighter, and I am easier to live with.

--Tennessee Williams

I polish most of my writing a great deal, writing many corrections on every page and then copying it over. In fact, I throw away many versions of every page before I am satisfied with it. I always read it at least once aloud to myself to be sure that the sentences are not too long or too choppy and that the rhythms sound right.

--Olivia Coolidge

No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in....That kind of symbol sticks out like—like raisins in raisin bread. Raisin bread is all right, but plain bread is better.

--Ernest Hemingway
People usually ask after my writing habits, thinking, I suppose, there must be some carefully kept secret that accounts for my prolific production. Actually there isn’t. I do all my own typing, but I type 70 words a minute and never slow down. The key characteristic is, I suppose, single-mindedness. I type every day, except when the typewriters are kept forcibly out of reach; I start early each day and continue typing till the number of typographical errors reaches an unacceptable concentration.

--Isaac Asimov

The conscious and unconscious levels in a novelist are often at war. A book is prepared in the unconscious, and it is important for a novelist not to betray that unconscious. If you do, the unconscious will not ‘prepare’ material for you, and you will face a writing block.

--Norman Mailer

The good writer makes a story by adding one part of his experience to another, fitting, adjusting, tinkering, building up, until a form emerges in which both the complexity of life and the transformation of the story are equally evident....He looks for the story that can emerge from the recombinations of experience that he constructs with words on paper.

--R. V. Cassill

The beauty or the curse of writing is that there is no formula for success, no government-tested right way. Mechanics have a manual to follow as they reassemble a transmission. Cooks have package directions that lead them from mix to cake. Writers will find neither packed with a typewriter.

--Thomas Clark

The hardest part about writing is sticking it out.

--Peggy Anderson

Listen to everyone. Then choose what is best for you.

--Lawrence Treat

No one put a gun to your head and ordered you to become a writer. One writes out of his own choice and must be prepared to take the rough spots along the road with a certain equanimity, though allowed some grinding of the teeth.

--Stanley Ellin

You must want to enough. Enough to take all the rejections, enough to pay the price in disappointment and discouragement while you are learning. Like any other artist you must learn your craft—then you can add all the genius you like.

--Phyllis Whitney
The complete novelist would come into the world with a catalog of qualities something like this: He would own the concentration of a Trappist monk, the organizational ability of a Prussian field marshal, the insight into human relations of a Viennese psychiatrist, the discipline of a man who prints the Lord’s Prayer on the head of a pin, the exquisite sense of timing of an Olympic gymnast and, by the way, a natural instinct and flair for exceptional use of language. Obviously, no man or woman has all of this. Yet unless he has some of it, dished out solely by the grace of the Lord, he cannot become a writer.

--Leon Uris

Dreaming and hoping won’t produce a piece of work; only writing, rewriting and re-re-wruting (if necessary)—a devoted translation of thoughts and dreams into words on paper—will result in an article, story or novel.

--Roberta Gellis

If you would be a writer, first be a reader. Only through the assimilation of ideas, thoughts and philosophies can one begin to focus his own ideas, thoughts and philosophies.

--Allen W. Eckert

Read a lot, finding out what kind of writing turns you on, in order to develop a criterion for your own writing. And then trust it—and yourself.

--Rosemary Daniell

Read at least one book a day. Study the memoirs of authors who interest you.

--Arthur C. Clarke

Compromise will be imposed from without. Therefore, avoid it from within. To please your readers don’t betray yourself.

--Flora Rheta Schreiber

Life is a short run—milk it. Write what you really want to write.

--Ralph G. Martin

Write to please yourself. As you do, you’ll reflect on your pages the thoughts and values of the people who share your own strange view of the world, and you’ll remind them that they’re not mad or alone.

--Richard Bach

Take the greatest possible unknown and say it in the simplest possible way.

--Rosemary Dantell
The reader has certain rights. He bought your story. Think of this as an implicit contract. He’s entitled to be entertained, instructed, amused; maybe all three. If he quits in the middle, or puts the book down feeling his time has been wasted, you’re in violation.

--Larry Niven

Tell the readers a story! Because without a story, you are merely using words to prove you can string them together in logical sentences.

--Anne McCaffrey

There is no reason why anybody should read a writer’s story unless he can capture his or her interest. A writer is competing with many varieties of entertainment, and the man or woman who buys his book has many alternatives—baseball, football, hockey, movies, TV, a drink at a bar, basketball, bowling, etc. A writer is not just competing with other writers, but with all the above. A writer has not just to write a story, he or she must write a better story.

--Louis L’Amour

Think of language as malleable, like clay—that you are simply shaping that clay to hold your meaning, whatever that may be.

--Rosemary Daniell

Don’t think and then write it down. Think on paper.

--Harry Kemelman

Study the writers’ magazines and pound hell out of the typewriter.

--Erle Stanley Gardner

If I had any advice to give, I’d take it myself.

--John Steinbeck

The new writer should observe, listen, look...and then write. Nothing begets better writing than the simple process of writing.

--Rod Serling

The beginning writer needs talent, application and aspirin. If he wants to write just to make money, he is not a writer.

--James Thurber

Beware of advice—even this.

--Carl Sandburg
As for style of writing, if one has anything to say, it drops from him simply and
directly, as a stone falls to the ground. There are no two ways about it, but down it
comes, and he may stick in the points and stops wherever he can get a chance.
--Henry David
Thoreau

Almost all advice is silly. No one knows what an individual author is doing, and
even he or she is not perfectly sure.
--Gregory Mcdonald

Above all else, you must be your own harshest critic, your own strictest editor, your
own most demanding taskmaster; if you are honest with yourself in these respects,
you will never please yourself entirely, but in continuing to try to do so, you cannot
help but please others.
--Edward R. Eckert

Until you can spot flaws in your material—and know how to repair them—and until
you really want to go through this process (as opposed to deeming yourself and your
work flawless), you may get money for your writing but you aren’t a writer.
--John Jakes

Books aren’t written, they’re rewritten....It is one of the hardest things to accept,
especially after the seventh rewrite hasn’t quite done it.
--Michael Crichton

Remember the word ‘irresistible.’ The writer confronts massive resistance from both
publisher and reader. Trap an editor from the title, from the first paragraph to the
very end. The same must be said of the reader. The writer must stop the editor from
rejecting the manuscript. The writer must prevent the reader from putting the book
down. The writer’s work must be irresistible.
--William X. Kienzle

You fail more than you succeed, even when your efforts get published and you get
paid.
--Larry Grobel

Don’t give up, because those who don’t like your work may very well be wrong. And
after you’re published, don’t pay any attention to the critics.
--Andrew Greeley

Be wary of people who want to rush in with advice. They usually want to maintain
the status quo.
--Ann Beattie
To be flattered by good criticism is corrupt and to be threatened by bad criticism is cowardly.

--Harry Mark Petrakis

A book title must grab the reader gently by the throat.

--Richard Peck

The publisher is the enemy. An enemy that one may work with fairly amicably on occasion, but an enemy nonetheless. It’s like a relationship between the US and Russia. A writer who faces that reality will never be surprised or disappointed by her publisher, or anything that publisher does.

--Bertrice Small

Treat it as a job—not a mystical calling. Then you’ll get up every morning and go ‘to work’ instead of waiting for the muse to attend you.

--Jean Brady

Once the writing begins, turn out a set number of completed pages a day. There is a compelling tendency to surrender to writer’s block. Setting a schedule and sticking to it helps prevent that.

--William X. Kienzle

Every writer must acknowledge and be able to handle the unalterable fact that he has, in effect, given himself a life sentence in solitary confinement. The ordinary world of work is closed to him—and that’s if he’s lucky!

--Peter Straub

Writing is difficult, often painful, and always lonely. As you learn to write better, writing becomes more difficult, more painful, and no less lonely.

--Betty Rollin

Preserve time each day for absolute quiet and privacy, whether you are writing or not. It is, after all, the inner life that alone nourishes the writer’s real sensibilities.

--Donald Spoto

Good fiction is people. And people are people you know. And the more you write about people you know, the more other people who read it recognize themselves or their problems or the way they feel about things.

--Theodore Sturgeon
Reporting on the extreme things as if they were the average things will start you on the art of fiction.

--F. Scott Fitzgerald

A playwright is a problem solver. I think of a character in a difficult situation, then try to figure out the events that led him to that point and how he’ll get out of trouble. The play writes itself from there.

--Milan Stitt

Normally I don’t pay attention to ages except for the books I write for beginning readers. For them I edit out complexities of style and if possible cut the vocabulary down. But for everyone else, I write the same for the 6-year-old and the adult. They both can comprehend anything if you give it to them in straight-ahead form.

--Dr. Seuss

Writers must be free not only to please but to displease. Isn’t that in the Constitution? We have to feel free to displease sometimes.

--Brian W. Aldiss

The more particular, the more specific you are, the more universal you are. These people who insist on writing cosmic novels about this woman who symbolizes fertility, who climbs up a mountain, slug, slug, slug, and marries a man who is all manhood and they have a baby who represents the principle of duty—they aren’t any good!

--Nancy Hale

I never talk about future projects. It’s bad luck and it dissipates your energy. Writing for me is like undoing a dream. And you never talk about a dream until it’s over and comes swimming out of your subconscious, do you?

--Robert Anderson

People are your plots then, only if you know them well enough and present them with problems they will have great difficulty in solving. As you take them through their struggle, you will generate conflict. This is good; it is what you must have, for without conflict, your story will simply not move. The most elaborate plot in the world is useless without the animation that conflict imparts to it.

--William C. Knott

Whatever you want to say, there is only one word that will express it, one verb to make it move, one adjective to qualify it. You must seek that word, that verb and that adjective, and never be satisfied with approximations, never resort to tricks, even clever ones, or to verbal pirouettes, to escape the difficulty.

--Guy de Maupassant
When I am considering poetry to publish, I don’t look for the well-made or the unwell-made poem, the cooked or the raw. The important thing is to speak with your own voice—the thing that is yours and nobody else’s.

--Howard Moss

When I ask myself what my materials are, it seems to me that I cannot exclude anything. I use the whole of my life. I use all that I have experienced and observed and been told of and thought about in solitude and read about in books. A very great deal of it has come from books. I am convinced that all of it, however acquired, enters in some subtle way into everything I write....When I am writing with all my power I have the resources of the whole of my life just behind the tip of my pencil.

--Richard McKenna

No matter how great...a writer's intellectual perception, its expression...will be worth little unless he perceives also through the emotions. Stark intellectuality is as unacceptable as stark sentimentality.

--Paul Horgan

The danger for a writer who does not insist on psychology in his treatment of character is that he will become a puppet master, manipulating more or less adroitly manufactured figures who are ultimately boring.

--Arthur Ganz

If you’re going to touch or tempt the world with what you write, you’d better make the ultimate effort, and in my prose writing I'll crawl on my elbows to get it right.

--Hortense Calisher

Your ability never reaches your hopes. You must be arrogant enough to think you can do it (write another book), and humble enough to do it.

--Hortense Calisher

Writing is the scrim through which the reader sees the story. If the writing is too fancy, or has patterns in it, there’s a conflict in the scrim. It disturbs the reader and he doesn’t see it clearly.

--James M. Cain

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and the sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.

--Ernest Hemingway
Originality in writing is largely a matter of doing better what other people have done badly or only fairly well. It often involves combinations of old elements in a new way. Something completely new, as the wheel was once, is rare—perhaps impossible now. Certainly you don’t write a play in a vacuum you pick up ideas from every play you read or see, every scrap of dialogue you overhear, every film, every radio or TV show; from every day at the office, every ride in a tram, meal with the family, class you teach, spadeful of earth you throw, truck you drive...

--Eunice Hanger

The best training for any novelist is to read and teach yourself to have a critical ability. Mostly, just read; and if you love novels, it’s just going to seep right into you. You must want to be a storyteller. If you’re not meant to be a novelist, you’ll find some other medium which will be much better for you. With so many types of writing, it’s a pity when young people think, ‘Oh, I must write a novel,’ when it might be much better for them to be a columnist or an essayist.

--Helen MacInnes

If you intend to write, get all the facts and then sit down and write it as near like poetry as you can without violating the record. Use your imagination. Let it pour, like hot iron, turn it on free-swinging, expansive, overwhelming, exultant, triumphant. That is, if you are to bring any fire and passion to a dull and drab world.

--James Daugherty

I am not, and must not be, aware of my audience when I write my books. I must be wholly subjective, conscious only of the particular limiting cage of form of the...book into which I must shape and compress my creation....I write only out of myself but also for myself.

--Meindert DeJong

It is no good looking for models. We want anti-models.

--John Berryman

One does not write for children. One writes so that children can understand. Which means writing as clearly, vividly, and truthfully as possible. Adults might put up with occasional lapses; children are far less tolerant. They must never be bored; not for an instant. Words must live for them; so must people. That is what really matters, and it entails believing entirely in what one writes and having a real urgency to convince the reader that it is absolutely, utterly true.

--Leon Garfield
Writing aims to communicate, but if it does not hold the attention, it fails of its purpose and might as well not have been written. Unfortunately, monotony often exerts its deadly effect without either the author or the reader having any awareness of the fault. Yet the fault is quite readily corrected, if only we are aware of it.

Monotony can take several forms. I would consider, primarily, monotony in regard to sentence length and sentence structure. While the length of the sentence obviously will vary, the effect of a sentence depends more on its structure than on the mere number of words that it contains....

To correct monotony of structure, the writer must first of all become aware that it exists. From a recently published text I selected a random page and jotted down the first word in each of the 26 sentences. Eighteen of these began with the word ‘the,’ two with ‘these,’ and three with ‘this.’ In the remaining three sentences the initial word was ‘although’ once, ‘in’ once, and ‘its’ once. The reader may increase his sensitivity to bad writing by the simple procedure of noting the initial words of sentences, comparing various authors one with the other.

--Dr. Lester S. King

One cannot stretch a rubber band beyond its determined length....Padding often tends toward diffusion.

--Stanley Richards

A good writer always works at the impossible.

--John Steinbeck

The contemporary novelist’s job is to take pieces of life and arrange them on paper. And the more direct their passage from street to paper, the more lifelike they should turn out....(The novelist) needs to make what is set down seem truly contemporary, to give the impression of things happening here and now, to force upon the reader a feeling of immediacy...the novelist must know how things happen—not how they are remembered in later years—and he must write them down that way.

--Dashiell Hammett

To be a writer is to sit down at one’s desk in the chill portion of every day, and to write; not waiting for a little jet of the blue flame of genius to start from the breastbone—just plain going at it, in pain and delight. To be a writer is to throw away a great deal, not to be satisfied, to type again, and then again, and once more, and over and over. It is to ring changes, not repeat, not fall into a dead center.

--John Hersey
To be a writer is to throw away a great deal, not to be satisfied, to type again, and then again, and once more, and over and over.  

--John Hersey

Two essential writing skills are involved (in technical writing): organizing one’s thoughts, then writing them into strong sentences. These skills can be applied in producing any kind of technical writing—memo, report, manual, proposal—and must be applied if the work is to excel.

--Hardy Hoover

I think that everyone who does not need to be a writer, who thinks he can do something else, ought to do something else.  

--Georges Simenon

Write without pay until somebody offers pay. If nobody offers within three years, the candidate may look upon this circumstance with the most implicit confidence as the sign that sawing wood is what he was intended for.

--Mark Twain

You can make yourself a more imaginative writer by being constantly analytical, critical and appreciative while reading.

--John Stahr

About the subject of outlines. They’re dangerous and perhaps useful. A first-rate stand-up comic who goes before an audience may know very well what he’s going to do in the five or ten minutes that he’s allotted. On the other hand, once he feels his audience sufficiently warmed up and responding in the way he wishes them to respond he will throw most of his prepared material to the winds and just ad lib—well, there’s no such real thing as ad libbing; he will go to other material, he will free-associate. The same is true of the novelist. Once you feel you’ve established the kind of rapport with your material, once you’re getting the note that you want, you’ve got to go along with whatever comes out of your typewriter. You just have to.

--Wallace Markfield

In the writing of every book or poem or play there are two crucial moments. One comes when the author puts down the first few words, and the other when he starts the last page. The tone of the concluding sentences is even more important than the beginning for it will surely help to determine his readers’ judgment of the whole, and sometimes these words are among those which remain most clearly in their memory.

--Gilbert Highet
I don’t believe you can write about anything, or in any fashion, even the fantastic, without drawing deeply on your own experience.

--Wallace Stegner

A writer must first of all have a working vocabulary. He must know the quality of words and their functions, methods of handling them, and their power or futility. He must know which words to avoid as well as the ones most suitable for his use, and he must have an artist’s taste and skill in arranging them.

--Norma R. Youngberg

The life of the writer is essentially lonely; he has to live among the interest and creations of his own mind, and therefore he has above all things, as a condition of his work, to accustom himself to loneliness.

--Gustave Flaubert

If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

--Elmore Leonard

A writer needs to know the strength of simple words, the effectiveness of few words, the power of the unsaid word.

--Norma R. Youngberg

The most frequent deficiency is the failure of the writer to organize his material logically. The editors of The Reader’s Digest have an expressive term for this fault; they say the article ‘doesn’t march.’ Instead, it hops from one phase of the subject to another and then, confusingly, back again to a previous sequence, and the transitions are bad or non-existent. As a result, the story doesn’t make much sense.

--Ben Hibbs

Anybody who has in him one sentence that can mean something to somebody else should write it down.

--Rod Steiger

A book that is worth writing, that you really care about, is only partly made. You may be able to make all the parts hold neatly and strongly together, as a carpenter does a good job on a box; but from the very beginning—perhaps even before you think of writing a story at all—the story must grow. An idea grows in your mind as a tree grows from a seed. The idea of the story is a seed, and it grows with the slowness of natural growth.

--Philippa Pearce
Do not write a novel unless your head is bursting with its birth pains. If your mind is crammed with a host of aggravating characters who find themselves in conflict either with each other or with you, the novel is ripe and you will not find relief until you get it on paper.

--Jesse Stuart

The first responsibility of the creative writer is to his language and to his technique, because only through these can the creative impulse itself find its realization. His second responsibility is to his own freedom to use his language as he must. He must be free to rebel, and in a profoundly basic sense every real writer is a rebel.

--Mark Schorer

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair—the sense that you can never completely put on the page what’s in your mind and heart. You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: you must not come lightly to the blank page. I’m not asking you to come reverently or unquestioningly; I’m not asking you to be politically correct or cast aside your sense of humor (please God you have one). This isn’t a popularity contest, it’s not the moral Olympics, and it’s not church. But it’s writing, damn it, not washing the car or putting on eyeliner.

—Stephen King

It seems to me that the novel can still be saved if the novelists want to save it. To do so, however, will require a certain humility upon the part of the writer. The first thing he must do is to acquire respect for his audience....The really great artists of the past were always able to adapt themselves to their audiences and create their masterpieces within the limitations set by the times.

--Cecil Hemley

Children have little patience with digression from the matters at hand. I have learned a lot about structure from the high expectations of an audience of children.

--Susan Shreve

Novels are being written these days with no plot, and except for a very talented person like Kafka, this can be very dangerous....the first duty of a novelist is to tell a story.

--Julian Symons

If the characters aren’t warm and vivid, nothing else will work. If they are, the story will take care of itself.

--Anton Myrer
If you want to be treated seriously as a writer, you’ve got to put something of yourself, some flavor of personal emotion, into what you write.

--Julian Symons

Respect your reader. The niftiest turn of phrase, the most elegant flight of rhetorical fancy, isn’t worth beans next to a clear thought clearly expressed.

--Jeff Greenfield

I’d rather fail by trying to do something new, something unheard of, than repeat myself for an entire career.

--James Dickey

The goal of writing is to keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has movement from breaking down and becoming a hole into which we sink decoratively to rest.

--William Carlos Williams

There are two basic tensions in biography. One occurs when you’re taking someone whom you don’t know, from a strange century or a strange place, and you’re trying to make him familiar and recognizable. You do that by putting the person in the context of the familiar, shared life we all know: the social life, the life of getting ahead in the world and making a living, and so on. So in one way you’re trying to make the person you’re writing about comprehensible in terms of your own experience. But on the other hand what you’re trying to do at the very same time is to make that person, especially if he or she is a highly creative person, seem unique, even mysterious and spooky. So you’ve got to manage these two challenges simultaneously.

--Justin Kaplan

I go my own way, do the best I can, writing mainly to please myself. But it is on the assumption that there is an audience out there somewhere, made up of people pretty much like myself, or at least of people who think and feel like me.

--Edward Abbey

Outlines are artificial, because you are saying that the story has to run a certain way. When you outline, your story is dead. Writers never know how their stories will end. There comes a moment of discovery, when you know how things are going to go.

--Andre Dubus
In nonfiction writing...you must go beyond merely describing what your subject or topic is—you must decide what your attitude toward it is, and further, what specifically you have to say about it that hasn’t already been said.

--Martin Russ

Writers are so interested in messages they’ve forgotten how to tell a story.

--Isaac Bashevis Singer

I would say that I like to have a certain amount of time alone every day. I don’t take any communication, no telephone calls. Just solitude. There’s a need. And solitude is not just because you’ve got a job on your hands. Solitude is blankness that makes accidents happen.

--Robert Penn Warren

Correspondence courses, writers’ schools, etc., are probably useful but all the authors I know were self-taught. There is no substitute for living.

--Arthur C. Clarke

All the characters one needs for a lifetime of novels are sitting quietly hunched over their beers waiting for someone to care enough about their lives to ask.

--Michael Jahn

Everybody has talent, if they dig away at it. I believe writers shouldn’t think of themselves as too important, or special. Obviously, there are geniuses, but most of us writers have got to look and listen very carefully and, with tremendous care, make our object.

--Nell Dunn

I am conscious of certain unwritten rules when I write for children. I think of a single story, not several as I tend to with adult books, a story whose events affect primarily the hero, just one hero. And as a result of these events, the hero changes. Grows up, really. This is not substantially different from the considerations I have in writing an adult book. I simply think of a book for children in terms of a single point of view and issue and resolution.

--Susan Shreve

I write five or six character ideas, and study four or five of the processes that combined to build a nation—religion, industry, cultural trends—and follow them through each era; then I weave the elements together as though I were making a basket. They say my books are educative, but that’s not my purpose. I’m just doing exactly what I want to do: to reveal the impact of people on history, and vice versa.

--James A. Michener
It is always a mistake to extract fictional ideas and attempt to turn them into a nonfiction statement. If I have to make a statement I would hope I would not have to write a novel to do it. In most good fiction, instructions on behavior are of the simplest kind: Try to be kind and try to be good.

--John Irving

In a conflict between style and grammar, style usually wins, and properly so. Grammar rules describe the normal, the expected. For the most part, you should try to write normally and acceptably. But if you need the unexpected for special effect—a forceful jolt to your readers, a sudden twist—break the usual patterns. The ‘mistake’ will call attention to the point you wish to emphasize; if it is deliberate and effective, it’s not a mistake at all.

--Jane Walpole

I always forget how important the empty days are, how important it may be sometimes not to expect to produce anything, even a few lines in a journal....The most valuable thing we can do for the psyche, occasionally, is to let it rest, wander, live in the changing light of a room, not try to be or do anything whatever.

--May Sarton

There's a great power in words, if you don't hitch too many of them together.

-- Josh Billings

You're supposed to look into other hearts to write....If you look only into your own heart, chances are that you'll write only one book.

--Leslie Epstein

If you were a carpenter, it would be no good making a chair, the seat of which was five feet up from the floor. It wouldn’t be what anyone wanted to sit on. It is no good saying that you think the chair looks handsome that way. If you want to write a book, study what sizes books are, and write within the limits of that size. If you want to write a certain type of short story for a certain type of magazine you have to make it the length, and it has to be the type of story, that is printed in that magazine. If you like to write for yourself only, that is a different matter—you can make it any length, and write it in any way you wish; but then you will probably have to be content with the pleasure alone of having written it. It’s no good starting out by thinking one is a heaven-born genius—some people are, but very few. No, one is a tradesman—a tradesman in a good honest trade. You must learn the technical skills, and then, within that trade, you can apply your own creative ideas; but you must submit to the discipline of form.

--Agatha Christie
Fortunately, Writer’s Block is almost always curable. Either by the passage of time, or by the informed efforts of the writer on his own, or both. Simple measures to get started again include retyping the last page, chapter, or whole manuscript: replotting from the viewpoint of another character; skipping ahead and dealing with the trouble spot later; or laying aside the narrative until the writer gains a new perspective on his material.

--Jean Backus

Opening oneself up to all experiences is the essence of writing. Tapping that deep feeling and not being afraid to say what you feel. For me, even a car accident and being stranded...is a subject for a poem....The opening of the mind to all experience is really finding the poet inside of you.

--Sandra Hockman

The story must come first. (Children) must want to turn the page. And as you tell them that good story, never be afraid that anything will be too hard for them, because nothing is.

--Madeleine L’Engle

Every writer wants to answer the questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? What is the world about? What sense can I make of everything? And I feel you begin to answer these questions when you write what you want to write. If you’re lucky, it also sells....You have to believe in what you’re writing.

--Anne Roiphe

I get up around nine and, after a glass of hot water mixed with herbs, try to work immediately while I’m still near to my dreams and intuitiveness, before I’ve had to think whether to put on a blue frock or a green, or go out and buy tomatoes. When I’m caught up in the spell of a story, I think it becomes my happiest time. I want to induce a trance-like situation, but very lucid. I write out loud. I say the words. Very often I’ll get up from the table because the telephone is ringing, and I can’t find it.

--Edna O’Brien

I refuse to write (a short story) unless it has a good strong plot. I also take so long to complete them because with the first draft I invariably find things have gone wrong everywhere and I need at least three weeks just to get the first page right. Hemingway taught me to keep rewriting. He said you just keep on doing it until it’s as near perfect as possible.

--Roald Dahl
A writer must be a strangely divided creature. First he works with blind enthusiasm—then casts a cold, cold eye on what the enthusiasm brought forth. The cold and critical eye is just as necessary and just as much a part of writing as the enthusiasm.

--R. V. Cassill

Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it.

--C. S. Lewis

In the expression ‘good writing’ or ‘good style’ the word ‘good’ has usually meant ‘beautiful’ or ‘proficient’—like a good Rembrandt or a good kind of soap. In our time it has come to mean honest as opposed to fake. Bad writing happens when the writer lies to himself, to others, or to both...Bad writing may be proficient; it may persuade us to buy a poor car or vote for an imbecile, but it is bad because it is tricky, false in its enthusiasm, and falsely motivated. It appeals to a part of us that wants to deceive itself.

--Donald Hall

The job of a writer is that of a gravedigger, to dig up what normal people have buried. People spend their time burying pain and love.

--Mary Hood

The ‘task’ of my novels is to give the reader a jolt which could lead to a recognition, to a judgment, a new attitude. Hence I try to make my prose as unobtrusive as possible, the language direct and easy, to facilitate the reader’s entry into the arena where the shock is to take place. The reader is to be moved from the waiting room into the examination room, so to speak. Once you are there, a shock: you are mortal, you’re vulnerable, you’re not protected—yet, you survive. It should be a joyful feeling, the awareness of being alive. At least you now have the knowledge—which is better than the assumption of strength—and the peace and promise of the ‘happy ending’—all, quite likely, not true.

--Jerzy Kosinski

If you write about the things and the people you know best, you discover your roots. Even if they are new roots, fresh roots...they are better than...no roots.

--Isaac Bashevis Singer
A writer is a person who writes. You don’t wait to write until you have something to write about. As long as you’re of normal intelligence and all your senses are functioning...you have all the material which you need. You don't think before you write. Writing is thinking because it’s the arrangement of words, and words are the only possible medium of thought.

--John Braine

You must never wait for inspiration before you write. It isn’t that inspiration doesn’t exist, but it comes only with writing. I’ve never met any writer who waited for inspiration.

--John Braine

I have never plotted anything on paper. I do my plotting in my head as I go along, and usually I do it wrong and have to do it all over again. I know there are writers who plot their stories in great detail before they begin to write them, but I am not one of that group. With me plots are not made; they grow. And if they refuse to grow, you throw the stuff away and start over again.

--Raymond Chandler

No writer who’s any good at all would sit down and put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and start typing a play unless he knew what he was writing about. But at the same time, writing has got to be an act of discovery. Finding out things about what one is writing about.

--Edward Albee

I realize how very old-fashioned I am as a dramatist to be so concerned with classic form but this does not embarrass me, since I feel that the absence of form is nearly always, if not always, as dissatisfying to an audience as it is to me.

--Tennessee Williams

I find if I put plain paper in the machine, all ready for the final copy, I’ll do it better than if I’m using yellow paper for a draft. You expect more of yourself then.

--Hal Borland

In a really good novel, the reader is seduced into having a dream—the novel’s story —more real than the room he’s reading in. The moment the writer accidentally makes the reader wake up—by some technique that too clearly calls attention to itself, or by some obvious lie (like oversimplified characterization), or by intrusive preachiness, the novel goes sour.

--John Gardner
If what I’m writing does not matter, deeply, to me, why should it matter to a reader?

--Michael J. Arlen

The novelist must become deeply involved in the lives of the characters of his or her novel. This involvement does not end during ‘off’ hours: his creations are inevitably with him twenty-four hours a day. They become an integral part of his or her life as long as the story is being written, and this involvement/identification begins well before the actual words are put onto paper and lasts well beyond the point at which the actual writing is finished.

--Howard Greenfield

I just let something simmer for a while in my mind before trying to put it into words. I walk around straightening pictures on the wall, rugs on the floor until I’m ready. Delay is natural to a writer. He’s like a surfer. He bides his time, waiting for the perfect wave on which to ride in.

—E. B. White

I threw the thesaurus out years ago. I found that every time you look up a word, if you want some word and you can think of an approximately close synonym of it and look it up, you only get cliché usages. It’s much better to use a big dictionary and look up derivations and definitions of various usages of a different word.

--James Jones

Writing for children does not always, or even usually, require the author to take a child’s-eye view. The mark of the tenth-rate story for children is often a creaking attempt to get down to child level, like an uncle on hands and knees playing games on the carpet. It is ineffectual and undignified. Children, on the whole, prefer adults to behave as adults, and to talk to them as adults talk. Yet the story of family life, which can be weighed by the child against his own experience in a way that the fairy tale or adventure story cannot, does require of its author a lively sense of what it is like to be a child in a family.

--Eleanor Estes

Tell your story as succinctly as you can, then cut it by a third. If you think it cannot be done, take a novel you enjoyed and compare it page by page with the Condensed Books version. That will show you it can be done, and often to advantage.

--Frederick Forsyth

Everyone’s got to be different. You can’t copy anybody and end up with anything. If you copy, it means you’re working without any real feeling. And without feeling, whatever you do amounts to nothing.

--Billie Holiday
I learned to work on top of the dining room table, despite radios blaring, telephones ringing, and people coming, going, talking loudly. It tremendously sharpened my powers of concentration, this exercise in shutting out the world. But it was a great strain on the nervous system.

--Ruth Whitman

Man will not merely endure, he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he, alone among creatures, has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit, capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s duty is to write about these things.

--William Faulkner

The young artist has to observe in his own way and keep it an absolute secret from those around him until he can work it into his own books.

--Sir Robert Sitwell

I hope you take things easy. I failed because I worked too hard. I let myself be driven by that foul witch, an uneasy conscience, which is only another name for Fear—who is the demon of all life, and the great source of almost all its crimes and criminals. Since I came to New York I have taken things easily, never worked at any thing a moment longer than I was interested in it that is the secret—never interest yourself in anything you don’t care about. This is not the rule for conduct, but it’s the rule for arts, and for artists in their work.

--J. B. Yeats

All over-expression, whether by journalists, poetic novelists, or clergymen, is bad for the language, bad for the mind; and by over-expression I mean the use of words running beyond the sincere feeling of writer or speaker or beyond what the event will sanely carry.

--John Galsworthy

I believe the crucial thing for a writer is the ability to make up coherent worlds.

--Peter Dickinson

If you don’t have to write, by all means go into other work; the frustration and rejection are not worth enduring unless one is unequivocally committed.

--Mark Medoff

A novelist must arouse the emotion of a reader—whether it’s laughter or tears or tension....If I can scare my reader and keep him turning the pages, I have succeeded in my craft.

--Stephen King
The problem in arts a problem of translation. Bad authors are those who write with reference to an inner context which the reader cannot know.

--Albert Camus

Imitation is suicide.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

No man was ever great by imitation.

--Samuel Johnson

The job of the novelist and the playwright is to entertain... and to entertain and to convince you need more than clarity. You need eloquence. You need flair. You need the whole gamut of words and sentence structures—the involved and the complex as well as the bare bones simple.

--Melvin J. Grayson

Be brave enough to live life creatively. The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can’t get there by bus, only by hard work and risk and by not quite knowing what you’re doing. What you’ll discover will be wonderful. What you’ll discover will by yourself.

--Alan Alda

The way you define yourself as a writer is that you write every time you have a free minute. If you didn’t behave that way you would never do anything.

--John Irving

Works of imagination should be written in very plain language; the more purely imaginative they are the more necessary it is to be plain.

--Samuel Taylor Coleridge

No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader’s intelligence, or whose attitude is patronizing.

—E. B. White

Literary success of any enduring kind is made by refusing to do what publishers want, by refusing to write what the public wants, by refusing to accept any popular standard, by refusing to write anything to order.

--Lafcadio Hearn
If it works, copy it. --Tony Schwartz

If writers were good businessmen, they’d have too much sense to be writers. --Irvin S. Cobb

A man really writes for an audience of about ten persons. Of course, if others like it, that is clear gain. But if those ten are satisfied, he is content. --Alfred North Whitehead

My purpose is to entertain myself first and other people secondly. --John D. MacDonald

Anything that is written to please the Author is worthless. --Blaise Pascal

Writing is one of the few professions left where you take all the responsibility for what you do. It’s really dangerous and ultimately destroys you as a writer if you start thinking about responses to your work or what your audience needs. --Erica Jong

Writers, if they are worthy of that jealous designation, do not write for other writers. They write to give reality to experience. --Achibald Macleish

Never write on a subject without first having read yourself full on it. --Jean Paul Richter

In a very real sense, the writer writes in order to teach himself, to understand himself, to satisfy himself; the publishing of his ideas, though it brings gratifications, is a curious anticlimax. --Alfred Kazin

Any writer overwhelmingly honest about pleasing himself is almost sure to please others. --Marianne Moore

This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. If your answer is yes, build your life around that necessity. --Rainer Maria Rilke
Keep the action moving so fast that the reader never has time to stop and think, ‘This is impossible.’

--Alistair MacLean

I write the books first, then do the research, then rewrite them.

--Peter Dickinson

All my major works have been written in prison...I would recommend prison not only to aspiring writers, but aspiring politicians, too.

--Jawaharal Nehru

Once in a great while lightning strikes, and occasionally it strikes early in the writer’s life. Sometimes it comes later, after years of work. And sometimes, most often, it never happens at all....But it will never, never happen to those who don’t work hard at it and who don’t consider the act of writing as very nearly the most important thing in their lives, right up there next to breath, and food, and shelter, and love, and God.

--Raymond Carver

Writers! Choose a subject equal to your abilities; think carefully what your shoulders may refuse and what they are capable of bearing.

—Horace

Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention.

--George Orwell

A writer doesn’t need to go out and live, but stay home and invent.

--Ned Rorem

A writer needs three things, experience, observation and imagination, any two of which, at times any one of which, can supply the lack of the others.

--William Faulkner

I need noise and interruptions and irritation: irritation and discomfort are a great starter. The loneliness of doing it any other way would kill me.

--Anita Brookner

The actual process of writing...demands complete, noiseless privacy, without even music; a baby howling two blocks away will drive me nuts.

--William Styron
I like a room with a view, preferably a long view. I dislike looking out on gardens. I prefer looking at the sea, or ships, or anything which has a vista to it.  

--Norman Mailer

The ideal view for daily writing, hour on hour, is the blank brick wall of a cold-storage warehouse. Failing this, a stretch of sky will do, cloudless if possible.  

--Edna Ferber

A writer shouldn’t be engaged with other writers, or with people who make books, or even with people who read them. The farther away you get from the literary traffic, the closer you are to sources. I mean, a writer doesn’t really live, he observes.

--Nelson Algren

Never write about a place until you’re away from it, because it gives you perspective. Immediately after you’ve seen something you can give a photographic description of it and make it accurate. That’s good practices but it isn’t creative writing.

--Ernest Hemingway

Writing is a wholetime job: no professional writer can afford only to write when he feels like it.

--W. Somerset Maugham

Don’t quit. It’s very easy to quit during the first ten years. Nobody cares whether you write or not, and it’s very hard to write when nobody cares one way or the other. You can’t get fired if you don’t write, and most of the time you don’t get rewarded if you do. But don’t quit.

--Andre Dubus

You can write about anything, and if you write well enough, even the reader with no intrinsic interest in the subject will become involved.

--Tracy Kidder

Remember that the first rule of vocabulary is use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colorful. If you hesitate and cogitate, you will come up with another word—of course you will, there’s always another word—but it probably won’t be as good as your first one, or as close to what you really mean.

—Stephen King
More than one way exists to write any sentence longer than one word. Any sentence longer than four or five words can be written four or five ways. Some ways are better than others; some are dead wrong; one may be right, depending on context. Next time, in another context, that same sentence may be better if you write it another way.

--Andrew Offutt

You can’t want to be a writer, you have to be one.

--Paul Theroux

I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil.

--Truman Capote

When I sit at my table to write, I never know what it’s going to be till I’m under way. I trust in inspiration, which sometimes comes and sometimes doesn’t. But I don’t sit back waiting for it. I work every day.

--Alberto Moravia

The last thing we decide in writing a book is what to put first.

--Blaise Pascal

You write by sitting down and writing. There’s no particular time or place—you suit yourself, your nature. How one works, assuming he’s disciplined, doesn’t matter.

--Bernard Malamud

A story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence—especially if it occurs toward the end—or a mistake in paragraphing, even punctuation.

--Truman Capote

Loneliness is your companion for life. If you don’t want to be lonely, you get into TV.

--William Styron

I don’t see how you can write anything of value if you don’t offend someone.

--Marvin Harris

Why use a tub of words to express a spoonful of thought?

—Unknown

Nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him.

--Samuel Johnson
One of the most common and erroneous ideas is that the clever writer hides his meaning. In fact, the good writer makes his meaning as clear as possible. He leaves no doubt about what is being read and he is not vague except when he has good reason.

--Gary Provost

If a writer's ego ever wilts, he is ruined. It is the only thing that can sustain him through those lonely months while he is trying to piece together a book out of one recalcitrant word after another. Every morning he has to persuade himself, all over again, that putting words on paper is the most important thing in the world that he has something to say which thousands of people not only will listen to, but pay for...Only an egomaniac can believe these things, for they defy all the evidence.

--John Fischer

The writer does the most, who gives his reader the most knowledge, and takes from him the least time.

--Charles Caleb Colton

Readers are like sheep. If there's any gate on the right or left, they'll take it. You must, therefore, always keep them on the path.

--John Wood

An author should try to get an agent to represent him. Selling a manuscript cold is the toughest way I know to get published. It can be done, but the odds are against the writer.

--William Targ

Publishers are always on the lookout for a good book. This is something to keep in mind no matter how discouraging the prospect of finding a publisher is, no matter how many rejection slips you get, and no matter how overwhelming the odds seem.

--Richard Balkin

Some people tell me they'd like to write for 'extra money.' I tell them: Sell your body instead. Writing makes big demands on you.

--Erma Bombeck

Writer's block is a misnomer and can be compared with turning off a faucet. Like the ability to write, faucets can develop problems when they're seldom used. You get all this rust in the pipes. When you turn on the faucet, a lot of rust comes out.

--Susan Neville
A first-rate writer...respects writing too much to be tricky.

--Virginia Woolf

Narcissus never wrote well.

--Edward Dahlberg

Style is the dress of thoughts; and let them be ever so just. If your style is homely, coarse, and vulgar, they will appear to as much disadvantage.

--Lord Chesterfield

A good style should show no sign of effort. What is written should seem a happy accident.

--W. Somerset Maugham

A good style must, first of all, be clear. It must not be mean or above the dignity of the subject. It must be appropriate.

—Aristotle

Only one thing is asked of the writer: that he tell his story as best he can, and having done so, curiously enough, get on with another.

--John le Carré

It is hard to say what interests a child in a book. They can become fascinated by the strangest things....But in general it is probably safe to assume that a successful child’s book has many of the same elements as a successful adult book: gripping plot, interesting characters, a bit of surprise, and most important, competent writing.

--Sandra Schmidt

Writing for children consists three parts of living, one part of writing. To give light to children, we must be involved in life—not shun it, nor be afraid of it, nor think we have experienced it by watching from the sidelines. We must be always seeking for truth about life, assured that we shall always be finding, but never finding all. In quietness we must search for such truth as life has to say to us. Only thus do we row reverent and teachable. Only the reverent and teachable can light they way for children.

A child’s book should be loved by its author, mulled over, slept over, rewritten, perhaps many times, so that the child reading it will know that he has come on experienced, not borrowed, truth; on wisdom, not on mere cleverness; on insight and beauty.

--Rebecca Caudill
A writer should like words the way some people like stones. He should like phrasing and syntax, and the very punctuation that keeps them straight. His interest in language should equal his interest in what he has to say, or he will never get the two together in any way he can call his own. He will never convince or delight, or get a second look.

--Sheridan Baker

Good writing must have a poetic faculty whether you write in prose or in verse. When those words come down on wings, they have the same kind of value no matter what form they wind up in.

--Katherine Anne Porter

In my opinion, a true description of Nature should be very brief and have a character of relevance. Commonplaces such as, ‘the setting sun bathing in the waves of the darkening sea, poured its purple gold, etc.’...one ought to abandon. In descriptions of nature one ought to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture....Nature becomes animated if you are not squeamish about employing comparisons of her phenomena with ordinary human activities.

--Anton Chekhov

Avoid depicting the hero’s state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero’s actions. It is not necessary to portray many characters. The centre of gravity should be in two persons: him and her.

--Anton Chekhov

Constant reading will pull you into a place (a mind-set, if you like the phrase) where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness. It also offers you a constantly growing knowledge of what has been done and what hasn’t, what is trite and what is fresh, what works and what just lies there dying (or dead) on the page. The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor.

—Stephen King

An entertainer who merely confuses and bores can hardly expect to receive applause. Serious novelists, I am aware, don’t want to be thought of as entertainers. But they will either amuse their patrons or be dismissed. After all, if King Lear’s jester hadn’t been funny, he would not have been allowed to deliver all those wise remarks.

--Cecil Hemley
The contemporary novelist’s job is to take pieces of life and arrange them on paper. And the more direct their passage from street to paper, the more lifelike they should turn out... (The novelist) needs to make what is set down seem truly contemporary, to give the impression of things happening here and now, to force upon the reader a feeling of immediacy... the novelist must know how things happen—not how they are remembered in later years—and he must write them down that way.

--Dashiell Hammett

Writing eight hundred or so pages of sentences will teach a young writer a great deal about English prose, but if it’s all towards one novel, he will learn considerably less about making characters, managing narrative pace, working subplots against main plots—that sort of thing—than he will by attempting a number of narrative pieces.

--John Barth

Get up early. If I wait until I get home from work, then I’m too tired or too hungry or I just want a glass of wine. But if I make myself get up and do it before I start my day, then I can do it. For me, it’s really about discipline and time management.

--Molly Birnbaum

The best writing is always done at night when you're asleep. You put yourself to sleep reading a book or the transcripts of judicial hearings. You let the facts just pour into your mind and then somehow they magically arrange themselves at night.

There is no sense in trying to bull your way through when you’re stuck on a passage—it means that somehow the facts don’t fit. You have to knock off and go to bed, and if the subconscious doesn’t arrange the facts, then you’re nowhere.

--Theodore H. White

First, establish a reason for your story, then introduce your characters, and after you’ve done that, make a dash for the climax. That’s all there is to it. Establish a premise and then rush for the final scene. Don’t waste any time en route. Be sure that it contains action, action, and then some more action. Mix a few thrills with it. Bring a tear to the eyes of your audience. Then, the next instant, chase away the tear with a smile. If you do that, then you’ve got a story.

--H. H. Van Loan

It is better to create than to be learned; creating is the true essence of life.

—Niebuhr

You lost it if you talk about it.

--Ernest Hemingway
Those who write clearly have readers, those who write obscurely have commentators.  

--Albert Camus

I would urge young writers not to be too much concerned with the vagaries of the marketplace. Not everyone can make a first-rate living as a writer, but a writer who is serious and responsible about his work and life, will probably find a way to earn a decent living, if he or she writes well.

--Bernard Malamud

Writing a mystery involves fictional ‘real’ people caught in fictional ‘real-life’ situations. Mysteries have to be logical. You can’t play tricks on the readers. Every action of every character has to have a purpose.

--Douglas Kiker

If a farmer can write about somebody killing somebody in a turnip patch and make it work, why not! You don’t have to be a judge or a lawyer with courtroom expertise to write a good mystery.

--Joan Kahn

A good mystery has to have an ending that surprises you, but one you know is unavoidable. It should make you rethink the plot and say to yourself: ‘Of course! Of course!’ A basic ingredient of mystery writing is the element of surprise.

--Douglas Kiker

Learn as much by writing as by reading.

--Lord Acton

(Write as though)...you are writing a letter to a dear friend....And this is a dear and close friend, real—or better—invented in your mind like a fixation. Write privately, not publicly; without fear or timidity, right to the end of the letter...so that your true friend will read it over and over, and then want more enchanting letters from you.

--Muriel Spark

I’m an outline man. I think spontaneous writing is a waste of time.

--Tom Wolfe

If one waits for the right time to come before writing, the right time never comes.

--James Russell Lowell
Keep in mind that there’s no right way of writing. There’s only your way.

--Milton Lomask

A freelance writer is often tempted, for the sake of immediate financial gain, to turn out work that goes against every standard he has set himself. In the long run this is the greatest of follies, for it can cripple him permanently as the kind of writer he set out to be.

Remember that there are many roads to success in writing, and it is psychologically bad for a writer to praise the one of his choice and condemn many of the others.

--Frank Belknap Long

Often must you turn your stylus to erase if you hope to write something worth a second reading.

—Horace

Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has had and how conscientious he is; so that when he makes something up it is as it would truly be.

--Ernest Hemingway

A successful book cannot afford to be more than 10 percent new.

--Marshall McLuhan

Never...change anything you got up in the middle of the night to write.

--Saul Bellow

A real writer learns from earlier writers the way a boy learns from an apple orchard—by stealing what he has a taste for and can carry off.

--Archibald MacLeish

Advice to young writers who want to get ahead without any annoying delays: don’t write about Man, write about a man.

--E. B. White

Self-expression is for babies and seals, where it can be charming. A writer’s business is to affect the reader.

--Vincent McHugh

There is but one art, to omit.

--Robert Louis Stevenson

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Many writers are attracted to passive verbs....It’s weak, it’s circuitous, and it’s frequently tortuous, as well. How about this: My first kiss will always be recalled by me as how my romance with Shayna was begun. Oh, man—who farted, right? A simpler way to express this idea—sweeter and more forceful, as well—might be this: My romance with Shayna began with our first kiss. I'll never forget it.

—Stephen King

Talent isn’t enough. You need what Steinbeck called a blend of faith and arrogance. When you’re young, plain old poverty can be enough, along with an insatiable hunger for recognition. You have to have that feeling of ‘I’ll show them.’ If you don’t have it, don’t become a writer.

--Leon Uris

Writing is a difficult trade which must be learned slowly by reading great authors; by trying at the outset to imitate them; by daring to be original; by destroying one’s first productions; by comparing subsequent works to recognized masterpieces and, once more, by destroying them; by crossing out whole passages; by weeping from despair; by being more severe with oneself than even the critics will be. After ten years of such arduous activity, if one has talent, one may begin to write in an acceptable manner.

--Andre Maurois

Never let a domestic quarrel ruin a day’s writing. If you can’t start the next day fresh, get rid of your wife.

--Mario Puzo

Every novel should have a beginning, a muddle, and an end.

--Peter De Vries

It was reported that the great American author Sinclair Lewis was once asked to give a lecture on writing to a group of college students:

‘Looking out at this gathering,’ he said to the assembled students, ‘makes me want to know how many of you really and truly wish to become writers.’

Every hand in the room went up. Lewis looked at them for a moment and then folded his notes and put them away.

‘If that’s true,’ he said, ‘then the best advice I can give you is to go home and write.’

And he left the room.

--The Winner’s Circle
Make it a point to keep on the lookout for novel and interesting ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea has to be original only in its adaptation to the problem you are currently working on.

--Thomas Edison

You can’t wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club.

--Jack London

If you are seeking creative ideas, go out walking. Angels whisper to a man when he goes for a walk.

--Raymond Inmon

I learned...that inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little chance to start flowing, prime it with a little solitude and idleness.

--Brenda Ueland

Very young writers often do not revise at all. Like a hen looking at a chalk line, they are hypnotized by what they have written. ‘How can it be altered?’ they think. It has to be altered. You have to learn how.

--Dorothy Canfield Fisher

The more sins you confess, the more books you will sell.

—Unknown

So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters, and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery.

--Virginia Woolf

Talent is a question of quantity. Talent does not write one page: it writes three hundred....The strong do not hesitate. They settle down, they sweat, they go on to the end. They exhaust the ink, they use up the paper. This is the only difference between men of talent and cowards who will never make a start. In literature, there are only oxen. The biggest ones are the geniuses—the ones who toil eighteen hours a day without tiring. Fame is a constant effort.

--Jules Renard
Technique alone is never enough. You have to have passion. Technique alone is just an embroidered pot holder.

--Raymond Chandler

Sit down and put down everything that comes into your head and then you’re a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff’s worth, without pity, and destroy most of it.

—Colette

A writer should never write about the extraordinary. That is for the journalist.

--James Joyce

Best-sellers are about murder, money, revenge, ambition, and sex, sex, sex. So are literary novels. But best-selling authors give you more per page: there are five murders, three world financial crises, two bankruptcies and a civil war in A Dangerous Fortune. There is more drama in it that a literary author will deal with in a lifetime of work.

--Ken Follett

Art...should simplify. That, indeed, is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole.

--Willa Cather

Writing is a difficult trade which must be learned slowly by reading great authors; by trying at the outset to imitate them; by daring them to be original; and by destroying one’s first productions.

--André Maurois

Take eloquence and wring its neck.

--Paul Verlaine

Concentration is inspiration. You must be completely overtaken by your work and your subject. Only then do all your influences and experience come up to the surface.

--César Chávez

Lyrically passionate writing should always be resisted, especially by the writer. A real idea slows you down, by demanding that you make yourself as plain as possible.

--Clive James
A novelist must preserve a childlike belief in the importance of things which
common sense considers of no great consequence.  
--W. Somerset
Maugham

You will have written exceptionally well if, by skillful arrangement of your words,
you have made an ordinary one seem original.  
--Horace

Of every four words I write, I strike out three.  
--Nicholas Boileau

An average English word is four letters and a half. By hard, honest labor I've dug
all the large words out of my vocabulary and shaved them down till the average is
three and a half letters... I never write metropolis for seven cents because I can get
the same money for city. I never write policeman, because I can get the same money
for cop.  
--Mark Twain

In the mind, as in the body, there is the necessity of getting rid of waste, and a man
of active literary habits will write for the fire as well as for the press.  
--Jerome Cardan

The great composer does not set to work because he is inspired, but becomes
inspired because he is working. Beethoven, Wagner, Bach and Mozart settled down
day after day to the job in hand with as much regularity as an accountant settles
down each day to his figures. They didn't waste time waiting for inspiration.  
--Ernest Newman

I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing. If one is writing for one's
own pleasure, that fear may be mild—timidity is the word I've used here. If, however,
one is working under deadline—a school paper, a newspaper article, the SAT
writing sample—that fear may be intense. Dumbo got airborne with the help of a
magic feather; you may feel the urge to grasp a passive verb or one of those nasty
adverbs for the same reason. Just remember before you do that Dumbo didn't need
the feather; the magic was in him.  
—Stephen King

A novelist must preserve a childlike belief in the importance of things which
common sense considers of no great consequence.  
--Somerset Maugham
Every playwright should try acting, just as every judge should spend some weeks in jail to find out what he is handing out to others.

--E. M. Remarque

Damn the subjunctive!—it brings all our writers to shame.

--Mark Twain

Write for fun.
Write to share ideas.
Write to share feelings.

--William Wharton

The secret of good writing is to say an old thing in a new way or to say a new thing in an old way.

--Richard Harding Davis

I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

--William Faulkner

Don’t think! Thinking is the enemy of creativity. It’s self-conscious and anything self-conscious is lousy. You can’t try to do things, you simply must do them.

--Ray Bradbury

But the greatest thing of all is to be a master of the metaphor. It is the only thing which cannot be taught by others; and it is also a sign of original genius, because a good metaphor implies the intuitive perception of similarity in dissimilar things.

—Aristotle

I only write when I’m inspired, so I make sure I’m inspired every day at 9 a.m.

--William Faulkner
Do you realize the illicit sensuous delight I get from picking my nose? I always have, ever since I was a child—there are so many subtle variations of sensation. A delicate, pointed-nailed fifth finger can catch under dry scabs and flakes of mucus in the nostril and draw them out to be looked at, crumbled between fingers, and flicked to the floor in minute crusts. Or a heavier, determined forefinger can reach up and smear down-and-out the soft, resilient, elastic greenish-yellow smallish blobs of mucus, roll them round and jelly-like between thumb and fore finger, and spread them on the under surface of a desk or chair where they will harden into organic crusts. How many desks and chairs have I thus secretively befouled since childhood? Or sometimes there will be blood mingled with the mucus: in dry brown scabs, or bright sudden wet red on the finger that scraped too rudely the nasal membranes....It is absorbing to look with new sudden eyes on the old worn habits: to see a sudden luxurious and pestilential ‘snot-green sea,’ and shiver with the shock of recognition.

--Sylvia Plath

Visualize, emotionalize, afterwards. Beginning writers work from the sense impressions, forget cold realistic organization. First get the cold objective plot scene set. Rigid. Then write the damn thing after lying on the couch and visualizing, whipping it to white heat, to life again, the life of the art, the form no longer formless without frame of reference.

--Sylvia Plath

If you can’t think outside yourself, you can’t write.

--Sylvia Plath

Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower: They like it, or do not. It helps them, or it does not. It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge. You do it for itself first. If it brings in money, how nice. You do not do it first for money. Money isn’t why you sit down at the typewriter. Not that you don’t want it. It is only too lovely when a profession pays for your bread and butter. With writing, it is maybe, maybe not. How to live with such insecurity? With what is worst, the occasional lack or loss of faith in the writing itself. How to live with these things? The worst thing, worse than all of them, would be to live with not writing. So how to live with the lesser devils and keep them lesser?

--Sylvia Plath
What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination.... If I sit still and don't do
anything, the world goes on beating like a slack drum, without meaning. We must
be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without
dreams is too horrible to imagine.

-- Sylvia Plath

The best stories don’t come from ‘good vs. bad’ but from ‘good vs. good.’

--Leo Tolstoy

Very few people possess true artistic ability. It is therefore both unseemly and
unproductive to irritate the situation by making an effort. If you have a burning,
restless urge to write or paint, simply eat something sweet and the feeling will pass.

--Fran Lebowitz

Love your calling with passion. It is the meaning of life.

--Auguste Rodin

Bookmaking is shooting craps...with the white boys...downtown on the stock
exchange...is betting a dime you can win...a hundred... Making books is shooting
craps...with God...is wandering into a casino where you don't even know the
language...let alone the rules of the game...And that's proper...that's as it should
be...If you wanted to be safe...you would have walked into the Post Office...or taken
a graduate degree in Educational Administration...If you want to share a vision...or
tell the truth...you pick up...your pen...And take your chances...This is not...after
all...tennis...where sets can be measured by points...or football...where games run on
time... or baseball...where innings structure the play...It is life...open-ended...And
once the play has begun...the book made...time...is the only judge.

--Nikki Giovanni

If you’re going to write fiction, you’d better never, ever let your mind go beyond
about 16 years old.

--Bernard Malamud

Respect the masterpiece. It is true reverence to man. There is no quality so great,
none so much needed now.

—Frank Lloyd
Wright

Last, but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.

--William Safire

I know of only one rule: Style cannot be too clear, too simple.

—Stendhal
The most important thing, at least in my humble opinion, is to use characters and thoughts that are lifelike. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction. All of my stories are actual experiences that I have come across during my travels. My characters are facsimiles of actual people I’ve known. Many people ask me how I manage to get that final little twist in my stories. I always tell them that the unusual is the ordinary rather than the unexpected.

--O. Henry

Music makes me feel less isolated from the more physically active world outside my door. Music helps focus my thoughts and aids in getting into a good writing groove.

-Mark Harris

The writer of stories must please or he is nothing.

--Anthony Trollope

The language used should be as efficient a conductor of the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader as is the electric spark which passes from one battery to another.

--Anthony Trollope

Study the writers' magazines and pound the hell out of the typewriter.

--Erle Stanley Gardner

The new writer should observe, listen, look...and then write. Nothing begets better writing than the simple process of writing.

--Rod Serling

The beginning writer needs talent, application and aspirin. If he wants to write just to make money, he is not a writer.

--James Thurber

Beware of advice—even this.

--Carl Sandburg

All good books have one thing in common—they are truer than if they had really happened, and after you’ve read one of them you will feel that all that happened, happened to you and that it belongs to you forever: the happiness and unhappiness, good and evil, ecstasy and sorrow, the food, the wine, beds, people and the weather. If you can give that to readers, then you’re a writer.

--Ernest Hemingway
A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.
--Virginia Woolf

Works of imagination should be written in very plain language; the more purely imaginative they are the more necessary it is to be plain.
--Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Becoming a great novelist means to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.
--James Baldwin

In a hyperactive world, the writing of fiction—and perhaps the reading of it—must seem slow, dull, even pedestrian and oldfangled. I think there is only one way to write fiction—alone in a room, without interruption or any distraction. Have I just described the average younger person’s room? I don’t think so. But the average younger person is multitasking. The rare, unusual, solitary, passionate younger person is writing a poem or a story.
--Paul Theroux

Notice how many of the Olympic athletes effusively thanked their mothers for their success? ‘She drove me to my practice at four in the morning,’ etc. Writing is not figure skating or skiing. Your mother will not make you a writer. My advice to any young person who wants to write is: leave home.
--Paul Theroux

Good writing...teaches the learning writer about style, graceful narration, plot development, the creation of believable characters, and truth-telling. A novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* may fill a new writer with feelings of despair and good old-fashioned jealousy—‘I’ll never be able to write anything that good, not if I live to be a thousand’—but such feelings can also serve as a spur, goading the writer to work harder and aim higher. Being swept away by a combination of great story and great writing—of being flattened, in fact—is part of every writer’s necessary formation. You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you.
—Stephen King

Composition is a discipline; it forces us to think. If you want to ‘get in touch with your feelings,’ fine—talk to yourself, we all do. But, if you want to communicate with another thinking human being, get in touch with your thoughts. Put them in order; give them a purpose; use them to persuade, to instruct, to discover, to seduce. The secret way to do this is to write it down and then cut out the confusing parts.
--William Safire
One must regard the hyphen as a blemish to be avoided wherever possible.

--Winston Churchill

The depth of your writing is a function of how absorbent you are. Writers must first inhale the world, and then exhale it in writing. Art, it has been said, is the discharge of experience, and the more deeply informed you are by your receptivity, by your life's experiences, the richer your writing. Imagine your body as a prism that the light of experience flows through and emerges as art. The more of the world you 'inspire' (literally 'breathe in'), the more you are capable of inspiring the world.

--Gregg Levoy

I think that being able to make people laugh and write a book that's funny makes the information go down a lot easier and it makes it a lot more fun to read, easier to understand, and often stronger.

--Al Franken

Put aside what you've been taught and ignore all filters. Only the crazy ideas are worth chasing.

--On Twitter
@RACINE

I don’t like neat. If you get too neat, you spend the whole time sharpening pencils and you don’t write.

--Garry Marshall

When you’re an artist you have to have that selfishness to be alone and create great things to your satisfaction.

--Robert DeNiro

Do not focus on the past. Be future focused. If you’ve done something great or terrible in the past, forget it and go on and create the next thing.

--Steve Jobs

A multitude of words is probably the most formidable means of blurring and obscuring thought. There is no thought, however momentous, that cannot be expressed lucidly in 200 words.

--Eric Hoffer

A good sentence is a key. It unlocks the mind of the reader.

--Eric Hoffer
And as a writer, one of the things that I’ve always been interested in doing is actually invading your comfort space. Because that’s what we’re suppose to do. Get under your skin, and make you react.

—Stephen King

A valuable guiding principle for fiction: If you didn’t have a sense of how people spoke, you didn’t know them well enough, and so you couldn’t, and you shouldn’t, tell their story. The way people spoke, in short, clipped phrases, or long, flowing rambles, revealed so much about them: their place of origin, their social class, their temperament, whether calm or angry, warmhearted or cold-blooded, foulmouthed or clean-spoken, polite or rude; and beneath their temperament, their true nature, intellectual or earthy, plain spoken or devious, and, yes, good or bad.

—Salman Rushdie

Writers should always write to illuminate, not to obfuscate.

—Stephanie Zacharek

To achieve literary immortality one must make the thing frankly a fairy story and ignore real life altogether.

—P. G. Wodehouse

Don’t write for money.

—William T. Vollmann

Writing’s like running, playing the piano, anything: You will only get better if you do it consistently. Don’t write in a vacuum, because if nobody ever sees it, you’re not going to know if it works. I still don’t know if a book works until somebody else reads it. Find a group of people, or a class, to give you structure and force you to take it seriously.

—Tracy Chevalier

Write about characters you’re interested in and let them come to life. If you can’t, you’re not getting it. If you can’t write one page a day, meaning 365 pages a year, which is a reasonable-length novel, then you shouldn’t be doing this.

—Stuart M. Kaminsky

The secret to writing is knowing your own mind and the way it works. As far as advice goes: Get it down, as much and as quickly as you can, and fix it up later. Write every day. When you can’t write every day, read as much as you can and take notes of the things that work in the novels of others.

—Sheridan Hay
Be tough on your drafts, but don’t ever give up. Let your early drafts sit for as many a six months before you revise, and then be brutal to your drafts before you let editors and fellow writers criticize them, but don’t ever, ever give up.

--Mark Wisniewski

Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant.

--Robert Louis Stevenson

Everything must have a distinct purpose so that if anything were to be deleted, it would be missed.

--Barbara Delinsky

The secret to being a writer is that you have to write. It's not enough to think about writing or to study literature or plan a future life as an author. You really have to lock yourself away, alone, and get to work.

—Augusten Burroughs

You would go mad if you began to speculate about the impact your novel might have while you were still writing it.

—Jonathan Coe

There is, beyond a certain point, no correlation between the time spent on something and how well it turns out. I learned that good writing is what happens when you stop thinking about the writing itself and think straightforwardly about what it is you’re trying to say, that it’s a question of mechanics, not magic.

—Emma Brockes

Good taste is the enemy of creativity

—Pablo Picasso

One of the things I’ve done as a writer is to learn more words. I do that by reading widely and in all disciplines. I read art criticism. I read science. I read psychology. As I have done that over a lifetime, I know more and more words. One of my anxieties when I first started writing was that my language seemed too plain to address subjects that were complicated. As I have been able to learn more words, it’s easier to paint a scene that might seduce the reader into watching that scene, and then more words for the speaker to speak so that the psychology becomes more nuanced.

—Alicia Anstead
Advice to writers: Sometimes you just have to stop writing. Even before you begin.
—Stanislaw J. Lec

Enduring comedy is grounded in both surprise and recognition, and that recognition requires that comedy arise from the real world.
—Frank Lidz

Trying to write books with a subject matter or in a genre or style you're not familiar with is the best way to find the Big Block looming.
—Jeffery Deaver

People say that profanity is a crutch for those who don’t have an extensive enough vocabulary, but I prefer to say that people who don’t use profanity are missing out on a lot of amazing words. Consider the ‘f’ word. It’s a verb, an exclamation, a way of commiserating or yelling in anger or expressing fear. It’s one of the most dynamic words in our language, and I take full fucking advantage of it.
—Jenny Lawson

Assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case.... What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?
—Annie Dillard

Get to work. Your work is to keep cranking the flywheel that turns the gears that spin the belt in the engine of belief that keeps you and your desk in midair.
—Annie Dillard

There’s no use just sitting down and waiting for an inspiration, though. You’ve got to play along. The main thing you’ve got to do is preserve your vitality. A couple of days of complete rest and solitude helps. Not seeing anybody. I even conserve my emotions. ‘I’m not going to get excited about anybody or anything,’ I say, ‘until I get this gag worked out.’ I go along that way, living a quiet and righteous life, and then I stay out late one night, and have a couple of drinks—perhaps all night—and the next morning the reserve pours out. But you’ve got to have the reserve. Dissipation is no use except as a release. You’ve been damming it up inside of you, and all of a sudden you say: ‘Oh, here it is!’ And then you go to work.
—Charlie Chaplin

If I had to put a name to it, I would wish that all my books were entertainments. I think the first thing you’ve got to do is grab the reader by the ear, and make him sit down and listen. Make him laugh, make him feel. We all want to be entertained at a very high level.
—John le Carre
One ought only to write when one leaves a piece of one’s flesh in the ink-pot each time one dips one’s pen.

—Leo Tolstoy

Anyone can write a book quickly: Just write a bad book.

—Neal Gabler

To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed...The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind...The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture.

—Joan Didion

Two questions form the foundation of all novels: ‘What if?’ and ‘What next?’ (A third question, ‘What now?’, is one the author asks himself every 10 minutes or so; but it’s more a cry than a question.) Every novel begins with the speculative question, What if ‘X’ happened? That’s how you start.

--Tom Clancy

An outline is crucial. It saves so much time. When you write suspense, you have to know where you’re going because you have to drop little hints along the way. With the outline, I always know where the story is going. So before I ever write, I prepare an outline of 40 or 50 pages.

--John Grisham

When I leave the novel I’m working on for the day, I never complete the last sentence--I quit mid-sentence, and it seems to kick-start me the next time I get back to the chapter.

--Judy Kimball

Don’t let technology, which is supposed to help us, hold you back. All you need to start with is a pen or pencil and paper. ‘The simpler, the better’ usually works for me. When friends know you’re a writer, they sometimes give you exquisite leather-bound journals in which to record your thoughts. For me they are so beautiful and intimidating, I can’t write in them. I line them up on the shelf and admire them from afar. For actual writing, I prefer a spiral notebook--preferably the steno kind with the flip-top back and pale green paper that’s easy on the eyes.

--Valerie O. Patterson
Avoid the ‘what ifs’ and get a daily discipline going. I’ve always written starting at about 3 in the morning. I can’t produce a coherent sentence after 2 in the afternoon. Know your limits and edit, edit, edit. Then edit again.

--Andrea Kitay

I know a group of young adult writers who rent a hotel room and sit around a table, writing together, but separately, all day long. It’s the same principle as group exercise classes: You don’t want to be the first to quit.

--Donna Gephart

I sometimes go to a library to write because there are other people there, but it’s still quiet. Same with coffee shops, where the noise level may be too frenetic for some and comforting to others. If the ambiance and not the actual people is what you are looking for, stream the sounds of a coffee shop.

--Donna Gephart

I’m a feedback junkie. I usually give a draft to several friends, including a novelist who never hesitates to scrawl ‘BORING!’ in the margins. The struggle then is how to weigh their reactions while remaining true to my writing self.

--Nancy K. Miller

At some point in the middle of a book, you reach a seriously low point where anything else looks more interesting. Heck, even laundry and toilet cleaning seem appealing. But your job is to finish the one you’re working on, however much you want to do something else.

--Donna Andrews

You can’t fix what you haven’t written. If you keep revising and deleting, you’ll never get to the end of the story. It’s better to go full steam ahead. There’s no such thing as writer’s block. As long as your fingers can move over the keyboard, eventually it’ll segue into something.

--Mary Kay Andrews

Try writing first thing in the morning, the moment you wake up. The dreamier your mind is, the more creative you’ll be. Your brain dreams during the night, but it also thinks. We don’t get to make use of that sleep-thinking if we don’t turn to our work first thing. Make your coffee in a dreamy way. Then move directly to work. Do not check to see if your husband is still breathing.

--Eric Maisel
To truly write well about people, issues and the world around you, get out into life. Roll around in it. Travel. Get dirty. Observe. Talk. Listen. Only then go back to your computer, writing nook, typewriter or coffee shop to do the heavy lifting of putting pen to paper.

--Julia Rappaport

In newsrooms there is little patience for the use of a difficult word where a simpler one will do. ‘Good prose is like a windowpane,’ wrote George Orwell in his famous essay ‘Why I Write,’ a rule that would seem to counsel against ever stopping a reader with an unfamiliar word. It’s good advice for beginners, but serious readers are also lovers of language. I find that the occasional obscure word, used correctly, spices prose.

--Rick Atkinson

One of the best places to find stories is in the human instincts. If you want to touch people and make them feel, get down to the bedrock emotions, the fundamental instincts we all have, dormant though some of them may be. The desire for a mate, for shelter, for food, for money—those are problems we all understand, and all of us can feel….Great need will always produce a story.

--Louis L’Amour

Write in the morning. Edit at night. Write what most scares you. It’s supposed to be hard. Just when you reach the point of deepest despair is when you will have a breakthrough. Relish the process. Work hard at your craft. Believe in your writing. Don’t give up.

--Melissa Coleman

In the talk of people, especially of those on the streets, lies an endless wealth of story-stuff. Nor is it necessary to go about haunting street corners with a notebook in your pocket and an amplifier in your ear. It is necessary only that you do not stop your ears with smugness or indifference or indolence. Going about your workaday rounds, assuming you’re neither in solitary confinement nor a hermit, you’ll hear all the words of which people’s lives are constituted. And if you listen long enough, the commonest speech will begin to rhyme like poetry. For people never say anything the same way twice; no two of them ever say it the same. The greatest imaginative writer that ever brooded in a lavender robe and a mellowed briar in his teeth, couldn’t tell you, though he try for a lifetime, how the simplest strap-hanger will ask the conductor to be let off at the next stop….It is all for the taking. All the manuals by frustrated fictioneers on how to write can’t give you the first syllable of reality, at any cost, that any common conversation can. All the classics, read and re-read, can’t help you catch the ring of truth as does the word heard firsthand.

--Nelson Algren
The most important and hardest thing for any writer to learn is the discipline of sitting down and writing even when you have to spend three days writing bad stuff before the fourth day, when you write something better. If you’ve been away from what you’ve been working on even for a day and a half, you have to put in those three days of bad writing to get to the fourth, or you lose the thread, you lose the rhythm. When you are a young writer, those three days are so unpleasant that you tend to think, ‘I’ll go away until the mood strikes.’ Well, you’re out of the mood because you’re not sitting there, because you haven’t had that period of trying to push through till the fourth day when the rhythm comes.

--Joan Didion

The curious thing about writer’s block, the only mysterious thing about it, is that its cause is not always apparent. Often one has to be one’s own doctor and diagnose it, using considerable intuition….Young writers will often go struggling on, like good horses, until they literally drop, not realizing that their prose is no longer fresh….A more experienced writer may realize the dullness of his prose, and stop, and call it a block, but he may not realize it is due to simple tiredness. There is such an anxiety and inner pressure connected with writing that many writers do not care to admit the need for loafing, for doing nothing at all for a few days.

--Patricia Highsmith

When I bought my first computer in 1983, the man who installed the word-processing program fixed it so that when I booted up, these words flashed across my screen: ‘A writer is someone who has written today.’ Those words were a gift to me then, and I’m passing them along to you.

—J. A. Jance

You have to follow your own voice. You have to be yourself when you write. In effect, you have to announce, ‘This is me, this is what I stand for, this is what you get when you read me. I’m doing the best I can—buy me or not—but this is who I am as a writer.’

--David Morrell

In truth, I never consider the audience for whom I’m writing. I just write what I want to write.

—J. K. Rowling

I think that the joy of writing a novel is the self-exploration that emerges and also that wonderful feeling of playing God with the characters. When I sit down at my writing desk, time seems to vanish...I think the most important thing for a writer is to be locked in a study.

--Erica Jong
I’m very concerned with the rhythm of language. ‘The sun came up’ is an inadequate sentence. Even though it conveys all the necessary information, rhythmically it’s lacking.

The sun came up.

But, if you say, as Laurie Anderson said, ‘The sun came up like a big bald head,’ not only have you, perhaps, entertained the fancy of the reader, but you have made a more complete sentence. The sound of a sentence.

--Tom Robbins

At night, when the objective world has slunk back into its cavern and left dreamers to their own, there come inspirations and capabilities impossible at any less magical and quiet hour. No one knows whether or not he is a writer unless he has tried writing at night.

--H. P. Lovecraft

Put down everything that comes into your head and then you’re a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff’s worth, without pity, and destroy most of it.

—Colette

A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: 1. What am I trying to say? 2. What words will express it? 3. What image or idiom will make it clearer? 4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

--George Orwell

Take yourself seriously. You have to make a conscious effort to go from someone who wants to write to someone who is going to write. And there is a clear distinction because once you have decided you are going to write you will make time for it. It’s like eating or going to the gym or paying a bill. It’s something you have to do because you have to write to be published. It took me awhile to learn that myself, so I don’t say that as an admonishment, but as an encouragement. Give yourself permission to say: If I am going to be a writer, I have to make time to write and that is OK.

--Sherri Winston

Don’t start selling the book before you write the book. People tell me about how they have this great idea for a book, and they’ve thought about it, and it could be a movie. They’ve already mapped out the marketing future, and they haven’t sold a manuscript because they haven’t even written the novel. Write the book, and if you can sell it, someone will find a market for you.

--Sherri Winston
You just want to make something beautiful so badly, and some days it doesn’t come out. We have to remember what it felt like when we were little: For a writer, the journal you had as a kid, when you sat under a tree and wrote and wrote and wrote. Get back to the true joy that you had in creating.

--Danielle Krysa

The writer has to be the kind of man who turns the world upside down and says, look, it looks different, doesn’t it?

--Morris West

The thing that impacts my work the most is the ‘micro.’ I had a 1958 Sears catalog and if I would get stumped with a scene or with a character, I could flip through it and notice that the ladies were all wearing gloves, and they carried handbags and they wore hats. And if I wondered if people had big metal garbage cans in their garages in 1958, I could go to a Sears catalog and see that, yes, they did, and this is what it costs.

--Lori Roy

I’ve always taken my manuscript and said, You know what? This is horrible. Or, you know what? I can’t do this. Or, I can’t show up another day and leave my office another day, having only written three sentences. And the reminder that this is part of the runner’s pain, that you think you’re not going to get up that hill, and that you’ve felt that way before. It’s what allows you to show up again the next day, and it allows you to get to the other side, and it allows you to get to a point where you can see the beauty of your work, after all that labor.

--Alexandra Styron

Run your own race. Some other writer will always write lovelier books, reach more readers, make more money, win more awards. The writing trade—which is full, full, full of rejection and failure—is a lifelong lesson in humility, and we are wise to take that lesson into the other arenas of our life. Writing is engaging, gratifying and often profoundly discouraging and difficult. But not as discouraging and difficult as coal mining or warfare.

--Monica Wood

Many writers want to start with sentence one and let the words flow out in order until they reach the conclusion. There may be drafts that come that easily, but if the words aren’t coming when you start at the beginning, attack whichever part of your work inspires you. Write in a disorganized fashion, then find the structure later.

--Laurie Helgoe
You can read anywhere, almost, but when it comes to writing, library carrels, park benches, and rented flats should be courts of last resort—Truman Capote said he did his best work in motel rooms, but he is an exception; most of us do our best in a place of our own.

—Stephen King

For me the most important lessons of Shakespeare for the writer are about process as much as product. He unabashedly used predecessor’s works as templates. Judging by the multiple versions of Hamlet, Lear, Shrew, and others, he was an obsessive reviser of his own work; and his sheer volume of output suggests he spent his time in the chair.

--Jess Winfield

Don’t start until you can’t not start. There’s a difference between when something is kind of living in your head as a good idea and when something is gnawing at your gut. Sometimes that can take years....you can wait those two years years until the play you’ve been thinking about is burning to get out of you and you have to write it.

--Sarah Treem

I have a cheat-sheet for each one of my characters about their personality, the way they look, etc. So there is no possible way that I could have writer's block.

--R. L. Stine

Grasp the subject, the words will follow.

--Cato the Elder

When writing humor I never write a rough draft with the idea that I’m going to go back and make it better. Never. I never leave a sentence, I never leave a word unless I’m pretty sure that’s the best I can do with that and that’s what I want. That doesn’t mean that I won’t change some stuff later, maybe, but I’m really not a believer in drafts for humor. I know there are people who do that all the time and that’s the way they write, but I don’t think that it’s humor writing that they are doing. To me, you’ve got to get it right. It’s kind of like if you’re going to do a magic trick and the ball doesn’t disappear, you can’t say, ‘Well, I’ll get to that part later on. No! You’ve got to learn how to make that ball disappear right now, or you’re never going to be able to do this trick. Make this sentence funny before you try to write another sentence, or else decide you’re not going to do this joke. When I’m finished and I put the last period on the last sentence—that’s the way I think it should be, not that I’m going to go back and look at it later.

--Dave Barry
Challenge every single sentence; challenge it for lucidity, accuracy, originality and cadence. If it doesn’t meet the challenge, work on it until it does.

--Tom Robbins

Remember that language is not the frosting; it’s the cake. Rhythmical language and vivid imagery possess a power of effect that is independent from content.

--Tom Robbins

Don’t talk about it; you’ll talk it away. Let the ideas flow from your mind to the page without exposing them to air. Especially hot air.

--Tom Robbins

If you don’t actually like to write, love to write, feel driven and compelled to write, then you’re probably better off abandoning your ambition in favor of a more legitimate career.

--Tom Robbins

Never be afraid to make a fool of yourself. The furthest out you can go is the best place to be. (But pushing the envelope has to come naturally; you can’t force it.)

--Tom Robbins

Always compare yourself to the best. Even if you never measure up, it can’t help but make you better.

--Tom Robbins

Write every day without fail, even if it’s only for half an hour, even if you’re savagely hung over and your grandmother has just fallen out of a third story window.

--Tom Robbins

Stop worrying about getting published and worry about getting better. If you make the work good enough, it will get published.

--Tom Robbins

I’ve always been turned off by crybaby writing, in fiction as well as in memoir. Yes, bad, sad things happen to people; bad, sad things have happened to me; but I learned long ago that misery is perpetuated and enlightenment obstructed by people taking themselves far too seriously. A book, be it memoir or novel, is no place to throw oneself a pity party; and I, for one, have never wanted my books to contribute to the weariness in the world.

--Tom Robbins
The most important part of the writer’s anatomy is not the brain, where ideas are born, or the hands that transfer those ideas into concrete form, but the backside. Although intelligence and creativity are essential components to the writing process, a writer must dedicate the time to a blank page. Thinking about writing won’t produce a manuscript.

--Phillip Margolin

The only excuse for a metaphor is that it presents an image or idea in a way that refreshes it for the reader. My working maxim is: If you find yourself using a metaphor or simile you’ve heard or read before, delete it. It’s better to avoid figurative language altogether than contribute to the gleefully robust disease of cliché.

--Glen Duncan

I don’t really believe in that whole ‘wait for the muse to strike’ thing. I’m more of a ‘sit your ass in a chair and start typing’ guy....People treat writer’s block like it’s this kind of mythical, mystical ailment. It’s actually a very specific problem, and that is that something is wrong with your story, or wrong with your scene, and you’re trying to do something that is not motivated by your characters. If your writer’s block is so complete that you don’t even know where to start, it’s probably that you’re not spending enough time at the keyboard. It’s all part of the process. I also think writer’s block comes from judging yourself too much, and [thinking] I only wrote one sentence today! I’m terrible!

--Ransom Riggs

Now is the time to be more creative. Today. Trust that there is no better time, that no time in the future will offer you more of what you need. I often hear people talk about a time when they will be able to write—when they retire, when the kids are grown and gone, or when they can quit their moonlighting job. Postponing your writing life is like postponing a new diet. It can be an excuse of never starting. My advice: Start now, if only in a limited way. A time in the future may exist that will hold fewer obstacles, but these can be dealt with today, and, as we’ve discussed, removing all the obstacles can hurt creativity. There’s an old saying about life that applies to writing: Happiness in not a destination. It is a companion we can choose to accompany us on our journey.

--Jack Heffron

Writing is an athletic activity. Just like running. You can’t just talk about running. Ultimately, you have to do it. You can’t talk about being on a diet. Finally, you have to stop eating so much. You can’t talk about writing. You have to pick up your pen and do it.

--Natalie Goldberg
What I have learned in time, in 32 years of writing, is that it’s a lot of work, and if I just show up, and I work and work, there is a moment, a magical moment, at some point, when it gives. And then you don’t need the effort anymore. It’s like dancing. When you’re dancing and counting the steps, you’re not dancing. When your body just goes—then you’re dancing, and then there’s a rhythm, there’s a velocity, there’s a feeling, there’s a joy that you cannot describe. And it happens in spite of me. I think that’s the moment in writing when the book starts to happen. From that point on, it’s all joy. At the beginning, it’s work.

--Isabel Allende

It’s important to know the ending of the book, something toward which to write, even if it changes during the writing process.

--Phillip Margolin

Landscape and human destiny are often inseparable in my work. So I want my readers constantly aware of the world my characters inhabit. My goal is for the reader to see, hear, smell and feel the setting, and by doing so, understand my characters and their motivations better.

--Ron Rash

Your writing room doesn’t have to sport a Playboy Philosophy decor, and you don’t need an Early American roll top desk in which to house your writing implements. I wrote my first two published novels, Carrie and ’Salem’s Lot, in the laundry room of a doublewide trailer, pounding away on my wife’s portable Olivetti typewriter and balancing a child’s desk on my thighs; John Cheever reputedly wrote in the basement of his Park Avenue apartment building, near the furnace. The space can be humble (probably should be, as I think I have already suggested), and it really needs only one thing: a door which you are willing to shut. The closed door is your way of telling the world and yourself that you mean business; you have made a serious commitment to write and intend to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

—Stephen King

I’ve always found it best to have a routine. I go to my study at the same time every day and climb into my bay window. I may not be inspired every day, but on the days I am, I need to be in place to write. If I’m not particularly inspired, I’ll revise or do research or correspondence.

—Diane Ackerman

The problem is that we view writing as a luxury, something special to allow ourselves as soon as we’ve taken care of the countless nagging duties that seem to come first. Once you put writing first, the rest of your life will fall into place.

—Sue Grafton
I am Southern; I write what I know. I also write from a place of deep ambivalence; my relationship with my beloved, blood-soaked, beautiful, enraging homeland is passionate and ongoing. I think we have to write into what we darkly love and dearly hate. All my best book ideas are lurking down in the depths of my black and salty mental illness, and much of that swampland was formed and influenced by growing up in this specific place and time. It’s worth noting that I never wrote anything distinctly Southern until after I moved to Chicago for seven years. I needed the distance in both time and space to see the South clearly. When I was part of it, I did not realize how weird we are, and I could not view it clearly enough to depict it with my mingled love and horror. So write what you know? Yes. But not what is raw.

--Joshilyn Jackson

Creativity comes from trust. Trust your instincts. And never hope more than you work.

--Rita Mae Brown

Alright, let’s establish one firm rule: from when I get up—at 7 or 7:30—until, say, 12:30...allowing one break for a modest, circumscribed, abrupt meal of porridge or eggs at about 10:30, nothing else will be allowable—no cooking, no cleaning, no walking, no talking or playing, etc.

--Lydia Davis

Back of every creation, supporting it like an arch, is faith. Enthusiasm is nothing: it comes and goes. But if one believes, then miracles occur.

—Henry Miller

In a nervous frenzy, I fling words as if flinging mud at a wall. Blurt out, heave out, babble out something—anything—as a first draft.

—John McPhee

What people identify as writers’ block, I see as fear. The first step to getting over it is recognizing what you’re afraid of: Are you afraid to reveal something about yourself, are you afraid your story will fail, are you afraid someone will judge you? Whatever is keeping you silent is the thing you need to look at deeply and move beyond.

—Jacqueline Woodson

A cliché is dead matter. It causes gangrene in the prose around it, and sooner or later it eats your brain. The only thing to do with a cliché is send it to the sports page. Or the speechwriter, where it will live forever.

—Verlyn Klinkenborg
If you are looking for perfection or an artistic expression that is free of chaos, you should give up writing. Learning to be comfortable with the chaos of early drafts is essential. You’d never expect an infant to wake up one morning fully toilet-trained, speaking in perfect English, and heading off to the bus stop. It’s equally unrealistic to expect your characters and narrative flow to sort themselves out instantly. Art takes time. Stories have their own heartbeat, and they will unfold at their own pace. All you have to do is to continue to show up and do the work. Every day.

—Laurie Halse Anderson

Keep your day job, live frugally and be prepared for the long haul. The worst thing writers can do to themselves and their dreams is to have unrealistic expectations about how much money they are going to make. Writing is hard. Writing under the pressure of paying the rent and feeding children is ridiculously hard.

—Laurie Halse Anderson

Most of the sentences you make will need to be killed. The rest will need to be fixed.

—Verlyn Klinkenborg

You must write every single day of your life. You must read dreadful dumb books and glorious books, and let them wrestle in beautiful fights inside your head, vulgar one moment, brilliant the next. You must lurk in libraries and climb the stacks like ladders to sniff books like perfumes and wear books like hats upon your crazy heads. I wish you a wrestling match with your Creative Muse that will last a lifetime. I wish craziness and foolishness and madness upon you. May you live with hysteria, and out of it make fine stories—science fiction or otherwise. Which finally means, may you be in love every day for the next 20,000 days. And out of that love, remake a world.

—Ray Bradbury

Write fat, edit lean. In that first draft, put all the extra stuff in, anything that comes into your head. What happens is we self-edit as we're writing—Oh, that's not going to make it in the final. Don’t worry about that. Put it in. It’s going to add flavor, and it’s going to inform the text. Once you’re done with that, then go through and put it on a diet. You know, we want a fat baby. They’ve got the chubby cheeks, the chubby arms, the chubby fingers—we love that! That’s good. When the baby grows up, then we want the lean muscle.

—Garth Stein

Enjoy writing late into the night/morning while the rest of the world feels like it’s sleeping. There’s peace in it.

—Sofia Fionda
I work to loud music—hard-rock stuff like AC/DC, Guns ’n Roses, and Metallica have always been particular favorites—but for me the music is just another way of shutting the door. It surrounds me, keeps the mundane world out. When you write, you want to get rid of the world, do you not? Of course you do. When you're writing, you're creating your own worlds.

—Stephen King

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It’s like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen.
I vary the sentence length, and I created music. Music. The writing sings.
It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony.
I use short sentences.
And I use sentences of medium length.
And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

—Gary Provost

Look for ‘forbidden’ passions, buried selves, and ill-understood drives. These emotions are the fuel that drives your writing and makes possible hours, days, weeks, months and years of what will appear to others, at a distance, as ‘work.’

—Joyce Carol Oates

Listen to the story being told. Come up with the idea, but let it play out naturally. Try not to shape it word for word or be so married to an outline that you deny what could become something amazing. A writer needs to know so many things, but there are so many things he doesn’t need to know.

—Caron McCullers

You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.

—Anne Lamott

It is indeed difficult to make a living as a writer, and my advice to anyone contemplating a literary career is to have some other trade.

—William S. Burroughs
An exclamation point is a punctuation mark used to indicate that the writer of a sentence is a twelve year-old girl.

—TL;DR Wikipedia

I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil.

—Truman Capote

A good novel is an indivisible sum; every scene, sequence and passage of a good novel has to involve, contribute to and advance all three of its major attributes: theme, plot, characterization.

—Ayn Rand

The best way to learn about writing is to study the work of other writers you admire.

—Jeffery Deaver

I have this little litany of things they can do. And the first one, of course, is to write — every day, no excuses. It’s so easy to make excuses. Even professional writers have days when they’d rather clean the toilet than do the writing.

—Octavia Butler

The most important thing that I have learned, or that I’m trying to learn, is to give up perfectionism, because when you keep trying to make the story do all the things you want it do do, you keep failing, and you end up going around and around in circles. You end up confusing yourself and your talent, and you begin to view things as a failure, even though they’re not failures.

—Akhil Sharma

Don’t write about the things that you remember, but the things that you wish you could forget. Those are just huge in your heart. And that way you can get right to the seed of a story. That’s usually where I begin. Some memory I wish I could forget. All you have to do is write from some very true place in your heart. You cut to the chase when you write about things you feel frightened to think about, the things that haunt you.

—Sandra Cisneros

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.

—Matthew Arnold

Simplicity is the glory of expression.

—Walt Whitman
I have never given an aspiring write the advice ‘write what you know.’ In fact, when my students try to write fiction based on their lives, it often comes out stilted and forced. It’s because they’re limiting themselves to what actually happened, what they really know. To write better, to write imaginatively, they need to be given permission to invent, to lie, to make things up. That’s the only way you’re going to get to the truth.

—Charles Salzberg

You can have all the talent, be wonderful at prose, amazing characters, great dialogue, descriptions; you can knock it out of the ballpark; but if you don’t develop ‘the talent of the room’—all of those other talents are worthless. And that talent is the ability to just go into a room alone and sit down and write. Without that talent, you can never finish anything.

—Cynthia Bond

Every chapter is, in a sense, a short story, and like a short story, it needs to pull the reader along and persuade him or her not to shut the book. You need a good opening line to capture your readers interest, just as you often need to close a chapter with a sense of what happens next.

—David C. Taylor

Every few days I’ll upload my manuscript-in-progress to my Kindle, and use its text-to-speech tool to have the draft read to me while I’m driving, stuck in L.A. traffic. Hearing your work read aloud is really helpful—in catching typos, mulling over word choice or just listening to the flow and pacing of the text. At red lights, I jot notes on what’s working and what’s not, and start the next day by making those edits.

—Brenda Scott

In writing and politicking, it’s best not to think about it, just do it.

—Gore Vidal

Powerful verbs scrub my work clean. They manipulate a psychological thriller—the grim unease, the emotion, the page-flipping pace. I especially love ‘pulse’ and ‘thrum.’ Strong verbs allow me to write sparely and abandon the rest to the imagination. That way, the reader and I are in the game together.

—Julia Heaberlin

Writing isn’t about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it’s about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well.

—Stephen King
When writing your first draft, being busy is key. It may feel frustrating at first, but having daily writing periods curtailed by chores, family and other distractions actually helps you get the thing done. This is partly because the hectic pace forces you to type with a fleet-fingered desperation. But it’s mostly because noveling in the midst of a chaotic life makes ‘book time’ a treat rather than an obligation. It’s a small psychological shift, but it makes all the difference in the world.

—Chris Baty

Stopping a piece of work just because it’s hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to go on when you don’t feel like it, and sometimes you’re doing good work when it feels like all you’re managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position.

—Stephen King

One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes. The pet is embarrassed and the person who committed this act of premeditated cuteness should be even more embarrassed. Make yourself a solemn promise right now that you’ll never use ‘emolument’ when you man ‘tip’ and you’ll never say John stopped long enough to perform an act of excretion when you mean John stopped long enough to take a shit.

—Stephen King

For heaven’s sake, publish nothing before you are thirty.

—Virginia Woolf

To write this book well I must believe that it is my only novel and the last book I shall write. I wish to pour all into it without reserve.

—André Gide

My counsel is to force nothing and rather to trifle and sleep away all unproductive days and hours, than on such days to compose something that will afterwards give no pleasure.

—Goethe

There is no harm in reading any number of unimportant books for pastime, but the significant books must be taken cautiously. You don’t want them to get in the way of what may perhaps be growing and brooding in yourself, taking its own time.

—Christopher Morley
The more extensive your acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled, the more extensive will be your powers of invention, and what may appear still more like a paradox, the more original will be your composition.

—Sir Joshua Reynolds

Can you find some way of earning a decently liberal living quite apart from your writing? Are you aware that poverty is a dark room, into which no sane man will voluntarily go? Do you know that the lovely fable of the poet’s attic is a lie invented by rich people, and that lack of books and of diversion and of freedom is stunting to the soul?

—Arthur Davison Ficke

Understand that you can have in your writing no qualities which you do not honestly entertain in yourself. Understand that you cannot keep out of your writing the indication of the evil or shallowness you entertain in yourself. If you love to have a servant stand behind your chair at dinner, it will appear in your writing; if you possess a vile opinion of women, or if you begrudge anything, or doubt immortality, these will appear by what you leave unsaid more than by what you say. There is no trick or cunning by which you can have in your writing that which you do not possess in yourself.

—Walt Whitman

Find the key emotion; this may be all you need to know to find your short story.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

A short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build towards it.

—Edgar Allan Poe

Don’t panic. Midway through writing a novel, I have regularly experienced moments of bowel-curdling terror, as I contemplate the drivel on the screen before me and see beyond it, in quick succession, the derisive reviews, the friends’ embarrassment, the failing career, the dwindling income, the repossessed house, the divorce . . . Working doggedly on through crises like these, however, has always got me there in the end. Leaving the desk for a while can help. Talking the problem through can help me recall what I was trying to achieve before I got stuck. Going for a long walk almost always gets me thinking about my manuscript in a slightly new way. And if all else fails, there’s prayer. St Francis de Sales, the patron saint of writers, has often helped me out in a crisis. If you want to spread your net more widely, you could try appealing to Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, too.

—Sarah Waters
In the planning stage of a book, don’t plan the ending. It has to be earned by all that will go before it.

—Rose Tremain

In order to write about life, first you must live it!

—Ernest Hemingway

Your work will be rejected. Often, always, and forever. Good work. Quality work. Publishable work. Work you’ve born your soul into. You will be turned down not only for logic and for reason, but for the silliest of subjectivities: The editor’s cat has just died, and your work is too sad. The agent is moving in a darker publishing direction; your work is too light. Your poems are too short. Your essays are too long. We’ve seen this before. We’ve never seen this before and wouldn’t know how to market it. It’s good, but it won’t sell. It’s good, but it’s just not right for us.

—Nicki Porter

If there is magic in story writing, and I am convinced there is, no one has ever been able to reduce it to a recipe that can be passed from one person to another. The formula seems to lie solely in the aching urge of the writer to convey something he feels important to the reader. If the writer has that urge, he may sometimes, but by no means always, find the way to do it. You must perceive the excellence that makes a good story good or the errors that make a bad story. For a bad story is only an ineffective story.

—John Steinbeck

If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it. Or, if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go. I can’t allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative.

—Elmore Leonard

Writerly advice: Don’t get it right, get it written.

—Mandy Hubbard

This is how you do it: you sit down at the keyboard and you put one word after another until it’s done. It’s that easy, and that hard.

—Neil Gaiman

Problem, purpose, conflict, goal. Use them. Think about them while you are in the planning phase of your novel; keep these elements at the back of your mind to guide you while you write. When you have written a scene, make sure they are all there, or that if one or another is missing, it is intentional and the effect is what you want.

—Phyllis A. Whitney
The beautiful unruliness of literature is what makes it so much fun to wander through: you read Jane Austen and you say, oh, that is IT. And then you turn around and read Sterne, and you say, Man, that is IT. And then you wander across a century or so, and you run into Kafka, or Calvino, or Cortazar, and you say, well that is IT. And then you stroll through what Updike called the grottos of Ulysses, and after that you consort with Baldwin or Welty or Spencer, or Morrison, or Bellow or Fitzgerald and then back to W. Shakespeare, Esq; the champ, and all the time you feel the excitement of being in the presence of IT. And when you yourself spend the good time writing, you are not different in kind than any of these people, you are part of that miracle of human invention. So get to work. Get on with IT, no matter how difficult IT is. Every single gesture, every single stumble, every single uninspired-feeling hour, is worth IT.

—Kathy Fish

If you can’t stand your own company alone in a room for long hours, or, when it gets tough, the feeling of being in a locked cell, or, when it gets tougher still, the vague feeling of being buried alive—then don’t be a writer.

—Graham Swift

You can’t run a 5K without training first. Don’t try to write 10,000 words in 2 days. Find a schedule that works for you.

—Unknown

Writing is a muscle. Smaller than a hamstring and slightly bigger than a bicep, and it needs to be exercised to get stronger. Think of your words as reps, your paragraphs as sets, your pages as daily workouts. Think of your laptop as a machine like the one at the gym where you open and close your inner thighs in front of everyone, exposing both your insecurities and your genitals. Because that is what writing is all about.

—Colin Nissan

I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here? Let’s think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you’ve read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being startled by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone’s soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds.

—Anne Lamott
If a writer starts worrying about what he or she has left out or forgotten, they might not be able to write even a single line.

—Baby Halder

An author needs a lot more than one person to succumb to his literary seductive charms, but, like Saul, he must realize that he doesn't have to—and indeed cannot—capture the hearts of every possible reader out there. No matter who the writer, his ideal intended audience is only a small faction of all the living readers. Name the most widely read authors you can think of—from Shakespeare, Austen, and Dickens to Robert Waller, Stephen King, and J. K. Rowling—and the immense majority of book-buyers out there actively decline to read them.

—Thomas McCormack

I disagree with the advice of 'write about what you know.' Write about what you need to know, in an effort to understand.

—Donald Windham

Let us not neglect the forbidden. Let us not sophisticate ourselves out of the cheap thrill and chill of it: the story told for perversity's sake, and all the better for that; the image created because an artist gets tired of reasons sometimes, and wants to dredge up some picture he's been haunted by, and parade it like a new tattoo. I go with it, readily.

—Clive Barker

Concentrate on sharpening your memory and peeling your sensibility. Cut every page you write by at least one third. Stop constructing those piffling little similes of yours. Work out what it is you want to say. Then say it in the most direct and vigorous way you can. Eat meat. Drink blokk. Give up your social life and don't think you can have friends. Rise in the quiet hours of the night and prick your fingertips and use the blood for ink; that will cure you of persiflage!”

—Hilary Mantel

_Saepe stilum vertas, iterum quae digna legi sint scripturas._ (Turn the stylus [to erase] often if you would write something worthy of being reread.)

—Horace

It is only when you open your veins and bleed onto the page a little that you establish contact with your reader. If you do not believe in the characters or the story you are doing at that moment with all your mind, strength, and will, if you don't feel joy and excitement while writing it, then you’re wasting good white paper, even if it sells, because there are other ways in which a writer can bring in the rent money besides writing bad or phony stories.

—Paul Gallico
So they spread the paintings on the lawn, and the boy explained each of them. ‘This is the school, and this is the playground, and these are my friends.’ He stared at the paintings for a long time and then shook his head in discouragement. ‘In my mind, they were a whole lot better.’

Isn't that the truth? Every morning, I go to my desk and reread yesterday’s pages, only to be discouraged that the prose isn’t as good as it seemed during the excitement of composition. In my mind, it was a whole lot better.

Know something about the world, and by this I mean the world outside of books. This might require joining the Marines, or working on an oil rig or as a hash slinger at a truck stop in Kentucky. Know what it smells like out there. If everything you write smells like a library, then your prospective audience will be limited to those who like the smell of libraries.

—Douglas Wilson

Make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait.

—Charles Dickens

In quickness is truth. The more swiftly you write, the more honest you are. In hesitation is thought. In delay comes the effort for a style, instead of leaping upon truth which is the only style worth deadfalling or tiger-trapping.

—Ray Bradbury

READ, damn it. Fill your brain to the bursting point with the good stuff, starting with writers that you truly enjoy, and then work your way backward and outward, reading those writers who inspired the writers you love best. That was my path as far as Weird/Horror Fiction, starting with Lovecraft, and then working my way backward/outward on the Weird Fiction spiderweb. And don’t limit your reading. Read it all, especially non-fiction and various news outlets. You’d be surprised by how many of my story ideas were born while listening to NPR, perusing a blog, or paging through Vanity Fair.

Once you have your fuel squared away, just write what you love, in whatever style and genre. You’ll never have fun being someone you’re not, so be yourself. When a singer opens their mouth, what comes out is what comes out.

Also, don’t be afraid to fail, and don’t be afraid to walk away. Writing isn’t for everyone, and that’s totally fine. One doesn’t need to be a writer to enjoy being a reader and overall fan of genre or wider fiction.

—T. E. Grau
What lasts in the reader's mind is not the phrase but the effect the phrase created: laughter, tears, pain, joy. If the phrase is not affecting the reader, what's it doing there? Make it do its job or cut it without mercy or remorse.

—Isaac Asimov

My advice to writers is this:

Walk, talk, breathe, laugh, cry, fall, rise, fail, succeed, run, jump, love, hate, hide, seek, learn, work, play, feel, LIVE.

Then write it down.

—S. Alex Martin

Don’t give in to doubt. Never be discouraged if your first draft isn’t what you thought it would be. Given skill and a story that compels you, muster your determination and make what’s on the page closer to what you have in your mind.

—David Morrell,

If you are serious, and you want to make a living as an author, then you need to hustle. Period. If you can't make that quality, then you need to concentrate on your craft and practice more.

One other thing, quality comes with practice. If you are prolific, then you become a better writer because you are writing. The more you do anything the better at it you will become. So in a way, quantity does add to quality.

—Larry Correia

Write what you know, and what do you know better than your own secrets?

—Raymond Carver

Build your novel one word at a time. Remember that minutes = novels.

—Mercedes M. Yardley

Don’t wait. Writers are the only artists I know of who expect to get somewhere by waiting. Everyone knows you have to dance to be a dancer, you have to sing to be a singer, you have to act to be an actor, but far too many people seem to believe that you don’t have to write to be a writer. So, instead of writing, they wait. Isaac Asimov said it beautifully in just six words: ‘It’s the writing that teaches you.’ Writing is what teaches you. Writing is what leads to ‘inspiration.’ Writing is what generates ideas. Nothing else—and nothing less. Don't meditate, don't do yoga, don’t do drugs. Just write.

—Daniel Quinn
Never try to keep it professional, keep it smutty, write with bodily fluids on sandpaper, and damn the men with clipboards in white suits, the literary bean-counters, the prose police.

—Peter Selgin

Step back and scrutinize your work, to delve deep into the meaning behind the words, it will get both easier in some ways and harder in others. Either way, you need to practice every day. You will probably get faster with time, because you learn to do this instinctively, and the writing may flow better on some days more than others, but it doesn’t get easier. And if you aren’t writing everyday, you are doing yourself and your craft a disservice. Writing is a habit. Get into the habit.

—Darynda Jones

We should be told: Write fast, write close to the bone, write for ten hours straight until you’re not thinking in words anymore, but in colors, in smells, in waves of memory. Right what you care about. Don’t write one more word you don’t care about. Don’t waste any more of your life on what does not matter to you. Write only what matters to you—those scenes, those dialogues. Get messy. Before you get neat, get very, very messy. Write until you are more alive than you have ever been before.

—Bonnie Friedman

Thankfully existing only in SMALL pockets within our discipline, is ‘intellectual’ snobbery. It’s a hushed but ugly truth that people are made to feel not worthy to be among a certain set – didn’t attend the right school or don’t have the requisite abbreviations to follow their name. I know what that feels like. Good thing I’m pigheaded, have a bigger vision and committed to my craft, or I would’ve succumbed to it long ago. That is why when I meet an emerging writer who’s serious about developing their craft, I try to encourage them as much as I can. I say IGNORE the highbrow cliques and prove your mettle by growing, accepting balanced feedback and most of all, creating work that will stand the test of time. Period.

—Sandra Sealy

Daily life is always extraordinary when rendered precisely. We can unlock our lives with a pencil tip.

—Bonnie Friedman

If you were waiting for a sign that you’re meant to be a writer...

THIS IS IT.

—M. Kirin

Live first, write second.

—Miranda Paul
If the passage absolutely demands cursing, be moderate. A little of it goes a long way. I’ve seen beginning writers pepper curse words through sentence after sentence.

‘If you don’t -blanking- get your -blanking-blank-blank- in to this house this -blanking- minute, I’m going to -blank- your -blank- and nail it to the -blanking-door.’

Two things happen when I read this junk: I get bored and I get angry. I didn’t pick up your book to read garbage. If this is as clever as you can be, I don’t want to read your prose. In life if you met someone who spoke like this, you’d want to flee. Then why put this stuff on the page?

As near as I can determine, this abomination occurs because a writer is corrupted by the awful -blanking- dialog that movies inflict on us these days. It’s also a sign of insecurity. The writer wonders if the dialog is strong enough and decides a lot of—blanking-blank—will do the trick.

Someone might object that this kind of dialog is realistic in certain situations—intense scenes involving policemen or soldiers for example. I can only reply that in my research I spend considerable time with policemen and soldiers. Few of them curse any more than a normal person would. This garbage isn’t realistic. It merely draws attention to itself and holds back the story. Use it sparingly.

—David Morrell

You think you have no ‘talent’? Write anyway. Lots of people with ‘talent’ don’t actually act on it. As long as you write, you will learn, you will improve, and you will be better than anyone claiming to have ‘talent.’

—M. Kirin

Even great, best selling writers produce works that fall flat from expectations. This writing thing isn’t easy and everything you produce won’t be a best seller, but you must write anyway. You have to write because you love it, because it fuels you, because you can feel the stories living inside you, nudging you, prodding you, itching to get out and the only thing worse than writing it and failing is not writing it. As the late Maya Angelou once said, ‘There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.’

Even if your work doesn’t resonate with others, it is still worth writing. And that in itself, is what’s important.

—Nancy Arroyo Ruffin
Stop beating yourself up over all the days you didn’t work on your story. Focus on what you can do today.

Sit down, and write. —M. Kirin

Writers often torture themselves trying to get the words right. Sometimes you must lower your expectations and just finish it. —Don Roff

Why is it that women are the only ones who will write perfect men into fiction? It’s strange. If a man portrayed his fictional men as archangels, the feminists would throw back their heads and howl, ‘UNFAIR!’ but we women will create our own Mr. Darcy’s and Mr. Knightley’s and defy anyone who would point out their unrealistic points. The men aren’t the ones crazy about Pride and Prejudice. Obviously they don’t find perfect men realistic and honest enough to bother reading about. We don’t write perfect women characters, do we? No. Our women all have bad tempers, or resentful hearts, or scabby pasts, or hidden fears--things that make them real. It’s because we’re easy on ourselves and aren’t trying to boast perfection because we know we don’t measure up. Then why do we hold men to a different standard?..... I’d caution all writers to make sure that your male ‘hero’ in your story has his own flaws. You don’t want a one-dimensional character. You don’t want a perfect man that will drive away other men from reading the book.

Look to the men in your life. The men around you. Look to your brothers and fathers and pastors and neighbors. Your uncles and the guy down the street. Goodness--look to Taylor the Latte Boy if you must, but let’s cast aside the Perfect-Man syndrome. —Rachel Heffington

If we are artists- hell, whether or not we’re artists- it is our job, our responsibility, perhaps even our sacred calling, to take whatever life has handed us and make something new, something that wouldn’t have existed if not for the fire, the genetic mutation, the sick baby, the accident. —Dani Shapiro

Aspiring authors, get this through your head. Cover art serves one purpose, and one purpose only, to get potential customers interested long enough to pick up the book to read the back cover blurb. In the internet age that means the thumb nail image needs to be interesting enough to click on. That’s what covers are for. —Larry Correia
The only way you’ll find out if you ‘have it in you’ is to get to work and see if you do. The only way to override your ‘limitations, insecurities, jealousies, and ineptitude’ is to produce. You have limitations. You are in some way inept. This is true of every writer, and it’s especially true of writers who are twenty-six. You will feel insecure and jealous. How much power you give those feelings is entirely up to you.

—Cheryl Strayed

Folding the laundry, completing another project at work, or watching television for the next hour doesn’t build your writing muscles. It only leaves them flabby.

—Rob Bignell

You have to be in your middle thirties before you have anything worth saying.

—Peter Bowen

There is nothing more valuable in the writing process than a friend to hold you accountable to your own potential.

—J. R. Young

When I reach for my pen, nothing is out of reach.

—Rob Bignell

On writing, my advice is the same to all. If you want to be a writer, write. Write and write and write. If you stop, start again. Save everything that you write. If you feel blocked, write through it until you feel your creative juices flowing again. Write. Writing is what makes a writer, nothing more and nothing less. — Ignore critics. Critics are a dime a dozen. Anybody can be a critic. Writers are priceless. — Go where the pleasure is in your writing. Go where the pain is. Write the book you would like to read. Write the book you have been trying to find but have not found. But write. And remember, there are no rules for our profession. Ignore rules. Ignore what I say here if it doesn’t help you. Do it your own way. — Every writer knows fear and discouragement. Just write. — The world is crying for new writing. It is crying for fresh and original voices and new characters and new stories. If you won’t write the classics of tomorrow, well, we will not have any. Good luck.

—Anne Rice

Motivated authors sacrifice TV time, sleep, hobbies, and even family time.

—Gudjon Bergmann

You will do well not to write for money, not because you won’t get rich doing it, but because writing fueled by that sort of motivation becomes dull and lifeless and mediocre.

—Joyce Rachelle
Don’t stop writing until someone pries the pen from your cold, dead hands.
—James J. Tritten

There is no such thing as lack of time, only unclear priorities and lack of motivation. It is better to abandon a project than to work on it half-heartedly for a protracted period of time.
—Gudjon Bergmann

Getting started on writing a book isn’t as hard as it sounds. You don’t need a plan and an outline. In fact, all you need are two things: time and one idea.
—Natasha Lester

Writing as a creative art flourishes only when there are no rules. Rules stifle you from entering the silent and forbidden spaces where the core of the story is waiting to be revealed.
—Gloria D. Gonsalves

If you have nothing good to say about someone, write a book about them.
—Carmen Fox

What you don’t write is often more important than what you do.
—Ernest Hemingway

Only God gets it right the first time and only a slob says, ‘Oh well, let it go, that's what copyeditors are for.’
—Stephen King

People are afraid to write books because they fear people will read them and find them worthless. Write as if nobody is going to read and throw your work into the public dustbin. Somebody may find it and consider it treasure.
—Bangambiki Habyarimana

There are many advices on writing. The best I know is stop reading them and start writing.
—Bangambiki Habyarimana

The secret to good writing is to use small words for big ideas, not to use big words for small ideas.
—Oliver Markus

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Writing—like any art—is so damned personal that there really isn’t a right way to do it. You do what works for you; what matters is getting the words on the paper. Sure, if you hear advice, and it works, then excellent. But, if it doesn’t, you have to realize that perhaps nothing is wrong with you. You don’t jive with the advice.

—Mur Lafferty

Max sent Scottie some literary advice, the same dictum he gave every college student who called on him. He stressed the importance of a liberal arts education but urged her to avoid all courses in writing. ‘Everyone has to find her own way of writing,’ he wrote Scottie, ‘and the source of finding it is largely out of literature.’

—A. Scott Berg

The feeling that the work is magnificent, and the feeling that it is abominable, are both mosquitoes to be repelled, ignored, or killed, but not indulged.

—Annie Dillard

You can read in the space of a coffin, and you can write in the space of a toolshed meant for mowers and spades.

—Annie Dillard

There may be a Nurse Ratched-like listing of things that must be done right this moment: foods that must come out of the freezer, appointments that must be canceled or made, hairs that must be tweezed. But you hold an imaginary gun to your head and make yourself stay at the desk.

—Anne Lamott

Keep being bold on the page, and in life, and people cannot ignore you forever.

—Don Roff

If you have received a letter inviting you to speak at the dedication of a new cat hospital, and you hate cats, your reply, declining the invitation, does not necessarily have to cover the full range of your emotions. You must make it clear that you will not attend, but you do not have to let fly at the cats. The writer of the letter asked a civil question; attack cats, then, only if you can do so with good humor, good taste, and in such a way that your answer will be courteous as well as responsive. Since you are out of sympathy with cats, you may quite properly give this as a reason for not appearing at the dedicatory ceremonies of a cat hospital. But bear in mind that your opinion of cats was not sought, only your services as a speaker. Try to keep things straight.

—William Strunk Jr.
Don’t be afraid to get off the internet, the answers aren’t all there. You may have to ask a cop about the kickback from a shotgun, or how sweaty they get in summer wearing body armor. Or what color blood is in the moonlight, or the vibrations through a serrated knife’s handle you feel in your fingers when you are hacking through somebody’s neck and hit cartilage.

—Dan Alatorre

Pound it out, get it done, write every day. No excuses. Kerouac said you can’t wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club. Damn straight. You’ll sleep a lot better getting your word count in than another quick Twitter check or keeping up to date on the Kardashians.

—Dan Alatorre

Why the tag of ‘aspiring’ writer be the wishful cliché? It’s like a bumper sticker. Say it! I am a Writer. Period. We may all have a target and gradation toward successes, a personal illusion/perception. The quality or perseverance in one’s craft is your act. Flaws? Sure. Yet, you are a Writer, not a wannabe. Let go of the tags. Just write!

—J. T. Sanz

I made a decision long ago not to make any apologies. Romance rocks, and even though my books don’t actually fall into the romance genre, I tout them as very much being about the romance. It’s fun. We’re all obsessed with it. And it’s human nature. Remember, NO APOLOGIES! Write what’s in your heart!

—Darynda Jones

ALWAYS hook a reader. If a detail is unnecessary, it doesn’t belong in your work, long or short! Make everything intriguing. If you have to describe a desk, make it awesome.

—Darynda Jones

You take a universal concept, something that has been done a million times (because everything has been done a million times), and add a fresh twist to it. Something no one saw coming. But mostly fresh writing! Keep it clean, simple, and compelling.

—Darynda Jones

Here’s my advice: you hold in your heart everything you need to know to write anything your story needs written. Dig deep and go where the pain and fear and joy are, and put it out there. The minute you shy away from pure honesty in your writing, you become a liar and people will smell it. People are suckers for the truth and they know it when they see it. Open your soul and they will stop and watch.

—Dan Alatorre
I take the rawest, realest moments in anyone’s life and I open them up and lay them bare. The innocence of a five year old child, the awkwardness of a teenager’s first sexual encounter, the heartbreak of longing for a relationship you can’t have, confronting the possibility of the death of your newborn child, whatever it is, you open your soul and put it out there and dare the world to read it, ready to have them stomp on you and laugh, but ready to do it again the next day. You have to put yourself out there as a writer, you can’t play it safe. Great writing isn’t safe.

—Dan Alatorre

Writing is new, relatively speaking. Story telling is ancient. Tell your story first putting aside all other worries. Leave fretting over homonyms, semicolons, and Oxford commas to editors and friends you can be bribe with baking.

—Ada Maria Soto

I would write:

‘The soft melting hunk of butter trickled in gold down the stringy grooves of the split yam.’

Or:

‘The child’s clumsy fingers fumbled in sleep, feeling vainly for the wish of its dream.’

‘The old man huddled in the dark doorway, his bony face lit by the burning yellow in the windows of distant skyscrapers.’

My purpose was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative.

—Richard Wright

Toni Morrison said, ‘The function of freedom is to free someone else,’ and if you are no longer wracked or in bondage to a person or a way of life, tell your story. Risk freeing someone else. Not everyone will be glad that you did. Members of your family and other critics may wish you had kept your secrets. Oh, well, what are you going to do? Get it all down. Let it pour out of you and onto the page. Write an incredibly shitty, self-indulgent, whiny, mewling first draft. Then take out as many of the excesses as you can.

—Anne Lamott
Never use the passive voice. Do not say, ‘It will get done.’ Say, ‘I’ll do it,’ and then stick to a solid, unwavering deadline

—Gina Barreca

Set fire to cities and nations, to hearts and minds, to the very core of every human spirit. Make sure your words seep into the skin of the reader, leaving trace minerals that sustain the ailing human shell. Make them pay attention. Set fire to the soul. Anything less is an abomination to creation.

—Susan Marie

**COMMANDMENTS**

1. Work on one thing at a time until finished.
2. Start no more new books, add no more new material to ‘Black Spring.’
3. Don't be nervous. Work calmly, joyously, recklessly on whatever is in hand.
4. Work according to Program and not according to mood. Stop at the appointed time!
5. When you can't create you can work.
6. Cement a little every day, rather than add new fertilizers.
7. Keep human! See people, go places, drink if you feel like it.
8. Don't be a draught-horse! Work with pleasure only.
9. Discard the Program when you feel like it—but go back to it next day. Concentrate. Narrow down. Exclude.
10. Forget the books you want to write. Think only of the book you are writing.
11. Write first and always. Painting, music, friends, cinema, all these come afterwards.

—Henry Miller

1. Never sit down and start writing. Always have a complete plan for what you are going to write before you start.
2. Always know the ending of your story. If you know the ending, you can always figure out how to get there.
4. When you finish writing, go back and cross out all adverbs.
5. No hugging. No crying.

—R. L. Stine

My top three pieces of writing advice? Stop whining and write. Stop fucking around and write. Stop making excuses and write.

—Nora Roberts
One of the few things I know about writing is this: Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book, give it, give it all, give it now.

—Annie Dillard

Start telling the stories that only you can tell, because there’ll always be better writers than you and there’ll always be smarter writers than you. There will always be people who are much better at doing this or doing that, but you are the only you.

—Neil Gaiman

Once a novel gets going and I know it is viable, I don’t then worry about plot or themes. These things will come in almost automatically because the characters are now pulling the story.

—Chinua Achebe

Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you’ve been to college.

—Kurt Vonnegut

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something – anything – down on paper.

—Anne Lamott

RULES FOR WRITING FIRST DRAFTS

1. Barricade the door. It must be just you, the ink, and the paper.
2. Work in a physical and mental condition that makes you want to write. Get there by all means possible.
3. Write yourself silly.
4. Allow our imagination to go to weird places. Nothing is off limits. You can clean up your mess later.
5. Break every writing rule know to man.
6. It’s okay if it reads like a letter from a lunatic.
7. Steal stylistically from other writers, as all great writers do.
8. Keep your bottom in your chair until you are done.
9. Once you’ve finished a first draft, leave it alone for days—if not weeks.
10. Celebrate.

—Demian Farnworth

Work on a computer that is disconnected from the internet.

—Zadie Smith
Read it aloud to yourself because that's the only way to be sure the rhythms of the sentences are OK (prose rhythms are too complex and subtle to be thought out—they can be got right only by ear).

—Diana Athill

For the love of your writing and your sanity, stop taking the advice from the know-it-alls as gospel.

—positivewriter.com

The one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live as only you can.

—Neil Gaiman

When people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right.
When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.

—Neil Gaiman

The main rule of writing is that if you do it with enough assurance and confidence, you're allowed to do whatever you like. (That may be a rule for life as well as for writing. But it's definitely true for writing.) So write your story as it needs to be written. Write it honestly, and tell it as best you can. I'm not sure that there are any other rules. Not ones that matter.

—Neil Gaiman

Even the great writers of our time have tried and failed and failed some more. Vladimir Nabokov received a harsh rejection letter from Knopf upon submitting Lolita, which would later go on to sell fifty million copies. Sylvia Plath's first rejection letter for The Bell Jar read, 'There certainly isn't enough genuine talent for us to take notice.' Gertrude Stein received a cruel rejection letter that mocked her style. Marcel Proust's Swann's Way earned him a sprawling rejection letter regarding the reasons he should simply give up writing all together. Tim Burton's first illustrated book, The Giant Zlig, got the thumbs down from Walt Disney Productions, and even Jack Kerouac's perennial On the Road received a particularly blunt rejection letter that simply read, 'I don't dig this one at all.' So even if you're an utterly fantastic writer who will be remembered for decades forthcoming, you'll still most likely receive a large dollop of criticism, rejection, and perhaps even mockery before you get there.

—Cody Delistraty
Never use jargon words like reconceptualize, demassification, attitudinally, judgmentally. They are hallmarks of a pretentious ass.

—David Ogilvy

A writer must know his or her ABC. Apply Bottom to Chair!

—Ann Hite Kemp

The nearest I have to a rule is a Post-it on the wall in front of my desk saying ‘Faire et se taire’ (Flaubert), which I translate for myself as ‘Shut up and get on with it.’

—Helen Simpson

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

—Kurt Vonnegut

EIGHT RULES FOR WRITING A SHORT STORY:

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things: reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a Sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

—Kurt Vonnegut

Becoming a writer is about becoming conscious. When you’re conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about the truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for your reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say, in the pictures you have painted, and this decreases the terrible sense of isolation that we have all had too much of.

—Anne Lamott
The secret of writing is to get started, and in order to get started you need to break the complex, overwhelming task of writing into small manageable tasks. Then you simply get going with the first task.

—Anne Lamott

This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious. Try walking around with a child who’s going, ‘Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned down house! Look at that red sky!’ And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, ‘Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!’ I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe.

—Anne Lamott

A work in progress quickly becomes feral. It reverts to a wild state overnight. . . it is a lion growing in strength. You must visit it every day and reassert your mastery over it. If you skip a day, you are, quite rightly, afraid to open the door to its room. You enter its room with bravura, holding a chair at the thing and shouting, ‘Simba!’

—Annie Dillard

My own best advice to young writers is: follow your curiosity and passion. What fascinates you will probably fascinate others. But, even if it doesn’t, you will have devoted your life to what you love. An important corollary is that it’s no use trying to write like someone else. Discover what’s uniquely yours.

—Diane Ackerman

Don’t write stage directions. If it is not apparent what the character is trying to accomplish by saying the line, telling us how the character said it, or whether or not she moved to the couch isn’t going to aid the case. We might understand better what the character means but we aren’t particularly going to care.

—David Mamet

You never want to judge or condemn your characters on the page. Instead you want to reveal what they do in direct light and allow readers to come to their own conclusion. Literature isn’t about presenting a moral condemnation—rather exploring the complex feelings of human life.

—Annie DeWitt

Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip. Think of what you skip reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them.

—Elmore Leonard
The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that’s already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to the education and rank.

—William Zinsser

Look back upstream. If you have come to your planned ending and it doesn’t seem to be working, run your eye up the page and the page before that. You may see that your best ending is somewhere in there, that you were finished before you thought you were.

—John McPhee

‘Don’t be pretentious’ is my first advice to young writers. This is the big problem — just because you’re getting an MFA doesn’t mean you have to write for the Academy. Be true to your personality. Don’t temper your personality down with words. Don’t build defensive fortresses around yourself with words — words are your friends.

—Gary Shteyngart

It’s not that you get a cliché and then wiggle it about or use synonyms. You don’t take an ordinary decorative paragraph and give it style. What you’re trying to do is be faithful to your perceptions and transmit them as faithfully as you can. I say these sentences until they sound right. There’s no objective reason why they’re right. They just sound right to me.

—Martin Amis

I have learned, as has many another better writer, to summon inspiration to my call as soon as I begin my day’s stint, and not to hang around waiting for it. Inspiration is merely a pretty phrase for work. And it can be cultivated by anyone who has the patience to try. Inspiration which will not come at its possessor’s summons is like a dog that cannot be trained to obey. The sooner the both are gotten rid of, the better.

—Albert Payson Terhune

Never use a verb other than ‘said’ to carry dialogue. The line of dialogue belongs to the character; the verb is the writer sticking his nose in. But ‘said’ is far less intrusive than ‘grumbled,’ gasped,’ ‘cautioned,’ ‘lied.’ I once noticed Mary McCarthy ending a line of dialogue with ‘she asseverated’ and had to stop reading and go to the dictionary.

—Elmore Leonard
Reread, rewrite, reread, rewrite. If it still doesn't work, throw it away. It's a nice feeling, and you don't want to be cluttered with the corpses of poems and stories which have everything in them except the life they need.

—Helen Dunmore

Don't write in public places. In the early 1990s I went to live in Paris. The usual writerly reasons: back then, if you were caught writing in a pub in England, you could get your head kicked in, whereas in Paris, *dans les cafés* . . . Since then I've developed an aversion to writing in public. I now think it should be done only in private, like any other lavatorial activity.

—Geoff Dyer

Have regrets. They are fuel. On the page they flare into desire.

—Geoff Dyer

Remember, if you sit at your desk for 15 or 20 years, every day, not counting weekends, it changes you. It just does. It may not improve your temper, but it fixes something else. It makes you more free.

—Anne Enright

A story needs rhythm. Read it aloud to yourself. If it doesn't spin a bit of magic, it's missing something.

—Esther Freud

Editing is everything. Cut until you can cut no more. What is left often springs into life.

—Esther Freud

Find your best time of the day for writing and write. Don't let anything else interfere. Afterwards it won't matter to you that the kitchen is a mess.

—Esther Freud

Write what you need to write, not what is currently popular or what you think will sell.

—P. D. James

You don't know the limits of your own abilities. Successful or not, if you keep pushing beyond yourself, you will enrich your own life – and maybe even please a few strangers.

—A.L. Kennedy
Defend your work. Organisations, institutions and individuals will often think they know best about your work – especially if they are paying you. When you genuinely believe their decisions would damage your work – walk away. Run away. The money doesn't matter that much.

—A.L. Kennedy

Write. No amount of self-inflicted misery, altered states, black pullovers or being publicly obnoxious will ever add up to your being a writer. Writers write. On you go.

—A.L. Kennedy

5 TECHNIQUES FOR GOOD CRAFTSMANSHIP

1. Proceed slowly and take care.
2. To ensure that you proceed slowly, write by hand.
3. Write slowly and by hand only about subjects that interest you.
4. Develop craftsmanship through years of wide reading.
5. Rewrite and edit until you achieve the most felicitous phrase/sentence/paragraph/page/story/chapter.

—Annie Proulx

5 ESSENTIALS FOR A BETTER STORY

1. Employ an unreliable narrator, preferably one who doesn’t know he is insane and has no recollection of such events as digging into a grave to rip out the teeth of his recently departed lover.
2. Include a beautiful woman with raven locks and porcelain skin, preferably quite young, and let her die tragically of some unknown ailment.
3. Use grandiloquent words, such as heretofore, forthwith, and never more. A little Latin will also enhance the text.
4. Do not shy away from such grotesqueries as inebriation, imprisonment, insanity, and men costumed as orangutans being burned to death.
5. When in doubt, bury someone alive.

—Gotham Writers’ Workshop Mock

Edgar Allan Poe

Enjoy writing late into the night/ morning while the rest of the world feels like it’s sleeping. There’s peace in it.

—Sofia Fionda

Look for ‘forbidden’ passions, buried selves, and ill-understood drives. These emotions are the fuel that drives your writing and makes possible hours, days, weeks, months and years of what will appear to others, at a distance, as ‘work.’

—Joyce Carol Oates
GEORGE ORWELL: 6 QUESTIONS/6 RULES

A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

What am I trying to say?
What words will express it?
What image or idiom will make it clearer?
fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

Could I put it more shortly?
Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

One can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
Never use a long word where a short one will do.
If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
Never use the passive where you can use the active.
Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

—George Orwell

The writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true.

—John Steinbeck

6 WRITING TIPS FROM JOHN STEINBECK

1. Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.

2. Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material.
3. Forget your generalized audience. In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the theater, it doesn't exist. In writing, your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person and write to that one.

4. If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it—bypass it and go on. When you have finished the whole you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is because it didn't belong there.

5. Beware of a scene that becomes too dear to you, dearer than the rest. It will usually be found that it is out of drawing.

6. If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it. Only then will it have the sound of speech.

— John Steinbeck

Perfectionism is simply putting a limit on your future. When you have an idea of perfect in your mind, you open the door to constantly comparing what you have now with what you want. That type of self criticism is significantly deterring.

--John Eliot

When the English language gets in my way, I walk over it.

—William A. Sunday

Listen to the story being told. Come up with the idea, but let it play out naturally. Try not to shape it word for word or be so married to an outline that you deny what could become something amazing. A writer needs to know so many things, but there are so many things he doesn’t need to know.

—Caron McCullers

You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.

—Anne Lamott

When a thought takes one’s breath away, a grammar lesson seems an impertinence.

—Thomas W. Higginson

If you know what you are going to write when you’re writing a poem, it’s going to be average.

—Derek Walcott
It is indeed difficult to make a living as a writer, and my advice to anyone contemplating a literary career is to have some other trade.

—William S. Burroughs

Cut your manuscript ruthlessly but never throw anything away: it’s amazing how often a discarded scene or description, which wouldn’t fit in one place, will work perfectly later.

—Robert Harris

So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters, and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery.

--Virginia Woolf

Imagination is a poor matter when it has to part company with understanding.

—Thomas Carlyle

When you do a writing job for a studio, one of the things you want to do is satisfy the expectations of your employer. That’s a little bit different than when you sit down and write something to satisfy yourself, because then you’re the employer.

—Joel Coen

I always tell my students, ‘If you walk around with your eyes and ears open, you can’t possibly live long enough to write all the novels you’ll encounter.’

—Jill McCorkle

The advice I like to give young artists, or really anybody who’ll listen to me, is not to wait around for inspiration. Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work. If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work. All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself. Things occur to you. If you’re sitting around trying to dream up a great art idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens. But if you just get to work, something will occur to you and something else will occur to you and something else that you reject will push you in another direction. Inspiration is absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive. You feel like you need this great idea before you can get down to work, and I find that’s almost never the case.

—Chuck Close
If you get stuck, get away from your desk. Take a walk, take a bath, go to sleep, make a pie, draw, listen to music, meditate, exercise; whatever you do, don’t just stick there scowling at the problem. But don’t make telephone calls or go to a party; if you do, other people’s words will pour in where your lost words should be. Open a gap for them, create a space. Be patient.

—Hilary Mantel

Sometimes people say to me, ‘I want to write, but I have five kids, a full-time job, a wife who beats me, a tremendous debt to my parents,’ and so on. I say to them, ‘There is no excuse. If you want to write, write. This is your life. You are responsible for it. You will not live forever. Don’t wait. Make the time now, even if it is ten minutes once a week.’

—Natalie Goldberg

Artistic temperament is the disease that afflicts amateurs.

—Gilbert K. Chesterton

Write what you know. That should leave you with a lot of free time.

—Howard Nemerov

There are, so far as I know, three ways, and three ways only, of writing a story. You may take a plot and fit characters to it, or you may take a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it, or lastly...you may take a certain atmosphere and get action and persons to express it and realize it.

--Robert Louis Stevenson

Anything you read can influence your work, so I try to read good stuff.

—S. E. Hinton

Poets...loathe and avoid the cliche— ‘no problem, that’s the way the ball bounces, let’s face it, get with it, that’s what you think, you can say that again, as a matter of fact, no kidding, let me put it this way.’ They choose the muscular metaphor above the weaker simile: something is, not something is like. ‘Up from India glances the silver sail of dawn,’ which is Housman. ‘The smell of liver and bacon sidled into the street with onions on its breath,’ which is Dylan Thomas.

—David McCord

It is very foolhardy—perhaps impossible—to write poetry about exceptional things. Beware of glorious sunsets.

—Winfield Townley Scott

Words are like golf strokes: the fewer you use, the higher they score.

—Greg Henry Quinn
Verses amount to so little when one begins to write them young. One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long, and a long life is possible, and then, quite at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For verses are not, as people imagine, simple feelings (we have these soon enough); they are experiences. In order to write a single verse, one must see many cities, and men and things; one must know animals and the flight of birds, and the gestures that the little flowers make when they open out in the morning. One must be able to return in thought to roads in unknown regions, to unexpected encounters, and to partings that had been long foreseen; to days of childhood that are still indistinct, and to parents whom one had to hurt when they sought to give some pleasure which one did not understand (it would have been a pleasure to someone else); to childhood’s illnesses that so strangely begin with such a number of profound and grave transformations, to days spent in rooms withdrawn and quiet, and to mornings by the sea, to the sea itself, to oceans, to nights of travel that rushed along loftily and flew with all the stars—and still it is not enough to be able to think of all this. There must be memories of many nights of love, each one unlike the others, of the screams of women in labour, and of some in childbed, light and blanched and sleeping, shutting themselves in. But one must also have been beside the dying, must have sat beside the dead in a room with open windows and with fitful noises. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the immense patience to wait until they come again. For it is the memories themselves that matter. Only when they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gestured, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—only then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

My books are my tools, and the greater their variety and perfection the greater the help to my literary work.

--Tryon Edwards

There’s only one person a writer should listen to, pay any attention to. It’s not any damn critic. It’s the reader.

--William Styron

A sculptor once said that the way he creates a statue is to cut away all the excess stone until only the statue is left. When I have a first draft on paper, it usually is long and untidy. I work at it for a year to a year-and-a half, tightening the scenes, sharpening the dialogue, and polishing the language. When I feel I cannot do anything more with it, the publisher sees it for the first time.

--Sidney Sheldon
Set your face against cliches, against fad phrases—and vow to express a thought in your own words instead....Don't dress a simple idea in complicated language.
——Edwin Newman

The monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind.
——Albert Einstein

Writers shouldn’t wait to write until they think they’ve researched everything. In that case, you’ll never write anything at all. Do enough to start, and save the rest as necessary while you write.
——Jack Smith

All writing problems are psychological problems. Blocks usually stem from the fear of being judged. If you imagine the world listening, you’ll never write a line. That’s why privacy is so important. You should write first drafts as if they will never be shown to anyone.
——Erica Jong

I haven’t had trouble with writer’s block. I think it’s because my process involves writing very badly. My first drafts are filled with lurching, cliched writing, outright flailing around. Writing that doesn’t have a good voice or any voice. But then there will be good moments. It seems writer’s block is often a dislike of writing badly and waiting for writing better to happen.
——Jennifer Egan

I don’t write easily or rapidly. My fist draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn’t work, or what simply is not alive.
——Susan Sontag

If your creation is taking 99% perspiration, it stinks and you need more inspiration.
——Kelly Bryson

If you care about being thought credible and intelligent, do not use complex language where simpler language will do. My Princeton colleague Danny Oppenheimer refuted a myth prevalent among undergraduates about the vocabulary that professors find most impressive. In an article titled ‘Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly,’ he showed that couching familiar ideas in pretentious language is taken as a sign of poor intelligence and low credibility.
——Daniel Kahneman
In his book *10 Rules of Writing*, Elmore Leonard offered a rule about exclamation points. He stated, 'You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.' Leonard was prolific. He wrote more than 40 novels in his career, totaling 3.4 million words. If he had followed his own advice, he would have used only 102 exclamation points in his entire career. In practice, he used 1,651. That’s 16 times as many as he recommended! But before you start thinking that Leonard was a secret exclamation-point fanatic, consider the chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Number of ! per 100,000 Words</th>
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<tr>
<td>Elmore Leonard</td>
<td>45 Novels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ernest Hemingway</td>
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<td>4 Novels</td>
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<td>James Joyce</td>
<td>3 Novels</td>
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—Ben Blatt

Five exclamation marks, the sure sign of an insane mind.

—Terry Pratchett

No one, ever, wrote anything as well even after one drink as he would have done with out it.

—Ring Lardner

- Always begin your story with a short, strong sentence. come to the point at once. Don’t waste words telling what you are going to tell.
- Avoid big words when small words will express your meaning as well, if not better.
- Always have an idea before you write; if you have an idea some editor wants it. There may be an overproduction of articles, but there will never be an overproduction of ideas.

—William H. Hills and Robert Luce (1887)

It’s true the muse may not visit you every day, but you have to sit down and give her a chance to show up.

—Scott Turow
He is a benefactor of mankind who contracts the great rules of life into short sentences, that may be easily impressed on the memory, and so recur habitually to the mind.

—Samuel Johnson

If you’re not a morning person, you should try to make yourself a morning person. Get up and write first thing. Do not do anything with language until you’re finished with your writing workday. Don’t read your emails. Don’t watch CNN….don’t pick up The New Yorker next to the toilet. Don’t read. Just go straight to the work. Let your actual sleep time clear your linguistic palette. And get into your creative language zone, your sensual zone with language, before you let the other uses of language—conceptual—come in at you.

—Robert Olen Butler

You’re only as good a writer as you are a reader of poetry.

—Natalie Elbert

Reading poetry every day makes your language more fluid. It makes you more attuned to the weight of words and more conversant with image and metaphor. I once watched in horror at the stiffness of my sentences until this little trick thoroughly remade me.

—Rion Amilcar Scott

Don’t use words too big for the subject. Don’t say ‘infinitely’ when you mean ‘very.’ Otherwise you’ll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.

—C. S. Lewis

When an author is too meticulous about his style, you may presume that his mind is frivolous and his content flimsy.

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.

—Ezra Pound

Writing is rewriting. It is not simply transcribing the stories you make up in your head to the page. It is not settling for good enough just because you prefer the rush of a new story idea or have grown tired of revisiting the same piece. If you are not open to revising or putting in the time to polish your work, you are only half a writer, and not necessarily the better half.

—Joni B. Cole
I believe that taking my attention off my writing and putting it elsewhere can benefit the writing. I think that’s the subconscious at work. It’s why I have epiphanies when I’m driving or riding my horse or taking a shower.

—Susan Mihalic

Advice? Fail constantly. Because the word doesn’t mean what you think it means, especially when you’re an artist. I use the word artist to mean everything from songwriting to writing a novel to even writing video games. Anything that tells a story, which is almost any medium. Gotta take risks, you gotta go through multiple drafts which means you have to FAIL, a lot. So you won’t always get the reaction you always want from every single person, so when you lose that fear of failure, when you stop even thinking of it as failure, and you push yourself farther, you’ll take bigger risks, and eventually, after about six or seven hundred rejections, you’ll find success. And you’ll find a way of conveying what you really want to say, in the best manner.

—Victor Giannini

If you’re a writer, you sit down and damn well decide to have an idea. That’s the way to get an idea.

—Andy Rooney

Words ought to be a little wild, for they are the assault of thoughts on the unthinking.

—John M. Keynes

If your prose is to be vigorous as well as vivid, if your characters are to be people who do rather than people to whom things are done, if your descriptions are to ‘come to life,’ you must make use of the active voice.

—Janet Burroway

As a writer, there is no rise in seniority over time. Everything rests on your ability to produce quality work. In most other jobs, your retirement savings grow a little every year, you are a little more senior, and there are usually compensations for the passage of time. For the writer, there is usually no financial compensation for having spent another year on the job, no seniority aside from what you accomplish, no guarantees whatsoever, except one: If you do the work every day, have a good critique group, and continue to challenge yourself, you will improve. That’s all you get in return for the great passage of time.

—Lauren Rosa
Creativity involves breaking out of established patterns in order to look at things in a different way.

—Edward de Bono

No one ever found wisdom without also being a fool. Writers, alas, have to be fools in public, while the rest of the human race can cover its tracks.

—Erica Jong

There have been times when I reread—or at least leafed through—something because I’d sent a copy to a friend, and what usually happened was that I noticed dozens and dozens of clumsy phrases I wished I could rewrite.

—Peter Straub

The writer must earn money in order to be able to live and to write, but he must by no means live and write for the purpose of making money.

—Karl Marx

To me, part of the beauty of a comma is that it offers a rest, like one in music: a break that gives the whole piece of music greater shape, deeper harmony. It allows us to catch our breath.

—Pico Lyer

Writers block occurs when a writer has nothing to say. Unfortunately not all writers experience it.

—Ron Brackin

Writing is about taking everyday observations, things which people see almost every day of their lives, and yet bringing it to their attention for the very first time.

—Jamie L. Harding

I don’t believe in writer’s block. Who can function working seven days a week at a job? It’s the same with writing. Take a break and let the words come to you. It rarely comes if you force it and if it does, you’ll probably regret what you wrote down on paper.

—Lillian R. Melendez

In writing, I am constantly bewitched by the rhythm and sound of the words, and by the interaction of their sound and sense. I always read my work aloud. It is only then that I can tell if it’s alive.

—Natalie Bober
When I started writing, I started writing every day. I sign books a lot, and I'll meet people who say, ‘I want to be a writer.’ And I'll say, ‘Do you write every day?’ And they say [dreamily], ‘No, when I get in the mood.’ And I think, ‘Well, sorry, you need to wake up every day in the mood.’

—David Sedaris

When I first started freelancing, I got a piece of advice I've never been able to forget. ‘Right off everything,’ said the successful, seasoned freelancer who was my mentor at the time. ‘Going to the movies? Film research. Developing film? Photo research. Eating out? Socializing with writers. Write it all off.’ He was talking about taxes, but he created a monster: Twenty years later, you can name any activity and I'll carve out some kind of way to relate it to writing. Meandering through the grocery store? Research for a character whose an amateur gourmand. Browsing notebooks in the stationary store for 45 minutes? Same character needs a specific notebook to jot down very specific ideas in. Re-reading mystery novels? Wanted to get an idea of how genre writers keep readers turning pages. Eating cookie dough from a frozen log in the freezer? Hey, that tweet the day I ate most of that log won me five new followers: building platform.

—Yi Shun Lai

I'm a longhand drafter. Each day, I open up a dedicated notebook and write, by hand, the first draft of the novel. When I get to the actual typing of that draft into my word processing program, I'm effectively working on my second draft. And that's when the word count really begins to pile up, when I'm revising the first draft on the fly, adding details to make the characters shine, and polishing actions and scenes so they really count, and add causality to each other. And when I get through each longhand-drafted page after copying it into the word processor and adding it on my computer, I take my pen and I cross out the longhand page, with great gusto and cheer and a totally outsized sense of accomplishment.

—Yi Shun Lai

I'm not an outliner. I trust the process will take the book where I need to go. You have to really believe you're going to get to that place. It's less efficient than outlining, but it keeps it interesting.

—Julie Buxbaum

If I were told that I could write a novel in which I should set forth the apparently correct attitudes toward all social questions, I would not devote even two hours of work to such a novel, but if I were told that what I write shall be read in twenty years by children of today, in that they will weep and smile over it and will fall in love with life, I would devote all my life and all my strength to it.

—Leo Tolstoy
I set a schedule for myself: between 5 a.m. and 7 a.m., I’d write aimlessly, no project in mind. But unlike in the past, the rule was: only one mug of black coffee. The refill was the thing I had to look forward to when I was done. The first week, I wrote garbage and knew it was garbage. And then one morning I woke up and wrote a 1,600-word essay, start to finish. That morning felt magical. But the essay didn’t emerge mysteriously or suddenly from my unconscious mind. It took a solid week of writing badly. That’s an important lesson—about as important, I think, as having a routine; let yourself write badly.

—Jeannie Vanasco

For many published authors I know, myself included, a completed novel takes them about 10, that’s right, 10 drafts, and at least a year of real editing. Will you be spending every single second editing your novel? No, of course not. Just as drafts need some real time on the surgery table, they also need rest in the recovery room. You don’t nurture a relationship by smothering a person, spending every waking second with them until you can’t stand the sight of each other, and you can’t nurture a novel by breathing down its literary neck.

—Jessica Stilling

Artists should follow their own visions and create whatever they want. That is because it is precisely the variety of those unique visions of the human condition that gives art its true value. While the world knows and loves the dramas of Shakespeare and still recites his sonnets, only historians of the Elizabethan period can remember the names of the politicians who were his contemporaries. The moral of this story is clear. The value of great art will outlive the political controversies of the moment.

--Playthell Benjamin

If you really want a piece of this industry—an agent, a publishing contract, a best-seller, or a simple byline—you must immediately stop letting yourself and others treat writing as a hobby. It is not a hobby. It is not a pastime, a flighty notion, or a passing fancy. It’s your passion, it is your life’s work, and it is your dream. It is worth every second and every penny you can spare. Don’t let anyone—yourself included—relegate it to the sidelines.

—Nicki Porter

The materials of the novelist must be real; they must be gathered from the field of humanity by his actual observation.

—Goldwin Smith

Active verbs drive both poems and stories. Circle all your is/was/were’s and see how many you can cut or replace.

—Jim Daniels
Shakespeare may have ruined more writers than any other writer. In his centuries atop the literary pantheon, the Bard has defined ‘good’ writing as long, intricate flourishes of language that seem drawn from the celestial spheres. As such, it’s extremely common for new writers to ape his style, language, and voice. Trouble is, Shakespeare is dead, very dead, and his voice seems as out of place in today’s modern media as a chamber pot in the bedroom. Instead, today’s writers speak with the voice of today—raw, short, punchy, and conversational.

—Mike Dunphy

Learn how to transform that blank-page staring contest into a writing exercise that gets your creative juices flowing. Develop a game plan for such moments. One technique you can use when you don’t know what to write next is to turn to your outline and just start writing. Don’t worry about form, spelling, or even churning out complete sentences. Set a 15-minute alarm on your phone, and don’t let your fingers stop typing during that time. When time is up, print those pages and highlight any passages or sentences you feel work well. When you force yourself to free-write, you’ll notice new ideas coming out of you that you might not have ever expected.

—Jen Glantz

**COMIC TAKEAWAYS**

1. Find inspiration by observing your world through a well-honed writer’s eye. Good ideas are everywhere, but you must be ready to receive them.
2. Exceed your limitations by striving to be as good as your favorite writer. Don’t settle for anything less.
3. Write first, polish second. It’s vital that you put words on paper before even thinking of editing.
4. Word choice can either turn a good story into a work of art or thrust it into mediocrity. Make sure every word used is the best word. Play around with vocabulary to surprise and enlighten readers.
5. A work is seldom perfect in its first draft. Revise again and again—every story has room for improvement.
6. The nature of the piece often dictates its structure, but don’t be afraid to experiment with different approaches to keep readers interested and involved.
7. Allow humor to arise naturally. Every line doesn’t need to leave the audience in stitches.

—Don Vaughn

The one piece of advice I would give: If it’s not exciting to you, it probably won’t work out.

—George Saunders
It’s not that you should write what you know, you should write what you don’t know about what you know.

—Grace Paley

When you write by hand, you don’t have the excessive freedom of a computer. When I write down something, I have to be serious about it. I have to ask myself, ‘Is this necessary at this point in the book?’

—Pat Conroy

Everyone hates to outline—when I tell kids that I outline every book, they hate it! No one likes to outline—but I can’t work without one. I think that’s one reason I’m so prolific—I take a week and I plan everything. I do all the thinking beforehand.

—R. L. Stine

The only writing advice that actually matters is the stuff that you discover 12 years into your journey.

—George Saunders

If your character walks out of his apartment, pulls up the collar of his coat, and goes searching through pockets for this gloves, you don’t have to tell us it’s freezing.

—Janet Evanovich

Write in such a way as that you can be readily understood by both the young and the old, by men as well as women, even by children.

—Ho Chi Minh

Another piece of advice: when you proofread cross out as many adjectives and adverbs as you can. You have so many modifiers that the reader has trouble understanding and gets worn out. It is comprehensible when I write: The man sat on the grass, because it is clear and does not detain one's attention. On the other hand, it is difficult to figure out and hard on the brain if I write: The tall, narrow-chested man of medium height and with a red beard sat down on the green grass that had already been trampled down by the pedestrians, sat down silently, looking around timidly and fearfully. The brain can't grasp all that at once, and art must be grasped at once, instantaneously. And then one other thing; you are lyrical by nature. The timber of your soul is soft. If you were a composer you would avoid writing marches. It is unnatural for your talent to curse, shout, taunt, denounce with rage. Therefore, you'll understand if I advise you, in proofreading, to eliminate the sons of bitches, curs, and flea-bitten mutts that appear here and there on the pages of Life.

—Anton Chekhov
Remember to never split an infinitive.
The passive voice should never be used.
Do not put statements in the negative form.
Verbs have to agree with their subjects.
Proofread carefully to see if you words out.
If you reread your work, you can find on rereading a great deal of repetition can be by rereading and editing.
A writer must not shift your point of view.
And don’t start a sentence with a conjunction. (Remember, too, a preposition is a terrible word to end a sentence with.)
Don’t overuse exclamation marks!!
Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 or more words, to their antecedents.
Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
Take the bull by the hand and avoid mixing metaphors.
Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky.
Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
Always pick on the correct idiom.
The adverb always follows the verb.
Last but not least, avoid cliches like the plague; seek viable alternatives.
---William Safire

Tell all the truth and tell it slant.
---Emily Dickinson

Writing advice is like a recipe in a cookbook. It’s a proven method to make a tasty meal, but there’s room for improvisation and creativity. It’s a guide.
---Steven James

You can’t write with music playing, and anyone who says he can is either writing badly, or not listening to the music, or lying. You need to hear what you’re writing, and for that you need silence.
---Philip Pullman

If you don’t hit a newspaper reader between the eyes with your first sentence, there is no need of writing a second one.
---Arthur Brisbane

The process of writing can be magical. ...Mostly it’s a process of putting one word after another.
---Neil Gaiman
I have advice for people who want to write. I don’t care whether they’re 5 or 500. There are three things that are important: First, if you want to write, you need to keep an honest, unpublishable journal that nobody reads, nobody but you. Where you just put down what you think about life, what you think about things, what you think is fair and what you think is unfair. And second, you need to read. You can’t be a writer if you’re not a reader. It’s the great writers who teach us how to write. The third thing is to write. Just write a little bit every day. Even if it’s for only half an hour—write, write, write.

—Madeleine L’Engle

What wretched poverty of language! To compare stars to diamonds!

—Gustave Flaubert

• Go on walks. Spend as much time outside as possible.
• Work at a coffeeshop at least once a week.
• Never be ashamed to talk to your dog. (He’s the best coworker you’ve ever had.)
• Spend more time on social media, connecting with writers, editors, and friends from afar.

—Nicki Porter

If you only write when you’re inspired you may be a fairly decent poet, but you’ll never be a novelist because you’re going to have to make your word count today and those words aren’t going to wait for you whether you’re inspired or not.

You have to write when you’re not inspired. And you have to write the scenes that don’t inspire you. And the weird thing is that six months later, a year later, you’ll look back at them and you can’t remember which scenes you wrote when you were inspired and which scenes you just wrote because they had to be written next.

The art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters, is simplicity.

—Walt Whitman

The poet doesn’t invent. He listens.

—Jean Cocteau

End every writing session in the middle of something—a paragraph, a line of dialogue—with notes about what’s coming next. There’s nothing harder than starting a writing day with a blank page.

—Baihley Gentry
Don't write with a pen. Ink tends to give the impression the words shouldn't be changed.

Write with what gives you the most sensual satisfaction.

Write in a hard-covered notebook with green lined pages. Green is easy on the eyes. Blank white pages seems to challenge you to create the world before you start writing. It may be true that you, the modern poet, must make the world as you go, but why be reminded of it before you even have one word on the page?

Don't erase. Cross out rapidly and violently, never with slow consideration if you can help it.

Start, as some smarty once said, in the middle of things.

Play with syntax.

Never want to say anything so strongly that you have to give up the option of finding something better—if you have to say it, you will.

Read your poem aloud many times. If you don't enjoy it every time, something may be wrong.

If you ask a question, don't answer it, or answer a question not asked, or defer. (If you can answer the question, to ask it is to waste time).

Maximum sentence length: seventeen words.

Minimum: One.

Don’t be afraid to take emotional possession of words. If you don’t love a few words enough to own them, you will have to be very clever to write a good poem.

—Richard Hugo

Maybe you’re one of those people who writes poems, but rarely reads them. Let me put this as delicately as I can: If you don’t read, your writing is going to suck.

—Kim Addonizio

Take the time to write. You can do your life’s work in half an hour a day.

—Robert Hass
Even masters of fiction know that they must deeply study the truth they’re repurposing. Ernest Hemingway immersed himself in the culture of bullfighting before he ever dared write about it. Jane Austen had experienced love—and disappointment—before she wrote about true romantic connection. And while their own personal reflections are not the stories we read, their experiences—and the vulnerability that seeps into their writing—is what makes those pieces in endure.

—Maria Walley

Every writer needs some bravery and some boldness, and a little bit of a unicorn in them to make it. Eighty percent of writing is about persevering, when your book bombs, not saying, ‘I quit,’ but saying, ‘OK, that book bombed, but I have plenty of other stories locked and loaded for my career.’ You can’t go into this fearfully and you can’t go into this with a chip on your shoulder saying, ‘I have a right to have my book make the New York Times best seller list in its first week of publishing.’ It’s not going to happen for 99 percent of writers. You have to go in with integrity, and with faith, and you have to go into this willing to work really hard to get your book out there.

And it’s a balance! I mean, I look on Twitter and I see people [where] every single post is about their new book. I’m like, Stop it already; you’re going to drown your book! Because writing isn’t just about writing, it’s about the social context in which you’re writing. It’s about paying attention to the world, and if you publish a book and it’s just about your book, you’re already failing the rest of the world.

—Jacqueline Woodson

The most dangerous thing a writer can do is think about how a reader is going to react to their writing, because you never know. You don’t know the reader, and if you’re going to self-censor, if you’re so busy thinking about the audience, who are you writing for? The first person you should be writing for is yourself. If you start out thinking, ‘What does the reader need?’ you’re going to fail. You’re going to be wrong.

—Jacqueline Woodson

Writing isn’t so much about talent but being convinced that any other occupation—no matter how high the salary or sweet the perks—would be a stupendous, even tragic, waste of time. It’s knowing something better is on the other side of that rejection and plowing forward until you seize that triumph. You move on to move ahead. No other mindset will do.

—Pete Croatto

I must write with my ear. It needs to be a love affair with my sentences. And so I have at them over and over until we feel we’ve concluded our relationship, and then I move on.

—Meg Tuite
A story is never ‘This happened, then that happened.’ A story is always ‘Because this happened, that had to happen.’

—Caroline Leavitt

Draw a line for every character. The beginning is what the character desperately wants and cannot get. The endpoint is the character getting what she needs, which is different than what she wants. Once you have that, figure out the middle, which is the misbelief the character is acting on, the thing that stops her from realizing her need.

—Caroline Leavitt

Read your work aloud as you write. Don’t get in the habit of just reading your words on the screen or page. You need to hear what you’ve written to understand what’s working well and what isn’t.

—Anthony Varallo

There’s no wrong way to write. The key is getting words on the page that can be made sense of later. Whether you create a detailed road map first or just start out and see where your subconscious takes you…it’s all good.

—Clifford Garstang

Be impatient and patient—impatience will drive you to keep revising your story to get it right. It will keep you trekking through that tangle of frustration and false starts to get to a more expansive view of things. Patience will help you understand that it takes time to hone your craft, endure rejection, and find your true voice.

—Jessica Keener

Let your story saturate for a while before sending it out. Read each draft aloud and take in the rhythms and connotations of each word and sentence. Anything clunky or uninspired will show up more vividly after belting it out. The only clichés that work in a story are in the dialogue to give the reader a better grasp of the character. Be original.

—Meg Tuite

One of my own pet peeves when I hear people explain what their story is about. For example: ‘This is a story about the time my cat almost died.’ Now we audience members know the ending. So, no spoilers, please.

—Donna Talarico

Read. Read classics, best-sellers, essays, poetry. Train you ear to the music words can make and to the many ways you can tell a story.

—Susan Henderson
I ask myself questions and then look for the most unusual ways to expose the answers. The trick is, where possible, to ask an emotional question and then answer it through action or through an experience in the body, not in the head. I don’t want the character to actually ponder the question, only the reader.

—Susan Henderson

I still have my own research library that I have built up over the years, which includes: two complete sets of encyclopedias, as well as huge collections of folklore, poetry, children’s books, nonfiction (especially natural history and American and European history), books on writing, art books, cookbooks, biographies of writers, mysteries, science fiction and fantasy, and 19th through 21st century fiction. I haunt old bookstores and go to library sales, League of Women Voters sales, antique stores, and garage sales….In the matter of owning books for research, be over-prepared.

—Jane Yolen

Write all the time. I believe in writing every day, at least a thousand words a day. We have a strange idea about writing: that it can be done, and done well, without a great deal of effort. Dancers practice every day, musicians practice every day, even when they are at the peak of their careers—especially then. Somehow, we don’t take writing as seriously. But writing—writing wonderfully—takes just as much dedication.

—Theodora Goss

I believe you have to write every day—make the time. It’s about having an organized mind instead of a chaotic and untidy one. There is a myth that writers are bohemian and do what they like in their own way. Real writers are the most organized people on the planet. You have to be. You’re doing the work and running your own business as well. It’s an incredibly organized state.

—Jeanette Winterson

I am not a big fan of, in general, saying you have to write every day. But I do think it’s really important if you’re working on a novel or story that it lives in your head every day.

—Jeff VanderMeer

Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic.

—Ted Hughes
Deep feeling doesn’t make for good poetry. A way with language would be a bit of help.

—Thom Gunn

Studies have been done about the benefits of writing by hand versus electronically. Seems the physical experience of crafting letters and words releases more creativity molecules. Something like that. Hey, if it works, it works.

—Elizabeth Sims

Readers today have far more things vying for their attention than those from even just a decade ago: social media feeds, hundreds of television channels, tens of thousands of video games, or any one of millions of other books. Respect your readers’ time. Acknowledge the busy lives they lead. Don’t overwhelm them with tediously long chapters.

—Steven James

Old novels…are chock-full of writing lessons. If you want to learn how to pen a great story, you could do a lot worse than to study old paperbacks and see what the past masters were doing decades ago.

—Jeff Somers

Your opening line doesn’t have to be a line. Among the writing tips that get passed around the most is the insistence that your opening line should be ‘grabby’—that it immediately draws readers into the story so they don’t get bored and slide your book back onto the shelf. And sure, that’s good advice as far as it goes, but it makes young writers…think that you have to start every story with a real line, a razor-sharp sentence that incises itself into your reader’s memory. Magnuson’s underrated debut novel [The Right Man for the Job], however, does no such thing. Instead, it opens with a rambling paragraph, a stream-of-consciousness monologue of self-reflection. There’s nothing sharp about it. But it grabbed me in the bookstore and never let go.

—Jeff Somers

Reading is the number one way writers can expand their toolset, and while the desire to have the newest, coolest tools is natural, don’t forget that most of those hardbacks were built on the cornerstones of past masters. Next time you come across a used bookstore, go in with a handful of change and take a few moments to buy some books you might not be familiar with, but which have really cool covers—the sort of cracked, well-loved covers that indicate someone really, really enjoyed that book. You might be amazed at the tricks of the trade you can pic up for pennies on the dollar.

—Jeff Somers
Write. Don’t talk about writing. Don’t tell me about your wonderful story ideas. Don’t give me a bunch of ‘somedays’. Plant your ass and scribble, type, keyboard. If you have any talent at all it will leak out despite your failure to pay attention in English.

—Glen Cook

If you like to be pampered, pamper yourself along the way. For each milestone, schedule a treat, major or minor depending on how much pampering you need. Some writers take long vacations after every book is turned in, and that’s enough incentive. Others need dinners out after every chapter. Many pros simply hold a race: In Lane One is the bank account, slowly draining away; in Lane Two is the manuscript, slowly growing. To win this race, the author must finish before his checks bounce.

—Franklynn Peterson and Judi Kesselman-Turkel

If you have to use the English language in almost any structured way in your job, you will have a double, a quadruple difficulty in finding your English language at night and on Sundays. When I had to earn my living for many years, I taught French. I should have taught mathematics. By teaching math or biology or physics, you come refreshed to writing.

—Thornton Wilder

Sometimes, when inspiration runs dry, I drink classical music until my words spill out.

—Kamand Kojouri

When I first started freelance writing, I didn’t include the WOW factor in my pitches. A homeless man camps out under an overpass. Instead of focusing on his current living conditions, dig deeper. What was his story before? He has a Ph.D. in psychology. How did he go from counseling teens to living in a makeshift tent on the sidewalk? How could his story prevent others from becoming homeless? To get an editor’s attention, you’ve got to craft the pitch that makes them say, ‘OMG —how did that happen?’ or ‘Wow, never heard that before.’ You’ve got to pique their curiosity and make them want to read on. The goal is to find a unique perspective that isn’t the same ole, same ole.

—K. L. Romo
Ian Fleming was a famously fast writer. He wrote the first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale*, in three weeks. But he had a cheat: he wrote the first draft as a skeleton, with only action, dialogue and fundamentals of the story—that’s what took three weeks. Then he went back and added details and description. Boiling your novel down to basics is a one way to get huge amounts of story on paper or screen when you only have a few minutes every day.

—Jeff Somers

If you’re the sort to review every sentence immediately after placing the period, tweaking it before the pixels have stabilized—stop. To paraphrase Don Draper: this novel only moves in one direction—forward. Leave revision till after you’ve written a first draft.

—Jeff Summers

The first draft of my second novel, *Common Murder*, began with five beautifully crafted chapters of backstory for my protagonist. When I sent it off to my agent, she said, ‘Lose the first five chapters. They’re lovely, but they don’t tell the story.

Everything you’ve told us here can be fed in as and when we need to know it.

—Hallie Ephron

TOSS THE OUTLINE. Yes, an outline helps drive the story in a certain direction. But when you write the first draft, the story should take you on the ride. Sit back and resist the temptation to take control. Sure, the new direction may not end up in the final script, but that’s why it’s called a ‘draft,’ the dictionary definition of which is: preliminary version, rough outline, plan, skeleton, abstract, bare bones.

Stop trying to make the first iteration perfect. Give yourself permission to write with reckless abandon. Right like you’re naked. Okay, maybe put your PJs on. You get the point.

—Jean Veillette Bowerman

Successful…writers know when to walk away from the computer. If you spend most of your time as a writer working in front of a computer, don’t spend the rest of it playing on a computer. Get away from the screen for a few hours every day. It will improve your concentration and your eyesight.

—John Hewitt

Successful…writers have a personal life. don’t forget to have fun, enjoy friends and be social. For writers, especially those working alone, it is easy to crawl into your little cave (or office) and forget the world exists for long periods of time. Don’t forget to get out of the cave every day and see the world around you.

—John Hewitt
Read a good story and chances are there is a lot of action and dialogue (showing) with minimal stretches of straight narrative (telling). Too much narrative and the story sounds like a summary. Readers don’t want a summary. They want scenes with action and dialogue that make them feel they are actually experiencing what is going on. So ‘show’ as much as possible of your story through action and dialogue….Get a grammar book to learn how to punctuate dialogue properly. But, most importantly, remember to change paragraphs each time the speaker changes. I read manuscripts all the time where three or four characters are speaking, yet the paragraph never changes. Just imagine how confusing that is to the reader!....Listen to any child or teenager and you’ll find out that much of what kids and teens say (at least to each other) tends to sound like a series of grunts. So don’t have the child or teen in your story use words like ‘shall,’ or never use contractions. If you do, the dialogue will sound too formal and your work will not have a child’s or teen’s voice.

—Suzanne Lieurance

Your POV character needs to face some big problem right at the start of the story. Then, he or she needs to struggle and struggle with this problem as he/she tries to solve it. That is, things need to keep getting worse and worse until finally the POV character is able to solve the problem (or at least resolve it) and change or grow somehow in the process. Without a story problem you have what editors like to call ‘an incident,’ and editors don’t publish incidents. They publish stories.

—Suzanne Lieurance

Don’t gunk up the lead. If you feel, for example, that your lead must somehow reference the long, clunky name of some organization or someone’s long title, resist the urge! Just find a generic phrase that describes the group or title in the lead and fold in the full reference later in the article. Don’t bog your poor readers down at the start.

—Ronald Kovach

Everything I’ve let go of has claw marks on it.

—Anne Lamott

A common mistake, even with experienced writers, is failing to provide a specific example to bring out a point. This keeps the writing too general and vague, and nearly always forces the editor to go back to the writer for more. Granted, the problem is often caused when a writer, rightly, is trying to meet a tight word count. But the better solution here is: Provide a good (brief) example to make your point understandable and compress elsewhere.

—Ronald Kovach
Avoid run-on sentences and overstuffed dashes. Break the poor things up, recast them, or put them out of their misery and start over....Overstuffed dashes usually force readers to jump back to the beginning of the sentence to remind themselves what it was about. That’s annoying and usually unnecessary. Such sentences can easily be reworded.

—Ronald Kovach

The importance of strong, and preferably fresh, verbs—as seen in the house ‘groaning’ for air—is so crucial to good writing that ( I hope) it scarcely needs noting.... Indeed, it’s not a bad idea to do a final check of your manuscript looking at nothing but verb choice.

—Ronald Kovach

Unnecessary use of the passive voice is also a much-noted evil, and for good reason. When there is not a valid reason to use one, each passive construction is like a little black hole in your manuscript, sucking the energy right out of a sentence. Even Thomas Jefferson knew this. In the Declaration of Independence (as noted by the late wordsmith Richard L. Tobin), he did not write, ‘Our seas have been plundered by King George III, our coasts have been ravished, our towns have been burned, and the lives of your people have been destroyed.’ Instead he made it: ‘He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

—Ronald Kovach

The language is full of wordy phrases that needlessly clutter. One of my own pet peeves is vast majority of, as in The vast majority of voters prefer competence and honesty. Nearly all the time you can simply say most, losing fat and gaining energy. Most of the time you can say about instead of approximately. Most of the time you can say because or since instead of as a result of or due to the fact that. In spite of the fact that can be expressed simply as Although. ('For plenty more examples, just google ‘wordy phrases.’)

—Ronald Kovach

Whenever possible, try to cast your sentences in a positive form, to say what something is, rather than what it isn’t. It’ll add energy and assertiveness to your sentences as well as tighten them. The reader will get your point much more quickly and be pulled forward into your next sentence.... BEFORE: He did not think that studying Latin was of much use. AFTER: He thought the study of Latin useless.

—Ronald Kovach
Do you really need to say someone ‘whispered quietly’ Or ‘shouted loudly’ Or, my favorite—she ‘nodded her head’? What else could she nod? Or, she ‘shrugged her shoulders’—she certainly wouldn’t shrug her foot!

—Suzanne Lieurance

When you tell a story, think of it as if you’re doing it live, sitting around the proverbial campfire. You’re trying to keep people entertained, and if you don’t they’ll nod off, or wander back into their tents, or go find someone else to entertain them. So, in order to hold them at your side, hanging on your words, you have to make those words count. You have to make them vivid and enticing and brief.

—Dennis Lehane

The worst thing you may do in writing the first draft may be to focus on the form or content of the story. Do not even consider technical problems at this early stage. And do not let your critical self sit at your desk with your creative self. The critic will stifle the writer within.

—John Dufresne

Don’t buy into negativity like ‘It’s too hard for a novice to break in.’ It’s not. Plenty of agents and editors are desperate for great new material. In my experience, if you cannot get an agent, it is usually because you’re not playing by the rules and invented your own genre, or your project has been done before and you’re not offering a new or fresh angle, and/or your writing isn’t good enough yet. So make it better!

—Susan Shapiro

Through the years, I’ve met plenty of people who tell me that someday, when their lives are perfect, they, too, will write books. Most of the time I’m skeptical about that. Perfection is hard to come by. Many would-be writers talk about writing and expect perfection to announce its arrival by whacking them over the head. By then, the time for writing will have passed them by....
When I bought my first computer in 1983, the man who installed my word-processing program fixed it so that when I booted up, these words flashed across my screen: ‘A writer is someone who has written today.’ Those words were a gift to me then, and I’m passing them along to you.

—J. A. Jance

I once stayed in a hotel, next door to a well-known writer. He never talked about writing. Each night I heard his typewriter, hour after hour, past midnight. Everybody else in the hotel was asleep. The sound of that machine reminds me, still, that what writers do is write.

—Richard Bach
For me, the writing life doesn’t just happen when I sit at the writing desk. It is a life lived with a centering principle, and mine is this: that I will pay close attention to this world I find myself in. ‘My heart keeps open house,’ was the way the poet Theodore Roethke put it in a poem. And rendering in language what one sees through the opened windows and doors of that house is a way of bearing witness to the mystery of what it is to be alive in this world.

—Julia Alvarez

Be thick-skinned. This industry is about rejection as much as—or more than—anything. Agents aren’t necessarily a gentle breed, so as hard as any of us may try to avoid it, feelings get stomped. Disheartening form letters, too-blunt rejections, nonresponse, unspeakable passages of time—I doubt many agents set out to crush writers through these methods, but given the sheer volume of words we confront, all of the above and worse can happen. Don’t take it personally. Objects in the publishing mirror are not as [jerky] as they appear. Unless they are. And that’s what voodoo dolls are for.

—Christopher Schelling, Agent

Do your homework, and I mean that in two ways....send to the right agents, but don’t jump into the arms of the first agent who responds positively. This is an entirely unregulated industry. Anyone can call himself an agent and poof, he is an agent. There are many, many agents out there, and as daunting as the process of finding one who will return your calls may seem, most of them are actively seeking good new clients. Keep plugging and if your book is worthy, you will find one. It would be nice to find an experienced and powerful one, but there is no substitute for raw enthusiasm. In the end, it is passion for the material that carries the day.

—Eric Simonoff, Agent

The greatest and cheapest university—where great teachers abound, the classes are free and there’s never any crowding—is just a library card away. Reading, most writers agree, is the best teacher.
I teach my students about the importance of reading deeply as a central part of their writing life. I ask them to do an imitation of a writer they love and then do a parody, to try on different styles.
In lieu of classes, the best way to learn how to write is to read voraciously.

—Mary Gordon

Writing is most of all an exercise in determination, first to get the job done, second to get it done right.

—Tom Clancy
Rejection always hurts, even when it’s clearly subjective. At its best, it helps you polish your work, and at its worse, it can lead you astray. I had to develop my own sense of judgment because my work was being rejected everywhere. I couldn’t let magazine editors decide what was good. Rejection and failure are great preparations for success.

Learn to take a stand for what’s good in your own work and hold yourself to your highest standard.

—Melissa Bank

Writing has an aggregate quality; the more you do, the better you get. Still, you probably have old material that you liked for its concept or voice but had trouble executing. Sometimes those old, unfinished pieces never leave our minds, or unfortunately our desks.

I felt these stories I had written as a young writer still had something to say, but I wanted to change some of the writing on a technical level. When I wrote them, I was learning to write, so I wasn’t happy with some of the metaphors—I think new writers have a tendency to overstate—so I tidied it up....Just like spring cleaning, you never know what you’ll unearth in old works of fiction, so don’t write them off.

—Yann Martel

There’s only one good reason to be a writer—we can’t help it! We’d all like to be successful, rich and famous, but if those are our goals, we’re off on the wrong foot. In the beginning, when I was in my 20s, I didn’t think about fame or success. I just wanted to earn enough money so I could work at home on my writing. I eventually managed to freelance at home by taking on all sorts of extras that I could pay the bills with, while saving my mornings for fiction writing. (I reviewed, lectured, read manuscripts, taught writing, wrote articles—and scraped by.) It was many years before I could give myself wholly to my writing, as I do now.

—Phyllis Whitney

I have just gone through a three-day funk because one editor didn’t like one manuscript I have in the works. At the time it seemed like the capstone my my career tomb....Now, I could have grabbed a high-powered rifle and wiped out the local fast-food franchise. I could have really rejected the editor’s rejection (heh, heh). I could have curled up in a corner and sucked my thumb for five years. But I didn’t do any of those things. Look what I did, instead.

I wrote about it. The answer to just about every writing problem is: write. What is the cure for writer’s block? Write. How do I get to page 1? Write. How can I learn to write natural dialogue: Write. My spouse doesn’t understand me, the rent is due, and just what in ever-loving hell am I supposed to about the drug problem, the homeless, the next election, the arms race, the space race, inflation, unemployment, pollution, overpopulation and the hole in the ozone layer? Write.

—Barry Longyear
I think I succeeded as a writer because I did not come out of an English department. I used to write in the chemistry department. And I wrote some good stuff. If I had been in the English department, the prof would have looked at my short stories, congratulated me on my talent, and then showed me how Joyce or Hemingway handled the same elements of the short story. The prof would have placed me in competition with the greatest writers of all time, and that would have ended my writing career.

—Kurt Vonnegut

Be tough—you need to be able to accept criticism, if you expect to become a better writer; when you know you’re right, you need to be able to reject it and stick to your own vision.

—Judith Guest

Don’t every depend upon a single source of income—publications change editors, they fold; to live off your writing, develop many sources.

—Larry Grobel

Very few writers get very far without at least some talent (though there are always enough prominent exceptions to prove this rule). And no writer gets anywhere without some little scrap of luck somewhere along the line. But there are more reasonably talented and reasonably lucky people around than there are successful writers, and I have come to the conclusion that what makes the crucial difference is...desire.

I have seen enough writers whose first efforts looked completely hapless and hopeless, utterly devoid of the faintest glimmer of promise, actually transform themselves into good writers that I have realized that it must be desire that does the trick. Desire is where perseverance comes from, where a certain necessary stubbornness comes from and finally, it should be what makes people try to become better writers in the absolute sense—not just better published and more highly visible writers.

—Madison Smartt Bell

Pay attention. To everything. All the time. You can’t create real, breathing, fictional people without paying attention to real, breathing, nonfictional people: how do they walk, talk, sing, eat, dress, dance, sleep, frown, twitch, yell, fight, cry? What do they want and how do they try to get it? By the same token, pay attention internally: the writer’s thoughts, emotions and motivations help define those of her/his characters.

—Marta Randall
Keep working. Don’t wait for inspiration. Work inspires inspiration. Keep working. If you succeed, keep working. If you fail, keep working. If you’re interested, keep working. If you’re bored, keep working. Pretty simple advice, but it works.

—Michael Crichton

I knew others had more talent, and better background. If persistence could not do it more me, I was doomed. So I always listened, and worked harder.

—Jack Bickham

I decided early on that I was going to be a writer and that whether I succeeded or failed, I was still going to be a writer. That is, I decided that, for me, it would be preferable to be a failed writer or a minor writer—some sort of footnote in the history of American letters—than to leave the dream behind.

—Joe David Bellamy

Always write for pleasure. Don’t write anything for money alone.

—Richard Wilbur

Writing in any guise is a difficult, lonely experience. In drama, where so much of what you write is manhandled by mauling, illiterate paws, it can also be the most emotionally debilitating. Hollywood is littered with the burnt-out bodies of once-hot screenwriters. If you can be a happy, whole human being doing anything else, for God’s sake, go do it instead. Forget what sells. Forget the formulas. Forget these sure-fire, how-to books. (I read one before I started my first script, basically to see what rules I would be breaking. I broke a lot.) Don’t try to give somebody what they want or what you think they want. Please yourself. If you don’t care about what you write, nobody else will.

—Charles Edward Pogue

I used to write because I wanted to become rich, and when I didn’t become rich, I wrote because I wanted to become famous, and when I didn’t become famous, I wrote because I liked to write.

—Thomas Sullivan

I forbid my imagination—and hence my pen—nothing.

—Clive Barker

Try to undertake projects that will delight you as much in the doing—if at all possible—as in the after-the-fact accomplishment.

—Michael Bishop
TELL ME A STORY! Don’t try to impress your readers with style or vocabulary or neatly turned phrases. Tell the story first!  
—Anne McCaffrey

Find your own voice. Don’t be Hemingway, Oscar Wilde, Tom Wolfe; they are taken.  
—Jeff Greenfield

Make notes—I’ve lost more material than I’ve ever written. Contrary to popular opinion, it’s not still up there in one’s brain, it’s in outer space and it ain’t comin’ back!  
—Judith Guest

Speak your dialogue out loud. If it sounds like the way real people talk, then write it down.  
—Tom Clancy

Everybody is unique. Find out what you have to say that no one else can say; then perfect the ideal way to say it. That’s all any writer has to sell. Anybody who can do it can sell anything they write.  
—James Gunn

If you don’t enjoy writing, there are other ways of making a living. If you are easily discouraged, there are other ways of making a living. If you don’t want to spend your life working in more or less isolation, there are other ways of making a living.  
—Isaac Asimov

Let rejection hurt for a half hour, no more. Then get back to your pen, typewriter, word processor.  
—Jacqueline Briskin

In spite of making a living at writing, I still get rejections—although the nature of the rejections have changed. I’m more respectfully turned down these day. And since I was 14, getting my poetry rejected by Harper’s and the Atlantic, I’ve never believed they were right when they rejected me. And it’s never changed. I still don’t believe a Publisher is right. It keeps me going. If you feel good about it when it’s done, that’s what really counts.  
—Larry Grobel

If there is any secret to my success other than the roll of the genetic dice, it is that I try to write major works that require me to learn something new each time out—German history, linguistics, music composition and technology and so forth.  
—Norman Spinrad
Dabble. I’ve published everything from op-ed to verse to coloring books to fantasy to nonfiction. If you keep doing the same things forever, you become stale. Or worse yet, dated. Besides, you may miss your area of greatest talent.

—Mary Lou Carney

Write the kind of book that you like to read, and would pay money for.

—Tom Clancy

Your first audience, and your best critic, is yourself…if you’re honest.

—Tom Clancy

There are three never in poetry:
Never write something just because it sounds good.
Never refuse to write something because you are afraid of public reaction.
And never, never let them see you sweat.

—Nikki Giovanni

Without practice, a dedication to write and keep writing, the writer’s inherent talent never develops or matures (unless he or she happens to be born a genius, which the great majority of professional writers are not). Continue to slug away at the Three Ps for writers:
Practice. The only way you can improve your writing skills. It’s just like golf.
Persistence. The only way to overcome periods when you write badly, the whimsicalities of the market, personnel changes at publishing houses, et. al.
Professionalism. Without the ability to judge your work critically, slash it and fix it, you’re not a writer.

—John Jakes

Edit thyself. (Learn the big difference between what’s interesting to you and what’s interesting period).

—Larry Strawther

No professional performer would walk onto a stage without first rehearsing the piece hundreds of times. Disciplined self-editing and exhaustive rewriting are a writer’s rehearsal.

—Malcolm McConnell

Never submit a final draft unless you are entirely satisfied; don’t leave weak areas to ‘the editors’ to correct. That’s like a soloist leaving flat phrasing to the mercy of the audience—and the critics. If you want to be treated professionally, perform accordingly.

—Malcolm McConnell
In addition to being a good and constant observer, be a good and constant reader. Trash is not forbidden by this advice; reading horrid writing can be very comforting when one’s own work is going badly. But don’t write anything you would not enjoy reading.

—Celeste N. DeBlasis

You can keep your own ambitions and stature in decent proportion by maintaining a constant contact with and reverence for the great writers of all time. Writers who read only their contemporaries, whether in competition or emulation, will never get far.

—Anthony Hecht

Read the work of top-notch writers in your field. They know how! Read first for entertainment, then reread for analysis. Soak yourself in their stuff—for atmosphere, color, technique.

—Fred East

Don’t leave your hero alone very long. Have at least two characters on stage whenever possible and let the conflict spark between them. There can be conflict with nature, and your hero can struggle against storm or flood, but use discretion....You could write a gripping story about a struggle between a lone trapper and a huge, clever wolf. But the wolf is practically humanized in such a story and fills every role of villain. The wolf too wants something and does something about it. A storm doesn’t want anything, and that’s why its conflict with man is generally unsatisfactory. It doesn’t produce the rivalry which is the basis of good conflict.

—Samuel Mines

Make your novel readable. Make it easy read, pleasant to read. This doesn’t mean flowery passages, ambitious flights of pyrotechnic verbiage; it means strong, simple, natural sentences.

—Laurence D’Orsay

Authors of so-called ‘literary’ fiction insist that action, like plot, is vulgar and unworthy of a true artist. Don’t pay any attention to misguided advice of that sort. If you do, you will very likely starve trying to live on your writing income. Besides, the only writers who survive the ages are those who understand the need for action in a novel.

—Dean R. Koontz

I just don’t wait for ideas. I look for them. Constantly.

—Peg Bracken
Good writing is remembering detail. Most people want to forget. Don’t forget things that were painful or embarrassing or silly. Turn them into a story that tells the truth.

—Paula Danziger

Beginning a novel is always hard. It feels like going nowhere. I always have to write at least 100 pages that go into the trashcan before it finally begins to work. It’s discouraging, but necessary to write those pages. I try to consider them pages 100 to zero of the novel.

—Barbara Kingsolver

A writer need not devour a whole sheep in order to know what mutton tastes like, but he must at least eat a chop. Unless he gets his facts right, his imagination will lead him into all kinds of nonsense, and the facts he is most likely to get right are the facts of his own experience.

—W. Somerset Maugham

As writers we live life twice, like a cow that eats its food once and then regurgitates it to chew and digest it again. We have a second chance at biting into our experience and examining it. ... This is our life and it’s not going to last forever. There isn’t time to talk about someday writing that short story or poem or novel. Slow down now, touch what is around you, and out of care and compassion for each moment and detail, put pen to paper and begin to write.

—Natalie Goldberg

When I start on a book, I have been thinking about it and making occasional notes for some time....It’s amazing how the subconscious self works on these things. I don’t worry about long periods of not doing anything. I know my subconscious is busy.

—Arthur C. Clarke

I do a great deal of research. I don’t want anyone to say, ‘That could not have happened.’ It may be fiction, but it has to be true.

—Jacquelyn Mitchard

Stay true to your own style. When I first started writing, everybody said to me, ‘Your style just isn’t right because you don’t use the really flowery language that romances have.’ My romances—compared to what’s out there—are very strange, very odd, very different. And I think that’s one of the reasons they’re selling.

—Jude Deveraux
Writing consists of very small parts put together into a whole, and if the parts are defective, the whole won’t work.

—Garrison Keillor

The only obligation any artist can have is to himself. His work means nothing, otherwise. It has no meaning.

—Truman Capote

You need that pride in yourself, as well as a sense, when you are sitting on Page 297 of a book, that the book is going to be read, that somebody is going to care. You can’t ever be sure about that, but you need the sense that it’s important, that it’s not typing; it’s writing.

—Roger Kahn

I’ve always had complete confidence in myself. When I was nothing, I had complete confidence. There were 10 guys in my writing class at Williams College who could write better than I. They didn’t have what I have, which is guts. I was dedicated to writing, and nothing could stop me.

—John Toland

I write in a very confessional way, because to me it’s so exciting and fun. There’s nothing funnier on earth than our humanness and our monkeyness. There’s nothing more touching, and it’s what I love to come upon when I’m reading; someone who’s gotten really down and dirty, and they’re taking the dross of life and doing alchemy, turning it into magic, tenderness and compassion and hilarity. So I tell my students that if they really love something, pay attention to it. Try to write something that they would love to come upon.

—Anne Lamott

When you are dealing with the blackest side of the human soul, you have to have someone who has performed heroically to balance that out. You have to have a hero.

—Ann Rule

Everything in a novel comes down to people making choices. You must figure out in advance what those choices are going to be.

—Marion Zimmer
  Bradley

We’re past the age of heroes and hero kings. If we can’t make up stories about ordinary people, who can we make them up about? … Most of our lives are basically mundane and dull, and it’s up to the writer to find ways to make them interesting.

—John Updike
Too many writers think that all you need to do is write well—but that's only part of what a good book is. Above all, a good book tells a good story. Focus on the story first. Ask yourself, ‘Will other people find this story so interesting that they will tell others about it?’ Remember: A bestselling book usually follows a simple rule, ‘It’s a wonderful story, wonderfully told’; not, ‘It’s a wonderfully told story.’

—Nicholas Sparks

Transitions are critically important. I want the reader to turn the page without thinking she’s turning the page. It must flow seamlessly.

—Janet Evanovich

Write. Rewrite. When not writing or rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts.

—Larry L. King

I’ll tell you a thing that will shock you. It will certainly shock the readers of Writer’s Digest. What I often do nowadays when I have to, say, describe a room, is to take a page of a dictionary, any page at all, and see if with the words suggested by that one page in the dictionary I can build up a room, build up a scene. ... I even did it in a novel I wrote called MF. There’s a description of a hotel vestibule whose properties are derived from Page 167 in R.J. Wilkinson’s Malay-English Dictionary. Nobody has noticed. ... As most things in life are arbitrary anyway, you’re not doing anything naughty, you’re really normally doing what nature does, you’re just making an entity out of the elements. I do recommend it to young writers.

—Anthony Burgess

I try to write a certain amount each day, five days a week. A rule sometimes broken is better than no rule.

—Herman Wouk

Writing verse is a great training for a writer. It teaches you to make your points and get your stuff clear, which is the great thing.

—P. G. Wodehouse

I do not rewrite unless I am absolutely sure that I can express the material better if I do rewrite it.

—William Faulkner

I’m a tremendous rewriter; I never think anything is good enough. I’m always rephrasing jokes, changing lines, and then I hate everything. The Girl Most Likely To was rewritten seven times, and the first time I saw it I literally went out and threw up! How’s that for liking yourself?

—Joan Rivers
I've always felt that my ‘style’—the careful projection onto paper of who I think I am—was my only marketable asset, the only possession that might set me apart from other writers. Therefore I've never wanted anyone to fiddle with it. ... Editors have told me that I'm the only writer they know who cares what happens to his piece after he gets paid for it. Most writers won't argue with an editor because they don't want to annoy him; they're so grateful to be published that they agree to having their style ... violated in public. But to defend what you've written is a sign that you are alive.

—William Zinsser

Falsely straining yourself to put something into a book where it doesn't really belong, it's not doing anybody any favors. And the reader can tell.

—Margaret Atwood

If you're writing for a magazine or a newspaper, then you're a guest. It's as if you're a guest violinst in some great conductor's orchestra. You play to his rhythm, to his audience. You're invited in and he edits you and tells you what he wants. On the other hand, when you're writing a book, the only reason you're writing it is to say it your own way, in your own words, and tell the story the way you see it.

—Teddy White

There's really a shortage of good freelance writers. ... There are a lot of talented people who are very erratic, so either they don't turn it in or they turn it in and it's rotten; it's amazing. Somebody who's even maybe not all that terrific but who is dependable, who will turn in a publishable piece more or less on time, can really do very well.

—Gloria Steinem

Publishers want to take chances on books that will draw a clamor and some legitimate publicity. They want to publish controversial books. That their reasons are mercenary and yours may be lofty should not deter you.

—Harlan Ellison

The most important thing is you can't write what you wouldn't read for pleasure. It's a mistake to analyze the market thinking you can write whatever is hot. You can't say you're going to write romance when you don't even like it. You need to write what you would read if you expect anybody else to read it. And you have to be driven. You have to have the three D's: drive, discipline and desire. If you're missing any one of those three, you can have all the talent in the world, but it's going to be really hard to get anything done.

—Nora Roberts
Inevitably, you react to your own work—you like it, you don’t like it, you think it’s interesting or boring—and it is difficult to accept that those reactions may be unreliable. In my experience, they are. I mistrust either wild enthusiasm or deep depression. I have had the best success with material that I was sort of neutral about.

—Michael Crichton

You shouldn’t submit anything anywhere unless you [would] read it aloud to them.

—MacKinlay Kantor

There’s no mystique about the writing business, although many people consider me blasphemous when I say that. … To create something you want to sell, you first study and research the market, then you develop the product to the best of your ability.

—Clive Cussler

Always remember the reader. Always level with him and never talk down to him. You may think you’re some kind of smart guy because you’re the great writer. Well, if you’re such a smart guy, how come the reader is paying you? Remember the reader’s the boss. He’s hired you to do a job. So do it.

—Jay Anson

You better make them care about what you think. It had better be quirky or perverse or thoughtful enough so that you hit some chord in them. Otherwise it doesn’t work. I mean we’ve all read pieces where we thought, ‘Oh, who gives a damn.’

—Nora Ephron

We all tell a story a different way. I’ve always felt that footsteps on the stairs when you’re alone in the house, and then the handle of the door turning can be scarier than the actual confrontation. So, as a result, I’m on the reading list from age 13 to 90.

—Mary Higgins Clark

I would want my younger self to realize that as wonderful as publication is, it isn’t the point of the writing process. It’s just a stop along the road. Writing is more about the journey than the destination. As award-winning author Anne Lamott points out, ‘Being published isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Writing is.’ So don’t let your non-published status get you down. Just enjoy where you are right now.

—K. M. Weiland
Read the whole of western literature for the past 400 years. If time allows, read the whole of eastern literature for the same time period. For, if one cannot tell what passed for good in the past, one cannot tell what passes for good now.

—Jim Harrison

Do not attempt this act alone. Yes, writing is a solitary act, performed in isolation. But the editing process needs different sets of eyes to help clarify the writer’s vision and meaning. The grouchiest curmudgeons make the best editors; praise feels good, but only criticism helps me improve.

—Philip Yancey

I have a lot of acquaintance with the story before I start writing it. When I didn’t have regular time to give to writing, stories would just be working in my head for so long that when I started to write I was deep into them.

—Alice Munro

Don’t assume you must follow a predetermined writer’s path, that you will be a novelist or a poet or a playwright or a journalist, and you will concentrate on this form of writing only. Try all forms of writing, don’t pre-type yourself, produce fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, playscripts, essays, profiles, humor, memoir, and biography. Eventually, the shape of your talent will emerge from how you have tested yourself.

—William Noble

Write for the love of writing itself, not what writing might afford you. The writers who endure are those who can’t not write, the ones for whom contracts and publication are secondary rewards. Rather than aiming at recognition, they chase understanding. They lean into the struggle, learn to marvel at the untangling of complexities and the transcendence of unforgettable stories. Writing holds the power to transform you and the way you see the world in a way few other human experiences can. This is the real reward, the one that lasts long after the lights go out.

—Michele Cushatt

Discipline. The clear, hard, cold fact is that without discipline all the inspiration and rituals, lucky pencils, good views out the window, and all those other things you think you have to have before you write, won’t bring you anything of value. They simply will not sustain you the way discipline will. I’d tell myself that with humor and grace, however, and not a bit sternly. No young writer should be spoken to with the least amount of stern admonition, but rather with enormous encouragement and support.

—Marion Roach Smith

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Don’t think too hard: The intellect is a great danger to creativity . . . because you begin to rationalize and make up reasons for things, instead of staying with your own basic truth—who you are, what you are, what you want to be. I’ve had a sign over my typewriter for over 25 years now, which reads ‘Don’t think!’ You must never think at the typewriter—you must feel. Your intellect is always buried in that feeling anyway.
—Ray Bradbury

Writers’ block is just a warning that you’re doing the wrong thing: What if you have a blockage and you don’t know what to do about it? Well, it’s obvious you’re doing the wrong thing, aren’t you? . . . You’re being warned, aren’t you? Your subconscious is saying I don’t like you anymore. You’re writing about things I don’t give a damn for. . . If you have writers’ block you can cure it this evening by stopping what you’re doing and writing something else. You picked the wrong subject.
—Ray Bradbury

Study the work of the masters: I used to study Eudora Welty. She has the remarkable ability to give you atmosphere, character, and motion in a single line. In one line! You must study these things to be a good writer. Welty would have a woman simply come into a room and look around. In one sweep she gave you the feel of the room, the sense of the woman’s character, and the action itself. All in twenty words. And you say, How’d she do that? What adjective? What verb? What noun? How did she select them and put them together?
—Ray Bradbury

You don’t become a writer by taking writing classes: I took a writing course in summer school in 1939, when I was in high school. But it didn’t work. The secret of writing was, to go and live in the library two or four days a week for ten years. I graduated from the library having read every single book in it. And along the way I wrote every day of every week of every month, for every year. And in ten years, I became a writer.
—Ray Bradbury

You can’t learn to write in college. It’s a very bad place for writers because the teachers always think they know more than you do—and they don’t. They have prejudices. They may like Henry James, but what if you don’t want to write like Henry James? They may like John Irving, for instance, who’s the bore of all time. A lot of the people whose work they’ve taught in the schools for the last thirty years, I can’t understand why people read them and why they are taught. The library, on the other hand, has no biases. The information is all there for you to interpret. You don’t have someone telling you what to think. You discover it for yourself.
—Ray Bradbury
Write when the idea strikes: The short story, if you really are intense and you have an exciting idea, writes itself in a few hours. I try to encourage my student friends and my writer friends to write a short story in one day so it has a skin around it, its own intensity, its own life, its own reason for being. There’s a reason why the idea occurred to you at that hour anyway, so go with that and investigate it, get it down. Two or three thousand words in a few hours is not that hard. Don’t let people interfere with you. Boot ’em out, turn off the phone, hide away, get it done. If you carry a short story over to the next day you may overnight intellectualize something about it and try to make it too fancy, try to please someone.

—Ray Bradbury

Go your own way: When I started writing seriously, I made the major discovery of my life—that I am right and everybody else is wrong if they disagree with me. What a great thing to learn: Don’t listen to anyone else, and always go your own way.

—Ray Bradbury

Any experience that touches you, in any particular way, is good. It can be a horrible experience. I saw a car crash when I was 15 here in Los Angeles and five people died as a result of it. I arrived at the scene within 20 seconds of hearing the collision. It was the worst mistake I ever made in my life. I didn’t know what I was running into. People had been horribly mangled and decapitated. So for months after, I was shaken. It’s probably the reason I never learned to drive. I was terrified of automobiles for a long time after that but I turned it into a short story called “The Crowd” six or seven years later. . . So out of this horror—this really terrible event—you take something that has taught you a certain kind of fear and you pass on to others and say, ‘This is what the car can do.’

—Ray Bradbury

Most short stories are too long. When I wrote the novel Something Wicked This Way Comes, the first draft was a hundred and fifty thousand words. So I went through and cut out fifty thousand. It’s important to get out of your own way. Clean the kindling away, the rubbish. Make it clear.

—Ray Bradbury

Don’t be afraid to write crap, either: Whatever it is—whatever it is, do it! Sure there are going to be mistakes. Everything’s not going to be perfect. I’ve written thousands of words that no one will ever see. I had to write them in order to get rid of them. But then I’ve written a lot of other stuff too. So the good stuff stays, and the old stuff goes.

—Ray Bradbury

Be wary of ‘writing rules’ and advice. Do it your way.

—Tara Moss
In the early stages of a book, I deal with potential self-consciousness by literally hushing the critical voices in my head. The voices that tell you: ‘Oh, those aren’t the words you want,’ or ‘you shouldn’t be working on this part now,’ or ‘why not use the present tense?’—on and on. Anyone who’s ever written anything is familiar with that chorus.

Writing a first draft, you can become paralyzed by these thoughts. So I literally tell the voices to quiet down. I praise them for their perspicacity, and I tell them how much I need them—that I will want them later. But I cannot listen to them right now, because I am confused by them.

And I don’t sit there waiting for that perfect, beautiful sentence, because I know I’m going to sit there forever. So, as I tell students—start out by tripping, why don’t you? Then get up and fall over again. Just as long as you go.

—Kathryn Harrison

To all the talented young men who wander about feeling that there is nothing in the world for them to do, I should say: ‘Give up trying to write, and, instead, try not to write. Go out into the world; become a pirate, a king in Borneo, a labourer in Soviet Russia; give yourself an existence in which the satisfaction of elementary physical needs will occupy almost all your energies.’ I do not recommend this course of action to everyone, but only to those who suffer from the disease which Mr Krutch diagnoses. I believe that, after some years of such an existence, the ex-intellectual will find that in spite of is efforts he can no longer refrain from writing, and when this time comes his writing will not seem to him futile.

—Bertrand Russell

You can only become truly accomplished at something you love. Don’t make money your goal. Instead pursue the things you love doing and then do them so well that people can’t take their eyes off of you.

—Maya Angelou

You can only write regularly if you’re willing to write badly… Accept bad writing as a way of priming the pump, a warm-up exercise that allows you to write well.

—Jennifer Egan

There is a great deal that either has to be given up or be taken away from you if you are going to succeed in writing a body of work.

—Susan Sontag

No one ever gets talker’s block. No one wakes up in the morning, discovers he has nothing to say and sits quietly, for days or weeks, until the muse hits, until the moment is right.

—Seth Godin
I've come to the stage when I know what I want to do with my future. I want to write, and that's all, and I need no study of such quaint American writers as Cotton Mather or Philip Freneau — both of whom we are studying in American Lit — to increase my perception or outlook on literature and life. For a person whose sole burning ambition is to write — like myself — college is useless beyond the Sophomore year. By that time he knows that further wisdom comes from reading men like Plato and Montaigne — not Cotton Mather — and from getting out in the world and living. All of the rest of the scholarship in English literature is for pallid, prim and vapid young men who will end up teaching and devoting 30 years of their sterile lives in investigating some miserably obscure facet of the life of some minor Renaissance poet. Sure, scholarship is necessary, but its [sic] not for me. I'm going to write, and I'll spend the rest of my days on a cattle-boat or jerking sodas before I teach.

—William Styron

What they want to hear is, ‘Here's how you get an agent, here's how you write a script’...but I always say, ‘Be so good they can't ignore you.’

—Steve Martin

I'm never not working on material. Every second of my existence, I am thinking, ‘Can I do something with that?”’ [By the way, this advice echoes a phrase I’ve learned from author Robert Greene, ‘It’s all material.’ Meaning everything bad that happens, everything frustrating or delayed or disappointing—all of it can be fuel for a book. It can teach you something that helps you improve your business, it can become a story you pass along to a friend.]

—Jerry Seinfeld

Why are you writing a novel? Do you want to be published? Do you want to self-publish? Do you want to be rich? I write because I love telling stories and because there is nothing else I want to do. Even if no one bought my books, I know I would go on writing . . . And that's the best attitude. Don't worry about publishers, agents, critics, partners, friends or even readers. Believe me that deals and bestseller lists are the part of writing that I enjoy least. Immerse yourself in your work. Believe in yourself and enjoy what you're doing. There is nothing quite as fulfilling as the act of writing. The rest can look after itself.

—Anthony Horowitz

I don’t think anybody can teach anybody anything. I think that you learn it, but the young writer that is as I say demon-driven and wants to learn and has got to write, he don’t know why, he will learn from almost any source that he finds. He will learn from older people who are not writers, he will learn from writers, but he learns it—you can’t teach it.

—William Faulkner
It’s okay to write crap. Just don’t try publishing it while it’s still crap.
—S. M. Blooding

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite:
‘Fool!’ said my muse to me, ‘look in thy heart, and write.’
—Philip Sidney

The first thing you have to learn when you go into the arts is to learn to cope with rejection. If you can’t, you’re dead.
—Warren Adler

On the Writing Process:
When in doubt, take it out.
—Barbara DaCosta

Speed is not always a constituent to great work, the process of creation should be given time and thought.
—E. A. Buchianeri

Writing a book is a blood sport. If it doesn’t hurt when you’re done, you’re probably doing something wrong.
—Kevis Hendrickson

Nouns and verbs are the guts of the language. Beware of covering up with adjectives and adverbs.
—A. B. Guthrie Jr.

Writing is like a lump of coal. Put it under enough pressure and polish it enough and you might just end up with a diamond. Otherwise, you can burn it to keep warm.
—A. J. Dalton

The best advice I have that is worth anything, is to do your research. Research everything—your book, marketing, promo, your genre—and think about the long-term goals, not just instant career gratification. That’s what separates career authors from hobbyists. Writing as a hobby is fine, if that’s what you want to do. If you want to be a professional, you just have to spend the time and study up. There is no magic formula or secret handshake. I so wish there was. (Well, there is coffee. That’s kind of magical.) You just have to put in the hours and do the work. Knowledge really is power.
—Michelle M. Pillow
I always encourage a writer to learn the craft by writing a genre romance—and that means a Harlequin/M&B style one. And why not? You have the highest chance of being published in this genre, it’s fun, it’s a challenge and it’s shorter than many other books. It sure worked for EL James. But does that mean it is easy? Not a chance! It will put to the test all your storytelling skills. That’s why it is such a great place to start your career.

—Sarah Bullen

Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away. Reexamine each sentence you put on paper. Is every word doing new work? Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous or pretentious or faddish? Are you hanging on to something useless just because you think it’s beautiful? Simplify, simplify.

—William Zinsser

Keep it amateur. You’re not writing for money but for pleasure. It should be fun. And it should be exciting. Maybe not as you write, but after it’s done you should feel an excitement, a passion. That doesn’t mean feeling proud, sitting there gloating over what you’ve done. It means you know you’ve done your best. Next time it’s going to be better.

—William Faulkner

Most nonfiction writers have a definitiveness complex. They feel that they are under some obligation—to the subject, to their honor, to the gods of writing—to make their article the last word. It’s a commendable impulse, but there is no last word. What you think is definitive today will turn undefined by tonight, and writers who doggedly pursue every last fact will find themselves pursuing the rainbow and never settling down to write. Nobody can write a book or an article ‘about’ something. Tolstoy couldn’t write a book about war and peace, or Melville a book about whaling. They made certain reductive decisions about time and place and about individual characters in that time and place—one man pursuing one whale. Every writing project must be reduced before you start to write. Therefore think small. Decide what corner of your subject you’re going to bite off, and be content to cover it well and stop.

—William Zinsser

The biggest threat to creativity and writing a novel is self-doubt and lack of confidence.

—Tamyara Brown

You will never learn how to write well if you don't learn how to edit.

—Sarah Gerdes
Your job as a writer is to say as truthfully as you can what you see and how you feel. Writing is a high-wire act. It’s best not to look at the other circus performers but to attend to the wire.

—Danelle Morton

Write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity.

—William Hazlitt

In general, shorter is better. If you can encapsulate your idea into a single captivating sentence, you’re halfway home.

—Len Wein

Writer’s block, for me, is merely a way of saying ‘I’m too lazy to sit down and give it the proper time.’
I want to be a progressive writer, not a lazy one.

—Olivia Majors

You do not need to be temperamental or upset to be a novelist. Don’t embrace the tortured artist rhetoric that any life difficulties might serve to benefit and enhance your writing. That’s damaging. Counterintuitive. Writing can be so incredibly lonely, and when you’re alone with your thoughts for long enough to produce a hundred thousand words of your own headspace, it can be scary. Suffering is not good for your art. Mental health care is. So talk to someone other than your future readers about the problems you are facing. Someone you know and trust. There is no shame in asking for help.

—Bryant A. Loney

A rain forest springs from the droppings of animals and grows greater than any cultivated garden; likewise, a great mass of literary skill springs from the droppings of writers that cross our minds through the reading we do.

—Agona Apell

T.S. Eliot said to me ‘There’s only one way a poet can develop his actual writing—apart from self-criticism & continual practice. And that is by reading other poetry aloud—and it doesn’t matter whether he understands it or not (i.e. even if it’s in another language.) What matters above all, is educating the ear.’ What matters, is to connect your own voice with an infinite range of verbal cadences & sequences—and only endless actual experience of your ear can store all that in your nervous system. The rest can be left to your life & your character.

—Ted Hughes
What I am trying to achieve is a voice sitting by a fireplace telling you a story on a winter’s evening.

—Truman Capote

The biggest thing for aspiring writers I would say is that writing is hard work. You can’t sustain the fantasy that it should somehow be otherwise for you because you are more special or more committed than other aspiring writers. You aren’t sitting down to be entertained by the gods or to entertain yourself. At times it can be a thrill and it feels more like play, but we are easily deceived by whatever pleasures or rewards writing can offer. Exhilarating work is still work. Is it work, or is it play? And the answer is ‘yes.’ Does it sometimes feel like it comes easily or naturally? Yes. But did it really come easily? No. Writing doesn’t offer the rhythmic endorphin hit you get scrolling down the screen clicking on memes. Are you up for the work it is going to take to become successful as a writer? It is going to be harder than you think. You are submitting to forces and to a process that you can’t fully control. There is maybe a tiny bit more control if you self-publish, and there is no shame in doing that, but even that is going to introduce hard work. Probably harder than you think. If my next novel can’t find a home, I’m not above self-publishing it in some capacity and then moving on to the next project.

—Brian K. Friesen

I have no talent; it’s just a question of working, of being willing to put in the time.

—Graham Greene

Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.

—Zadie Smith

Writers are usually encouraged to write a ‘vomit draft’ and just get something out, however terrible it is, in order to overcome The Fear, get some momentum, and move to more of an editing mindset, where’s it’s less scary to make progress. I don’t do that. I think that’s just a trick to try and lower the stakes so you can overcome procrastination and The Fear. And while it’s good for that, I think it’s bad in the long haul because you’re producing a lot of junk and that’s going to be hard to fully clean up. I treat writing a lot more like architecture. You wouldn’t work without a blueprint, construct a crappy building, then knock it down and build a better one. That would be ridiculous. You’d put together a really tight blueprint, then construct the building once, the right way, and if it needs tweaks, they’re relatively small. As the old saying goes: ‘Measure twice, cut once.’

—Eric Barker

Being ‘rather unique’ is no more possible than being ‘rather pregnant.’

—William Zinsser
Create a world in front of your readers where they can taste, smell, touch, hear, see, and move. Or else they are likely going to move on to another book.

—Pawan Mishra

Young writers should get other degrees first, social sciences, arts degrees or even business degrees. What you learn is research skills, a necessity because a lot of writing is about trying to find information.

—Irvine Welsh

Part of getting better at writing is knowing where to find that inspiration. Right after something happens to me, the first thing I’ll do is go write when those feelings are really, really fresh.

—Troye Sivan

Write about only three things: what you love, what you hate, and what you’re deeply conflicted about.

—Marlon James

You need to take out the stuff that’s just sitting there and doing nothing. No slackers allowed! All meat, no filler!

—Stephen King

The final advantage is the same that applies in every other competitive venture. If you would like to write better than everyone else, you have to want to write better than everyone else. You must take an obsessive pride in the smallest details of your craft. And you must be willing to defend what you've written against the various middlemen—editors, agents, and publishers—whose sights may be different from yours, whose standards are not as high. Too many writers are browbeaten into settling for less than their best.

—William Zinsser

To be a writer—write! To be an author—publish! To be a bestselling author—never stop writing!

—David Maxwell

Writing is for the creative brain. Editing is for the critical brain. Separate them appropriately.

—James D. Beers

I’ll be blasted…if I ever write another word, or try to write another word, to please Nick Greene or the Muse. Bad, good, or indifferent, I’ll write, from this day forward, to please myself.

—Virginia Woolf
It won’t do to say that the reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. If the reader is lost, it’s usually because the writer hasn’t been careful enough.

—William Zinsser

Don’t over edit. Don’t second-guess yourself, or your ideas. Just write. Write every day, and keep at it. Don’t get discouraged with the rejections. Tape them up on your office wall, to remind you of all the hard work you put in when you finally start getting published! It's all about persistence and passion. And have fun with it. Don’t forget to have fun.

—Heather Grace Stewart

The mind has plenty of ways of preventing you from writing, and paralysing self-consciousness is a good one. The only thing to do is ignore it, and remember what Vincent van Gogh said in one of his letters about the painter's fear of the blank canvas —the canvas, he said, is far more afraid of the painter.

—Philip Pullman

To make the writing process easier for you, do more research. The more information you have about the topic you chose to write about, the more effective, easier and practical writing experience you will have, and the better reading material readers will get.

—Noora Ahmed

Reading your work out loud to yourself is good. It helps even more if you read to people. If they start yawning that is a bad sign. Unless you are writing for children. Then your story is not bad, you just wrote a bedtime story!

—Ana Claudia Antunes

You do not need to be temperamental or upset to be a novelist. Don’t embrace the tortured artist rhetoric that any life difficulties might serve to benefit and enhance your writing. That’s damaging. Counterintuitive. Writing can be so incredibly lonely, and when you’re alone with your thoughts for long enough to produce a hundred thousand words of your own headspace, it can be scary. Suffering is not good for your art. Mental health care is. So talk to someone other than your future readers about the problems you are facing. Someone you know and trust. There is no shame in asking for help.

—Bryant A. Loney

Don’t ever let yourself surrender to writer's block.

—Julie Wenzel
The structured form of an outline helps us to keep track of all plot lines in a series, and of course, this diminishes the chance of plot holes for us.

—Lydia Larue

A writer needs solitude: moments that he can spend in introspection and in reflection. These moments make him pensive and thoughtful and help him write his thoughts with clarity. A life of devotion to one's passion gives us meaning to our life.

—Avijeet Das

It’s a terrible mistake to let the perfect get in the way of the good. If you wait to publish until you have written a great book, you will never publish anything. Great books happen by chance, not by design. The wise writer writes the best he can and leaves it to posterity to decide about greatness.

—Andrew M Greeley

No writer ever puts into words which he or she thinks is unnecessary; learning how to discover that some are is one of the chief challenges in learning to write.

—Anne E. Berthoff

Discipline, not the Muse, results in productivity. If you write only when she beckons, your writing is not yours at all.

—Kenneth Atchity

You need the devotion to your work that a priest of God has for his.

—Ernest Hemingway

Any discipline can help your writing: logic, mathematics, theology, and of course and particularly drawing. Anything that helps you to see, anything that makes you look. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn’t require his attention.

—Flannery O’Connor

Get through a draft as quickly as possible. Hard to know the shape of the thing until you have a draft. Literally, when I wrote the last page of my first draft of Lincoln’s Melancholy I thought, Oh, shit, now I get the shape of this. But I had wasted years, literally years, writing and re-writing the first third to first half. The old writer’s rule applies: Have the courage to write badly.

—Joshua Wolf Shenk

I don’t fire up the prose. I just tell it straight and don’t fool around with it.

—Raymond Carver
Write what you love. Passion is the key to a good story.

—R. M. Donaldson

Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but, most of all, endurance.

—James Baldwin

The best advice I can give on this is, once it’s done, to put it away until you can read it with new eyes. Finish the short story, print it out, then put it in a drawer and write other things. When you’re ready, pick it up and read it, as if you’ve never read it before. If there are things you aren’t satisfied with as a reader, go in and fix them as a writer: that’s revision.

—Neil Gaiman

The more time you can put between you and your manuscript, the more fresh your eyes become and the more mistakes you’ll catch. Let a chapter rest for a day, you’ll see ways to improve it. Let your completed book rest a month or more and you’ll see stuff that’s long or that you want to skip. Read it out loud to get rid of awkward phrases and listen to your critique partners if they are good.

—Dan Alatorre

By small and simple sentences, great books come to pass.

—Richelle E. Goodrich

[When asked for her advice to aspiring writers] Run! Just kidding. Sort of. Really, I think the best advice I can give is to wait for the book that compels you to write it—the one that you eat, sleep, and breathe.

If you try to force yourself to create an epic story, you will feel the ensuing drudgery quite acutely—and worse, your readers will feel it too.

Conversely, if you wait for the book that won’t leave you alone until you finish it, your readers will feel that energy and it will make it difficult for them to put the book down until they have finished it!

—Kealohilani

The ‘if I had time’ lie is a convenient way to ignore the fact that novels require being written and that writing happens a sentence at a time. Sentences can happen in a moment. Enough stolen moments, enough stolen sentences, and a novel is born—without the luxury of time.

—Julia Cameron
There are a lot of ways for a novelist to create suspense, but also really only two: one a trick, one an art.

The trick is to keep a secret. Or many secrets, even. In Lee Child’s books, Jack Reacher always has a big mystery to crack, but there are a series of smaller mysteries in the meantime, too, a new one appearing as soon as the last is resolved. J. K. Rowling is another master of this technique — Who gave Harry that Firebolt? How is Rita Skeeter getting her info?

The art, meanwhile, the thing that makes ‘Pride and Prejudice’ so superbly suspenseful, more suspenseful than the slickest spy novel, is to write stories in which characters must make decisions. ‘Breaking Bad’ kept a few secrets from its audience, but for the most part it was fantastically adept at forcing Walter and Jesse into choice, into action. The same is true of ‘Freedom,’ or ‘My Brilliant Friend,’ or ‘Anna Karenina,’ all novels that are hard to stop reading even when it seems as if it should be easy.

—Charles Finch

Writing Tip:
Don’t let the ‘writing rules’ bog you down when you’re writing the first draft; they don’t matter when you’re writing the story, only when you’re editing the story.

—Linda Westphal

The first draft of a book—even a long one—should take no more than three months, the length of a season.

—Stephen King

Getting stuck is the commonest trouble of all. Usually, I say, your mind gets stuck when you’re trying to do too many things at once. What you have to do is try not to force words to come. That just gets you more stuck. What you have to do now is separate out the things and do them one at a time. You’re trying to think of what to say and what to say first at the same time and that’s too hard. So separate them out. Just make a list of all the things you want to say in any old order. Then later we’ll figure out the right order.

—Robert M. Pirsig

Writing as a creative art flourishes only when there are no rules. Rules stifle you from entering the silent and forbidden spaces where the core of the story is waiting to be revealed.

—Gloria D. Gonsalves
I started reading my manuscripts out loud, to hear what they sounded like. If the text flows with little effort, then I am satisfied, but if I keep stumbling and stuttering while I read, then I rewrite.

—Gudjon Bergmann

It is imperative that your work habits from school do not make their way into your book writing process. I am talking about the practice of typing the last words just before the deadline every time you would hand in an assignment, a paper, or even a thesis. Your book needs time to mature, and you must allow yourself the luxury of rewriting and editing until you are satisfied.

—Gudjon Bergmann

Writing to impress others is the surest path to pretentious mediocrity.

—Katerina Stoykova

The first step in becoming a good writer is to write crap. In all seriousness, none of us are born knowing how to write. Almost all of us will produce a lot of really lousy stories before we start to get good. (Not all of us will choose to publish those lousy stories, but that’s a whole separate discussion...)

—Jim C. Hines

The only thing you really need to be a writer is time. Regular, consistent time, quality time when you’re not tired.
I write on the bus to and from work, that’s my time, 1 or 2 hours every single day. Make the time, keep at it, and you’ll be a real writer before you know it.

—Jonathan Maas

Writing badly can eventually lead to something better. Not writing at all leads to nothing.

—Anna Quindlen

Writing is like gardening. Planting, watering, and weeding are not enough. You have to prune if you want growth.

—Ron Brackin

Don’t think too much. There’ll be time to think later. Analysis won't help. You’re chiseling now. You’re passing your hands over the wood. Now the page is no longer blank. There’s something there. It isn’t your business yet to know whether it’s going to be prize-worthy someday, or whether it will gather dust in a drawer. Now you’ve carved the tree. You’ve chiseled the marble. You’ve begun.

—Dani Shapiro
Q: Do you have any advice for upcoming writers who want to pen weird stories?

A: READ, damn it. Fill your brain to the bursting point with the good stuff, starting with writers that you truly enjoy, and then work your way backward and outward, reading those writers who inspired the writers you love best. That was my path as far as Weird/Horror Fiction, starting with Lovecraft, and then working my way backward/outward on the Weird Fiction spiderweb. And don’t limit your reading. Read it all, especially non-fiction and various news outlets. You’d be surprised by how many of my story ideas were born while listening to NPR, perusing a blog, or paging through Vanity Fair.

Once you have your fuel squared away, just write what you love, in whatever style and genre. You’ll never have fun being someone you’re not, so be yourself. When a singer opens their mouth, what comes out is what comes out.

Also, don’t be afraid to fail, and don’t be afraid to walk away. Writing isn’t for everyone, and that’s totally fine. One doesn’t need to be a writer to enjoy being a reader and overall fan of genre or wider fiction.

—T. E. Grau

Want to be a writer? take a good book a good pen and a notepad to bed with you every night of your life.

—Ken Scott

Quality comes with practice. If you are prolific, then you become a better writer because you are writing. The more you do anything the better at it you will become. So in a way, quantity does add to quality.

—Larry Correia

If the writer doesn’t sweat, the reader will.

—Mark Twain

Every morning, I go to my desk and reread yesterday’s pages, only to be discouraged that the prose isn’t as good as it seemed during the excitement of composition. In my mind, it was a whole lot better.

Don’t give in to doubt. Never be discouraged if your first draft isn’t what you thought it would be. Given skill and a story that compels you, muster your determination and make what’s on the page closer to what you have in your mind.

—David Morrell
Concentrate on sharpening your memory and peeling your sensibility. Cut every page you write by at least one third. Stop constructing those piffling little similes of yours. Work out what it is you want to say. Then say it in the most direct and vigorous way you can. Eat meat. Drink blood. Give up your social life and don’t think you can have friends. Rise in the quiet hours of the night and prick your fingertips and use the blood for ink; that will cure you of persiflage!

—Hilary Mantel

If you have a story to tell, put it out there. Get the thing done. No excuses. No procrastinating. No apologies. It will never be as good as you want it to be, so forget about perfection. Just be satisfied that you’ve done the best work you can do at this stage in your life as an author. Then roll the rocket onto the launch pad and fire it off. After that, write another story. Always keep going. Move fast. Stay one step ahead of the forces of distraction and self-doubt. Love your characters enough to give them a good home. Love your readers enough to give them a place of refuge from life’s tragedies, big and small. And love the world you live in enough to make it the world of your dreams.

—James Hampton

Writers often torture themselves trying to get the words right. Sometimes you must lower your expectations and just finish it.

—Don Roff

To become better writers we must become the best thieves and liars in the business. We slink around the pages of everyone else’s work and shove it into our pockets. Then we run home and try to make it our own.

—Chris Stocking

Of course, the writer can impose control; It’s just a really shitty idea. Writing controlled fiction is called ‘plotting.’ Buckling your seatbelt and letting the story take over, however... that is called ‘storytelling.’ Storytelling is as natural as breathing; plotting is the literary version of artificial respiration

—Stephen King

Go APE: Author a great book, Publish it quickly, and Entrepreneur your way to success. Self-publishing isn’t easy, but it’s fun and sometimes even lucrative. Plus, your book could change the world.

—Guy Kawasaki

In quickness is truth. The more swiftly you write, the more honest you are. In hesitation is thought. In delay comes the effort for a style, instead of leaping upon truth which is the only style worth deadfalling or tiger-trapping.

—Ray Bradbury
When something can be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing.  
--Enrique Jardiel Poncela

Never write short and add. That’s a recipe for disaster, in my humble opinion, and know of no professionals who do that. The first draft is for everything, that’s why some refer to it as the ‘vomit draft,’ etc. You put it all in, everything, so then you see what works what doesn’t, what is overwritten or underwritten. To write a short first draft only hurts you because you can’t tell if something you left out works until you see it in there. So, you’re causing yourself more work by writing ‘short.’

—Paul Guyot

When a man is in doubt about this or that in his writing, it will often guide him if he asks himself how it will tell a hundred years hence.

—Samuel Butler

If you do not breathe through writing, if you do not cry out in writing, or sing in writing, then don’t write, because our culture has no use for it.

—Anaïs Nin

It’s not a good idea to try to put your wife into a novel. Not your latest wife, anyway.

—Norman Mailer

Dialogue is not just quotation. It is grimaces, pauses, adjustments of blouse buttons, doodles on a napkin, and crossings of legs.

—Jerome Stern

How can a man freshen and enrich his style? Read and reread the Bible and Shakespeare and Defoe and Swift and Bunyan and Tennyson, for all of these have a genius for pouring the water of life into the clay jugs of Saxon speech.

—Charles Edward Jefferson

Kafka became a model for me, a continuing inspiration. Not only did he exhibit an irrepressible originality—who else would think of things like this!—he seemed to say that only in one’s most personal language can the crucial tales of a writer be told. Don’t bend; don’t water it down; don’t try to make it logical; don’t edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly. Only if you do that can you hope to make the reader feel a particle of what you, the writer, have known and feel compelled to share.

—Anne Rice
Sleep on your writing; take a walk over it; scrutinize it of a morning; review it of an afternoon; digest it after a meal; let it sleep in your drawer a twelvemonth; never venture a whisper about it to your friend, if he be an author especially.

—A. Bronson Alcott

No man should ever publish a book until he has first read it to a woman.

—Van Wyck Brooks

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it.

—Margaret Atwood

It has often been said there’s so much to be read, you never can cram all those words in your head.

So the writer who breeds more words than he needs is making a chore for the reader who reads.

That’s why my belief is the briefer the brief is, the greater the sigh of the reader’s relief is.

And that’s why your books have such power and strength. You publish with shorth! (Shorth is better than length.)

—Dr. Seuss

In many cases when a reader puts a story aside because it ‘got boring,’ the boredom arose because the writer grew enchanted with his powers of description and lost sight of his priority, which is to keep the ball rolling.

—Stephen King

Read a thousand books, and your words will flow like a river.

—Lisa See
Advice? I don’t have advice. Stop aspiring and start writing. If you’re writing, you’re a writer. Write like you’re a goddamn death row inmate and the governor is out of the country and there’s no chance for a pardon. Write like you’re clinging to the edge of a cliff, white knuckles, on your last breath, and you’ve got just one last thing to say, like you’re a bird flying over us and you can see everything, and please, for God’s sake, tell us something that will save us from ourselves. Take a deep breath and tell us your deepest, darkest secret, so we can wipe our brow and know that we’re not alone. Write like you have a message from the king. Or don’t. Who knows, maybe you’re one of the lucky ones who doesn’t have to.

—Alan Wilson Watts

Writing simply means no dependent clauses, no dangling things, no flashbacks, and keeping the subject near the predicate. We throw in as many fresh words we can get away with. Simple, short sentences don’t always work. You have to do tricks with pacing, alternate long sentences with short, to keep it vital and alive.... Virtually every page is a cliffhanger—you’ve got to force them to turn it.

—Dr. Seuss

The...thing you have to do to be a writer is to keep on writing. Don’t listen to people who tell you that very few people get published and you won’t be one of them. Don’t listen to your friend who says you are better that Tolkien and don’t have to try any more. Keep writing, keep faith in the idea that you have unique stories to tell, and tell them. I meet far too many people who are going to be writers ‘someday.’ When they are out of high school, when they’ve finished college, after the wedding, when the kids are older, after I retire . . . That is such a trap. You will never have any more free time than you do right now. So, whether you are 12 or 70, you should sit down today and start being a writer if that is what you want to do. You might have to write on a notebook while your kids are playing on the swings or write in your car on your coffee break. That’s okay. I think we’ve all ‘been there, done that.’ It all starts with the writing.

—Robin Hobb

I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don’t let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don’t mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice.

—Mark Twain
People often ask me why my style is so simple. It is, in fact, deceptively simple, for no two sentences are alike. It is clarity that I am striving to attain, not simplicity.

Of course, some people want literature to be difficult and there are writers who like to make their readers toil and sweat. They hope to be taken more seriously that way. I have always tried to achieve a prose that is easy and conversational. And those who think this is simple should try it for themselves.

—Ruskin Bond

If a writer stops observing he is finished. Experience is communicated by small details intimately observed.

—Ernest Hemingway

I want to be clear about this. If you wrote from experience, you’d get maybe one book, maybe three poems. Writers write from empathy.

—Nikki Giovanni

Remember that you own what happened to you. If your childhood was less than ideal, you may have been raised thinking that if you told the truth about what really went on in your family, a long bony white finger would emerge from a cloud and point to you, while a chilling voice thundered, ‘We *told* you not to tell.’ But that was then. Just put down on paper everything you can remember now about your parents and siblings and relatives and neighbors, and we will deal with libel later on.

—Anne Lamott

I have advice for people who want to write. I don’t care whether they’re 5 or 500. There are three things that are important: First, if you want to write, you need to keep an honest, unpublishable journal that nobody reads, nobody but you. Where you just put down what you think about life, what you think about things, what you think is fair and what you think is unfair. And second, you need to read. You can’t be a writer if you’re not a reader. It’s the great writers who teach us how to write. The third thing is to write. Just write a little bit every day. Even if it’s for only half an hour—write, write, write.

—Madeleine L’Engle

It is all very well for you to write simply and the simpler the better. But do not start to think so damned simply. Know how complicated it is and then state it simply.

—Ernest Hemingway

If a story is not about the hearer, he will not listen. And here I make a rule—a great and interesting story is about everyone or it will not last.

—John Steinbeck
There was a moment when I changed from an amateur to a professional. I assumed the burden of a profession, which is to write even when you don’t want to, don’t much like what you’re writing, and aren’t writing particularly well.

—Agatha Christie

Be ruthless about protecting writing days, i.e., do not cave in to endless requests to have ‘essential’ and ‘long overdue’ meetings on those days. The funny thing is that, although writing has been my actual job for several years now, I still seem to have to fight for time in which to do it. Some people do not seem to grasp that I still have to sit down in peace and write the books, apparently believing that they pop up like mushrooms without my connivance. I must therefore guard the time allotted to writing as a Hungarian Horntail guards its firstborn egg.

—J. K. Rowling

I tell aspiring writers that you have to find what you MUST write. When you find it, you will know, because the subject matter won’t let you go. It’s not enough to write simply because you think it would be neat to be published. You have to be compelled to write. If you’re not, nothing else that you do matters.

—Rick Riordan

Always get to the dialogue as soon as possible. I always feel the thing to go for is speed. Nothing puts the reader off more than a big slab of prose at the start.

—P. G. Wodehouse

Don’t just stare at the pages. Become the characters. Live inside the book.

—Wally Lamb

Exercise the writing muscle every day, even if it is only a letter, notes, a title list, a character sketch, a journal entry. Writers are like dancers, like athletes. Without that exercise, the muscles seize up.

—Jane Yolen

People will tell you that writing is too difficult, that it’s impossible to get your work published, that you might as well hang yourself. Meanwhile, they’ll keep writing and you’ll have hanged yourself.

—John Champlin Gardner Jr.

No one wants to read poetry. You have to make it impossible for them to put the poem down—impossible for them to stop reading it, word after word. You have to keep them from closing the book.

—Muriel Rukeyser
Play around. Dive into absurdity and write. Take chances. You will succeed if you are fearless of failure.

—Natalie Goldberg

When you have a good romance, find ways to make their lives miserable and hellish...Do you think ‘Titanic’ would have been so popular if they had both lived? Not a prayer.

—Orson Scott Card

Write as if you’ll never be read. That way you’ll be sure to tell the truth.

—Lori Lansens

The worst thing you can do is censor yourself as the pencil hits the paper. You must not edit until you get it all on paper. If you can put everything down, stream-of-consciousness, you’ll do yourself a service.

—Stephen Sondheim

When I walk into [the studio] I am alone, but I am alone with my body, ambition, ideas, passions, needs, memories, goals, prejudices, distractions, fears.

These ten items are at the heart of who I am. Whatever I am going to create will be a reflection of how these have shaped my life, and how I’ve learned to channel my experiences into them.

The last two—distractions and fears—are the dangerous ones. They’re the habitual demons that invade the launch of any project. No one starts a creative endeavor without a certain amount of fear; the key is to learn how to keep free-floating fears from paralyzing you before you’ve begun. When I feel that sense of dread, I try to make it as specific as possible. Let me tell you my five big fears:

1. People will laugh at me.
2. Someone has done it before.
3. I have nothing to say.
4. I will upset someone I love.
5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind.

There are mighty demons, but they’re hardly unique to me. You probably share some. If I let them, they’ll shut down my impulses (‘No, you can’t do that’) and perhaps turn off the spigots of creativity altogether. So I combat my fears with a staring-down ritual, like a boxer looking his opponent right in the eye before a bout.
1. People will laugh at me? Not the people I respect; they haven't yet, and they’re not going to start now....

2. Someone has done it before? Honey, it’s all been done before. Nothing’s original. Not Homer or Shakespeare and certainly not you. Get over yourself.

3. I have nothing to say? An irrelevant fear. We all have something to say.

4. I will upset someone I love? A serious worry that is not easily exorcised or stared down because you never know how loved ones will respond to your creation. The best you can do is remind yourself that you’re a good person with good intentions. You’re trying to create unity, not discord.

5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind? Toughen up. Leon Battista Alberti, the 15th century architectural theorist, said, ‘Errors accumulate in the sketch and compound in the model.’ But better an imperfect dome in Florence than cathedrals in the clouds.

—Twyla Tharp

Convince yourself that you are working in clay, not marble, on paper not eternal bronze: Let that first sentence be as stupid as it wishes.

—Jacques Barzun

Just start the sentence...and see what happens. This is how we write.

—Jincy Willett

You can write about anything for children as long as you’ve got humour.

—Roald Dahl

A good writer should draw the reader in by starting in the middle of the story with a hook, then go back and fill in what happened before the hook. Once you have the reader hooked, you can write whatever you want as you slowly reel them in.

—Roland Smith

You can’t judge a book by it’s cover but you can sure sell a bunch of books if you have a good one.

—Jayce O’Neal

Never put off writing until you are better at it.

—Gary Henderson
Any man who keeps working is not a failure. He may not be a great writer, but if he applies the old-fashioned virtues of hard, constant labor, he’ll eventually make some kind of career for himself as writer.
—Ray Bradbury

When writing goes painfully, when it’s hideously difficult, and one feels real despair (ah, the despair, silly as it is, is real!)—then naturally one ought to continue with the work; it would be cowardly to retreat. But when writing goes smoothly—why then one certainly should keep on working, since it would be stupid to stop. Consequently one is always writing or should be writing.
—Joyce Carol Oates

Plotlines are like sharks: They either keep moving or they die.
—J. R. Ward

If you could understand, really understand, that no one needs to read your work, then your writing would improve vastly.
—Dan Barden

Rituals are a good signal to your unconscious that it is time to kick in.
—Anne Lamott

Write in the morning, revise in the afternoon, read at night.
—Roberto Bolaño

If you write to impress it will always be bad, but if you write to express it will be good.
—Thornton Wilder

Write about small, self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory. If you remember them, it’s because they contain a larger truth that your readers will recognize in their own lives. Think small and you’ll wind up finding the big themes in your family saga.
—William Zinsser

What I write when I force myself is generally just as good as what I write when I’m feeling inspired. It’s mainly a matter of forcing yourself to write.
—Tom Wolfe

Never annoy an inspirational author or you will become the poison in her pen and the villain in every one of her books.
—Shannon L. Alder
Anyone and everyone taking a writing class knows that the secret of good writing is to cut it back, pare it down, winnow, chop, hack, prune, and trim, remove every superfluous word, compress, compress, compress...

Actually, when you think about it, not many novels in the Spare tradition are terribly cheerful. Jokes you can usually pluck out whole, by the roots, so if you’re doing some heavy-duty prose-weeding, they’re the first to go. And there’s some stuff about the whole winnowing process I just don’t get. Why does it always stop when the work in question has been reduced to sixty or seventy thousand words—entirely coincidentally, I’m sure, the minimum length for a publishable novel? I’m sure you could get it down to twenty or thirty if you tried hard enough. In fact, why stop at twenty or thirty? Why write at all? Why not just jot the plot and a couple of themes down on the back of an envelope and leave it at that? The truth is, there’s nothing very utilitarian about fiction or its creation, and I suspect that people are desperate to make it sound manly, back-breaking labor because it's such a wussy thing to do in the first place. The obsession with austerity is an attempt to compensate, to make writing resemble a real job, like farming, or logging. (It’s also why people who work in advertising put in twenty-hour days.) Go on, young writers—treat yourself to a joke, or an adverb! Spoil yourself! Readers won’t mind!

—Nick Hornby

Write as the wind blows and command all words like an army!

—Hilaire Belloc

Perhaps writing a story or a novel was not something that should be done for money, or to win praise, but for the sheer sensual pleasure of it. I liked that idea. It made me want to write lots of stories, to give myself that pleasure.

—Vanessa Wu

Don’t write so that you can be understood, write so that you can’t be misunderstood.

—William Howard Taft

Not long ago, I advertised for perverse rules of grammar, along the lines of ‘Remember to never split an infinitive’ and ‘The passive voice should never be used.’ The notion of making a mistake while laying down rules (‘Thimk,’ ‘We Never Make Misteaks’) is highly unoriginal, and it turns out that English teachers have been circulating lists of fumblerules for years. As owner of the world’s largest collection, and with thanks to scores of readers, let me pass along a bunch of these never-say-neverisms:

* Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
* Don’t use no double negatives.
* Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never
where it isn’t.
* Reserve the apostrophe for it’s proper use and omit it when its not needed.
* Do not put statements in the negative form.
* Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
* No sentence fragments.
* Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
* Avoid commas, that are not necessary.
* If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition
can be avoided by rereading and editing.
* A writer must not shift your point of view.
* Eschew dialect, irregardless.
* And don’t start a sentence with a conjunction.
* Don’t overuse exclamation marks!!!
* Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 or more
words, to their antecedents.
* Writers should always hyphenate between syllables and avoid un-necessary
hyph-ens.
* Write all adverbial forms correct.
* Don’t use contractions in formal writing.
* Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
* It is incumbent on us to avoid archaisms.
* If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
* Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck in the language.
* Take the bull by the hand and avoid mixed metaphors.
* Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky.
* Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
* Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their
writing.
* If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, resist hyperbole.
* Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration.
* Don’t string too many prepositional phrases together unless you are walking
through the valley of the shadow of death.
* Always pick on the correct idiom.
* ‘Avoid overuse of ‘quotation’ marks.”
* The adverb always follows the verb.
* Last but not least, avoid cliches like the plague; seek viable alternatives.
  —William Safire

The key to good writing is to leave Boo Radley in the house until the end of the
story.

—Michael P. Naughton
There’s so much I can’t read because I get so exasperated. Someone starts describing the character boarding the plane and pulling the seat back. And I just want to say, Babe, I have been downtown. I have been up in a plane. Give me some credit.

—Amy Hempel

Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean ‘More people died’ don’t say ‘Mortality rose.’

—C. S. Lewis

1. Write every day.
2. Write what interests you.
3. Write for the child inside of you. (Or the adult, if you are writing adult books.)
4. Write with honest emotion.
5. Be careful of being facile.
6. Be wary of preaching.
7. Be prepared for serendipity.

Finally I would remind you of something that Churchill told a group of school boys: ‘Never give up. Never give up. Never, never, never give up.’

—Jane Yolen

The habit of writing thus for my own eye only is good practice. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and the stumbles.

—Virginia Woolf

I’ve found the best way to revise your own work is to pretend that somebody else wrote it and then to rip the living shit out of it.

—Don Roff

Instead of ‘write a novel,’ aim for ‘add a new page to my draft every day.’ In place of ‘sell my book this year,’ shoot for ‘query six new agents each month.’ Rather than ‘hit the bestseller list,’ go for ‘offer to Skype with a dozen book clubs,’ ‘ask 20 friends to request that their libraries purchase the book,’ and ‘set up a fun launch event at my favorite local bookstore.’

Aiming too high can make writing and publishing seem more daunting than they need to be and set you up for repeated letdowns. Setting a truly reasonable and achievable goal broken down into manageable steps means you won’t have to psych yourself up so much to approach the task—and you’ll be more likely to meet or even exceed the goal.

—Anica Mrose Rissi
How often your work gets published is somewhat out of your control, but you can control how often it gets rejected. Set an ambitious yearly goal for the number of rejections you hope to receive and be unabashed in pursuing it. Resolve to submit your work widely and accumulate ‘no thank yous’ from the most prestigious agents, editors, publishers, and publications you can find. Striving for rejection will get you in the habit of putting yourself out there, help you grow a thicker skin, and stop you from self-rejecting by failing to submit your work in the first place.

If one of your submissions gets accepted for publication, don’t be deterred! Dust yourself off, write and polish another piece, and see if you can get it turned down from someplace even better.

—Anica Mrose Rissi

When I first started writing novels, I spent too much time crafting beautiful sentences and scenes that I would later cut in revision. I would get mired in a frustrating loop, rewriting the opening chapter again and again in an attempt to perfect them rather than moving forward with the story. The story skeleton is the important part; the language and details can be fleshed out later. The payoff is less wasted time, and hopefully a quicker draft. It’s just a matter of discipline, of forcing yourself to keep moving forward until a scene or chapter or draft is complete.

Some writers use tricks, like tilting the computer screen so they are not tempted to read and re-evaluate while they are writing.

Set reasonable word-count or page goals and stick to them. If you think of something you need to go back and change, make a note and address it at the end of the session, so as not to disrupt the writing flow.

Skip over small issues that threaten to stall your work; often, such trouble spots are more easily resolved when you return to them in the next draft.

—Laura McHugh

Study plots that sell. Devise your plot similarly.

First, read numerous novels that have sold well (check sales ranks on Amazon to know which have) and outline the skeletons of their plots as you read. Ignore the pretty writing; ignore the voice; simply read along briskly while hunting and jotting down plot twists.

Second, create an outline for your own novel using roughly the same ‘storytelling moves’—and please do note immediately here that, by this, I do not in the least mean plagiarizing. I mean learning in general what book-buying readers of a given genre expect twist-and-turn-wise, including how many twists and turns book-buying readers expect.

—Mark Wisniewski
You have to go after a story or an essay like a pit bull with a piece of raw meat, and you cannot stop. You cannot let anyone get in your way.

—Mira Bartók

Edit your manuscript until your fingers bleed and you have memorized every last word. Then, when you are certain you are on the verge of insanity...edit one more time!

—C.K. Webb

If you’re going to be a writer, the first essential is just to write. Do not wait for an idea. Start writing something and the ideas will come. You have to turn the faucet on before the water starts to flow.

—Louis L’Amour

In literature the ambition of the novice is to acquire the literary language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it.

—George Bernard Shaw

I almost always urge people to write in the first person. Writing is an act of ego and you might as well admit it.

—William Zinsser

When you do your research write down whatever interests you. Whatever stimulates your imagination. Whatever seems important. A story is built like a stone wall. Not all the stones will fit. Some will have to be discarded. Some broken and reshaped. When you finish the wall it may not look exactly like the wall you envisioned, but it will keep the livestock in and the predators out.

—Roland Smith

Life is busy and hard and...there’s crushing pressure to just settle down and get a real job and khaki pants and a haircut. But don’t. Please don’t. Please keep believing that life can be better, brighter, broader because of the art that you make. Please keep demonstrating the courage that it takes to swim upstream in a world that prefers putting away for retirement to putting pen to paper, that chooses practicality over poetry, that values you more for going to the gym than going to the deepest places in your soul. Please keep making your art for people like me, people who need the magic and imagination and honesty of great art to make the day-to-day world a little more bearable.

—Shauna Niequist

A writer who doesn’t keep up with what’s out there ain’t gonna be out there.

—Toni Cade Bambara
No matter what your age or your life path, whether making art is your career or your hobby or your dream, it is not too late or too egotistical or too selfish or too silly to work on your creativity.

—Julia Cameron

You have to find your own shtick. A Picasso always looks like Picasso painted it. Hemingway always sounds like Hemingway. A Beethoven symphony always sounds like a Beethoven symphony. Part of being a master is learning how to sing in nobody else’s voice but your own.

—Hugh MacLeod

It takes writing a billion bad words before you get to the good ones.

—Ray Bradbury

As much as I like it when a book I’m writing speeds along, the downside can be that an author becomes too eager to finish and rushes the end. The end is even more important than the first page, and rushing can damage it.

—David Morrell

I go silent so I can write. When my tongue is wagging my fingers are silent.

—Sonia Rumzi

Beware of the compound adjective.

—Ambrose Bierce

Hear me now or regret it later: Everything you write must be read aloud. Once all the context items are in place, this is the final test for any written piece...Do not neglect your sense of hearing in the process of writing and reading. As a longtime teacher of English as a foreign language, I can tell you on good authority that you have been listening to the English language at least five or six years longer than you have been writing and reading. And, most probably, your ears also had eighteen or more years of familiarity with the language before you began to read or write with a writer’s sensibility. For these reasons, your ears know when things sound okay, good, beautiful, strange, awkward, or just plain bad, before your eye can pick up on such things...Your written voice should burn with the fire of fervent prayer, soothe like a friend’s voice during a late-night phone call, allure like a lover’s whisper. You must, through your accessible, infinitely read-aloudable voice, make your audience into an insatiable reader of your words.

—Jiro Adachi

You don’t necessarily have to have something to say in order to write. You can write to explore, understand and learn. That’s a glorious freedom right there.

—Elizabeth Sims
Don’t dash off a six-thousand-word story before breakfast. Don’t write too much. Concentrate your sweat on one story, rather than dissipate it over a dozen. Don’t loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club, and if you don’t get it you will none the less get something that looks remarkably like it. Set yourself a ‘stint,’ [London wrote 1,000 words nearly every day of his adult life] and see that you do that ‘stint’ each day; you will have more words to your credit at the end of the year.

Study the tricks of the writers who have arrived. They have mastered the tools with which you are cutting your fingers. They are doing things, and their work bears the internal evidence of how it is done. Don’t wait for some good Samaritan to tell you, but dig it out for yourself.

See that your pores are open and your digestion is good. That is, I am confident, the most important rule of all.

Keep a notebook. Travel with it, eat with it, sleep with it. Slap into it every stray thought that flutters up into your brain. Cheap paper is less perishable than gray matter, and lead pencil markings endure longer than memory.

And work. Spell it in capital letters. WORK. WORK all the time. Find out about this earth, this universe; this force and matter, and the spirit that glimmers up through force and matter from the maggot to Godhead. And by all this I mean WORK for a philosophy of life. It does not hurt how wrong your philosophy of life may be, so long as you have one and have it well.

The three great things are: GOOD HEALTH; WORK; and a PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE. I may add, nay, must add, a fourth—SINCERITY. Without this, the other three are without avail; with it you may cleave to greatness and sit among the giants.

—Jack London

Find what gave you emotion; what the action was that gave you excitement. Then write it down making it clear so that the reader can see it too. Prose is architecture, not interior decoration.

—Ernest Hemingway

You should be querying 25 to 30 agents. Only after getting a data set from that many subjective responders can you determine it’s time to set this aside and switch focus to your current WIP.

—Barbara Poelle
Creative exhaustion is first cousin to writer’s block. First off, I try to accept that when it hits, I am not wasting time, but preparing myself to return to work. I blog more. I do something different, like answering this question. If I can’t force myself to finish a story, then perhaps it was not worth finishing. If I have to push rather than let it flow, it won’t be as good as if I take more time, mess around in the garden and try to shove the guilt deep into the compost pile. I am still a writer so long as I am thinking!

—Sue Isle

When a writer tries to explain too much, he’s out of time before he begins.

—Isaac Bashevis Singer

Write your truth. If you have a book and you truly feel like your character needs to be black, queer, etc., then write it. But if you’re going to be brave enough to write outside your own experience, then you need to be brave enough if people in that group get upset. Seek out beta readers from the group to make sure you’re doing an authentic portrayal. Take their feedback to heart. You’ll still get things wrong. That’s OK. Be open when you’re told that. Don’t get defensive. Listen.

—Kellye Garrett

I’m an outliner. I know there are people who are plotters and people who are more pantsers, but I am definitely a plotter. I need to know what is going to happen in a story. So I generally start with what I call a ‘macro-plot,’ in which I sort of take the story from Point A, where it begins, to the end, and try to lay out the significant moments. And I think pacing is a good way of looking at it, because I’m looking at the moments where the story turns….I try to plot those out, and that forms a spine on which everything else is built. Then I’ll do what I call a ‘micro-plot,’ in which I actually plot out each chapter and what is happening in terms of the characters and the arcs and the events that are occurring in order to create a full story.

—Cassandra Clare

Listen to the way people actually talk. To an extent, all written dialogue is stylized where we take out the ums and the ifs and the sort ofs and the minimizing language. And remember that there is a rhythm. That the back-and-forth of talking is rhythmic: Somebody gives information, somebody else reacts. You have to get that pattern down…one thing that was helpful to me was sitting down and listening to audiobooks and plays written in the Victorian Era, so I could get the cadence of Victorian dialogue and the way that they talked. I did it as a sort of immersion thing. For about six months, I only read books, watched movies and listened to plays that were written in the specific time period my characters were operating in, so that I was sort of walking around thinking in that kind of language.

—Cassandra Clare
In terms of avoiding stereotypes, it’s something that you have to keep an eye out for. When I create characters that are not like me, I always use sensitivity readers. When I was writing, for instance, the trans character Diana, who is in The Dark Artifices, I met with many trans women who live in my area and talked to them extensively about how to build her character, how to know exactly what to avoid. That was my first question. I sat down [and asked], ‘What do you not want to see in this character? What do you not want me to express?’ And then when the book was done, I had tans readers give me their feedback and changed it accordingly.

—Cassandra Clare

If you want to write in a genre you’re not used to, the best thing you can do is sit down and spend a couple of weeks reading in that genre.

—Cassandra Clare

Hear me now or regret it later: Everything you write must be read aloud. Once all the context items are in place, this is the final test for any written piece...

Do not neglect your sense of hearing in the process of writing and reading. As a longtime teacher of English as a foreign language, I can tell you on good authority that you have been listening to the English language at least five or six years longer than you have been writing and reading. And, most probably, your ears also had eighteen or more years of familiarity with the language before you began to read or write with a writer’s sensibility. For these reasons, your ears know when things sound okay, good, beautiful, strange, awkward, or just plain bad, before your eye can pick up on such things...

Your written voice should burn with the fire of fervent prayer, soothe like a friend’s voice during a late-night phone call, allure like a lover’s whisper. You must, through your accessible, infinitely read-aloudable voice, make your audience into an insatiable reader of your words.

— Jiro Adachi

Rules such as ‘Write what you know,’ and ‘Show, don’t tell,’ while doubtlessly grounded in good sense, can be ignored with impunity by any novelist nimble enough to get away with it. There is, in fact, only one rule in writing fiction: Whatever works, works.

—Tom Robbins

Finished crap can be edited. Unfinished greatness languishes forever. The only bad writing is the thing you didn’t write!

—Margarita Gakis
If you like fantasy and you want to be the next Tolkien, don’t read big Tolkienesque fantasies — Tolkien didn’t read big Tolkienesque fantasies, he read books on Finnish philology. Go and read outside of your comfort zone, go and learn stuff.

—Neil Gaiman

Awful first drafts are fine—Agree with this.
If you don’t finish something, you’ll never get in the game. Just quell the voice in your head that says ‘Are you kidding? No one is going to want to read this drivel’ and keep on going. You’re going to revise and revise and then revise again anyway.

—Jamie Freveletti

The recipe for becoming a good novelist, for example is easy to give but to carry it out presupposes qualities one is accustomed to overlook when one says ‘I do not have enough talent’. One has only to make a hundred or so sketches for novels, none longer than two pages but of such distinctness that every word in them is necessary; one should write down anecdotes each day until one has learned how to give them the most pregnant and effective form; one should be tireless in collecting and describing human types and characters; one should above all relate things to others and listen to others relate, keeping one’s eyes and ears open for the effect produced on those present, one should travel like a landscape painter or costume designer; one should excerpt for oneself out of the individual sciences everything that will produce an artistic effect when it is well described, one should, finally, reflect on the motives of human actions, disdain no signpost to instruction about them and be a collector of these things by day and night. One should continue in this many-sided exercise some ten years: what is then created in the workshop, however, will be fit to go out into the world. —What, however, do most people do? They begin, not with the parts, but with the whole. Perhaps they chance to strike a right note, excite attention and from then on strike worse and worse notes, for good, natural reasons.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Accept criticism. If you do not offer your work for criticism and accept that criticism, meaning give it serious thought and attention, then you will never improve.

—Theodora Goss

Work like hell! I had 122 rejection slips before I sold a story.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Read a lot. But read as a writer, to see how other writers are doing it. And make your knowledge of literature in English as deep and broad as you can. In workshops, writers are often told to read what is being written now, but if that is all you read, you are limiting yourself. You need to get a good overall sense of English literary history, so you can write out of that knowledge.

—Theodora Goss
There is no definitive writing advice....Every so-called rule has an exception, a counterpoint, a contrasting success story....That's the beauty of this passion. Everyone's odyssey is personal. It's not about what's right, but about what's right for you.

—Tyler Moss

How do you know when to throw it away? Well this is the thing—you do know. Because you're a good reader. Everyone who wants to be a writer is usually an amazing reader. That's given me a kind of confidence to say when my work isn't working. When I'm drafting, I'm super nice to myself. I don't judge. I try to put on two different hats: Drafting me, and I'm super nice, and the editing me, and I'm very tough.

—Min Jin Lee

There isn't a lot of money in this business. You do it because you like it. Because it means something to you. Because you make something. And to not treat it as a career. I still don't treat it as a career. I think of it as something I really want to do and I wouldn't stop unless I couldn't do it anymore. I think you should try to have a job that doesn't drain you of everything that you have. So whatever job you can do, it should leave a space so you can make something. I also think that whatever you decide you want to make, it should be something that you want to go to more than anything. Otherwise you won't continue working on it....I want you to protect your time and art and dream. I wouldn't want you to have your heart broken thinking that all this stuff is going to happen. Maybe it'll happen, and if it does—great! But in the meantime, find a topic you really want to go to in the morning or in the evening or after you put your kids to bed.

—Min Jin Lee

Be gentle with yourself. If you're working really hard at craft and you're being really brave about the stuff you want to write about, I think you should just give yourself a gold star right there. And as for the world and its expectations? They don't really understand what we do. What we do is weird. It's so weird. I don't even understand why we do it, but if you feel so compelled to do those twin thins—craft and bravery with storytelling—they you've done everything....That said, when you're drafting, forget success, forget failure and just be brave. And also figure out the how. How do you make a transition between paragraphs? How do you make a transition between scenes? How do you understand point of view in a masterful way? That's the job that we can control.

—Min Jin Lee

If you'd blush saying something in person, don’t write it.

—Jonathan Price
As far as ‘write what you know’…like, if you are a cis-gender, married white woman with two children and a penchant for telling others to drink less while you spill Tito’s on your keyboard, do I think that’s the only lens through which you should be writing? Not at all. Just be aware and authentic in your portrayals, prose and plotting, and you can anchor us in the emotion of the story—the ache and need and loss and elation and pain and terror and love and hope. We all ‘know’ those.

—Barbara Poelle

A lot of (children’s literature) beginners get bogged down by morals. A moral should never be driving the story. And a moral should never be confused with a plot. You can’t preach to kids, and you can’t talk down to them, either. It’s amazing how they sense condescension.

—Patty Smith

You will learn more about writing from one hour of reading than you will in six hours of writing.

—John McAleer

If we are exhorted to play simple melodies with beauty rather than difficult ones with error, the same should be applied to writing; simple words greater effect.

—Sonia Rumzi

Don’t try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person.

—William Zinsser

A novel takes the courage of a marathon runner, and as long as you have to run, you might as well be a winning marathon runner. Serendipity and blind faith faith in yourself won’t hurt a thing. All the bastards in the world will snicker and sneer because they haven’t the talent to zip up their flies by themselves. To hell with them, particularly the critics. Stand in there...no matter how badly you are battered and hurt.

—Leon Uris

I hate to be a nag, but you have got to read. Like most authors, I run creative writing workshops from time to time, and speak, when invited to writers’ circles and at summer schools, and I’m continually amazed at the number of would-be writers who scarcely read. For ideas to germinate and proliferate there has to be fertile ground to sow them in, and for the ground to be fertile it must be mulched with observation, imagination, and other writing.

—Sarah Harrison
When you travel with your family, you may not get the volume of work done you would if you were alone, but you can still do something while recharging. If nothing else, you can gather your own thoughts, write down ideas, observe people around you, and reflect on experiences. Working doesn’t always mean putting words on paper.

—Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

Sound is so important to creative writing. Think of the sounds you hear that you include and the similes you use to describe what things sound like. ‘As she walked up the alley, her polyester workout pants sounded like windshield wipers swishing back and forth.’ Cadence, onomatopoeia, the poetry of language are all so important. Learn all that you can about how to bring sound into your work.

—Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

A good approach is to allow one dream per novel. Then, in the final revision, go back and get rid of that, too.

—Howard Mittelmark

First-person narrators is the way I know how to write a book with the greatest power and chance of artistic success.

—Anne Rice

HOW TO WRITE GOOD

➢ Avoid Alliteration. Always.
➢ Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
➢ Avoid cliches like the plague. They’re old hat.
➢ Comparisons are as bad as cliches.
➢ Be more or less specific.
➢ Writers should never generalize.

Be consistent!
➢ Don’t be redundant; don’t use more words than necessary; it’s highly superfluous.
➢ Who needs rhetorical questions?
➢ Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.

—Internet Meme

A poorly planned project (or piece of writing) takes four time longer to complete than expected. A well planned project only takes twice as long.

—Lawrence J. Peter
You can cut hours, sometimes days, from any writing project by following one basic rule: think through what you want to say and to whom you want to say it. State the message in one sentence and keep it before you as you write. Let it be your guide to what you keep or cut. Remember that writing is an act of communication. Ultimately you must ask: Will the reader understand what I am saying?...

Longer writing projects, and sometimes even letters and memos, are easier to tackle if you follow this process:

➤ Gather the information, evidence, ideas, and observations that give substance to your message.
➤ Organize the material.
➤ Write the first draft. Read it out loud. Let someone else read it.
➤ Reorganize the material; eliminate unnecessary and irrelevant details.
➤ Rewrite. Read it out loud.
➤ Edit. Correct the spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage.
➤ Check the final copy for clarity, typographical errors, and neatness.

—Shirley Boes Neill

Keep it simple. The ability write simple, direct prose that says precisely what you want it to say in the fewest words has always been the mark of an educated person.

—Business Week

Use the first person. Don’t be shy about saying I, we, me. People identify with people, not with an abstraction like ‘it is felt.’

—William Zinsser

Get rid of most passive verbs. Invariably, by changing a passive verb to an active verb, you produce a shorter sentence.

—Edward T. Thompson

Stay with it....Writing can get harder rather than easier as you get better at it. The competence a good writer acquires is not so much facility as it is staying power.

—Sheridan Blau

**AVOID THE NO. 1 SIN: JARGON**

Just because you work for an institution, you don’t have to sound like one. As parents we want to think of the men and women who are running our children’s schools as people not unlike ourselves. I don’t want to give my school my ‘input’ and get its ‘feedback,’ though I’d be glad to exchange ideas and options, and even offer some complaints....The message is simple: Avoid sentences that sound like ‘informed academic writing.’

—William Zinsser
Start where your readers are. How much do they know about the subject? Don't write to a level higher than your readers’ knowledge of it. CAUTION: Forget the old-and-wrong advice about writing a 12-year-old mentality. That’s insulting. But do remember that your prime purpose is to explain something, not prove that you’re smart than your readers.

Avoid jargon. Don’t use words, expressions, phrases known only to people with specific knowledge or interests. Example: A scientist, using scientific jargon, wrote, ‘The biota exhibited a one hundred percent mortality response.’ He could have written: ‘All the fish died.’

Cut out excess evidence and unnecessary anecdotes: Usually, one fact or example (at most, two) will support a point. More just belabor it. And while writing about something may remind you of a good story, ask yourself: ‘Does it really help to tell the story, or does it slow me down?’

Look for the most common word wasters: windy phrases.

Windy phrases —————— Cut to...
at the present time —————— now
in the event of —————— if
in the majority instances ———— usually

Look for passive verbs you can make active: Invariably, this produces a shorter sentence. ‘The cherry tree was chopped down by George Washington.’ (Passive verb and nine words.) ‘George Washington chopped down the cherry tree.’ (Active verb and seven words.)

—Edward T. Thompson

Keep it simple. As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. ‘To be or not to be?’ Asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence is his short story ‘Eveline’ is this one: ‘She was tired.’ At that point in the story, no other word could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’

—Kurt Vonnegut

Stop worrying about ending sentences with a preposition. It’s not something readers care about. (If that last sentence was written formally, it would have read, ‘It’s not something about which readers care,’ and that sounds awkward.)

—Steven James
REMINDERS FOR THE ANXIOUS/DEPRESSED CREATIVES

You’re more than what you make.
Your productivity does not determine your value.
It’s okay to do nothing sometimes.
Not everything you do has to result in a product.
Not everything you make has to be important, significant, or even good.
You can make things just for yourself.
You can keep secrets for yourself, whether it’s not posting some of your projects or not sharing your techniques.
You’re allowed to say no.
You’re allowed to rest.

—Internet Meme

Treat thyself: Butt-in-chair time feels less soul-sucking with a thick splurgy blanket or a fancy new tea (or glass of scotch) by your side.
Change up your routine: Trade the mellow music for movie soundtracks, light some tropical candles, switch from Times New Roman to Garamond for a month or two. (Ridiculous, yes, but it helps, I swear.)

—Nicki Porter

We must have a good, fast opening. Smack us within the first paragraph. Get our interest aroused. Don’t tell us about the general geographic situation or the atmospheric conditions. Don’t describe the hero’s physique or the kind of pants he wears. Start something!

—Jack Byrne

The presence of an adverb simply means that you haven’t yet chosen the most appropriate verb.

—Steven James

Use italics to denote thoughts and quotation marks to distinguish the speakers during dialogue. Using quotation marks for thoughts confuses readers, who won’t know if someone is talking or thinking.

—Steven James

Examine your choice of verbs. Use only active verbs and avoid passive writing. The more visually you can write, the quicker the read will be.

—Jeanne Veillette
Bowerman
As writers, reading is an essential, integral part of our writing practice. Sure, there are exceptions to this blanket rule: Some writers choose not to read certain authors or genres while immersed in a writing project, for fear they may subsume another’s voice, for example. But for the most part, we can’t advance or become better at our craft without interacting with other great (or, yes, even poorly written) texts.
—Rebecca Pitts

You’ve got to start your first chapter with a scene that shows character through action and dialogue. Immediately....You've got to get them fast and hold them by the neck, as opposed to slowly leading them along on a leash.
—Ryan G. Van Cleave

If your competing titles are father out than five or 10 years, you’re doing yourself a disservice. A book written before the Internet is going to have a vastly different pace because your reader had a very different attention span. God help you if it’s a book written before television! You can’t be like, ‘I’m going to write the next Moby Dick.’ Sorry, nobody liked it then! So don’t do that.
—Ryan G. Van Cleave

I resolve to ignore the dreamkillers in my life. If someone makes you feel like you don’t deserve to reach your goals or like writing is a cute little hobby, you don’t owe them your time. You deserve to have passions. You don’t need permission to make art.
—Ryan G. Van Cleave

Maybe you are too old a dog to learn new tricks? Maybe you have missed the bus? That’s hooey. Thomas Hardy (a finer poet than he was a novelist in my view) did not stat publishing verse till he was nearly sixty.
—Stephen Fry

Buy a notebook, exercise book or jotter pad and lots of pencils (any writing instrument will do but I find pencils more physically pleasing). This is the only equipment you will need: no cameras, paintbrushes, tuning forks or chopping boards. Poets enjoy their handwriting (‘like smelling your own farts,’ W. H. Auden claimed) and while computers may have their place, for the time being write, don’t type.
You may as well invest in a good pocket-side notebook: the Moleskin range is becoming very fashionable again and bookshops and stationers have started to produce their own equivalents. Take yours with you everywhere. When you are waiting for someone, stuck in an airport, traveling by train, just doodle with words. As you learn new techniques and methods for producing lines of verse, practice them all the time.
—Stephen Fry
A piece of writing advice might be good and useful in some scenarios, but destructive and limiting in others. One of the hardest skills for a writer to develop is being able to decide when it’s time to break those rules in order to save your work-in-progress….Rules are made to be broken—in fact, the meta-advice most writers figure out on their own is wonderful in its simplicity: You learn the rules of writing in order to know how to break them for maximum impact.

—Jeff Somers

‘Write what you know,’ was never intended to be a comprehensive rejection of the imagination; believe it or not, you can write about stuff you know nothing about as long as you can pull it off and make people believe it. (That sums up how I got through college, after all). After all, if you follow ‘write what you know’ to its logical conclusion, you’re left with memoir. My take on WWYK is this: Don’t write what you know, write what you want to know.

—Jeff Somers

The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.

—Hans Hofmann

You can’t write poetry on the computer.

--Quentin Tarantino

Readers do not read to learn about your experience or bathe in your insights. They don’t even read for your characters’ experiences and insights, at least not directly. Instead, they read to have their own experiences and insights. Our job as writers is not to explain everything for the reader. It is to provide just enough information—in the form of dramatic scenes with crisp, evocative dialogue, as well as insightful self-reflection on the part of the characters—so the reader can imagine the rest for herself. Overburdening—worse, assaulting—the reader with inessential verbiage undermines her ability to engage the text with her own imagination.

—David Corbett

You need to rely on the invaluable skill of being able to read your work as though you didn’t write it. That kind of objectivity is crucial in evaluating when a given section needs further development or cutting….Reading the text out loud can make all the difference. The ear is wiser than the eye, and it is particularly keen at picking up where the prose has begun to drag or feels excessive.

—David Corbett
Only listen to advice that supports your process. There’s so much noise out there, but the only right way to write a book is the way that gets the book written.
—Sarah J. Sover

The more the marble wastes, the more the statue grows.
—Michelangelo

There’s no right way to do things. You should write the kinds of books you love to read.
—Karin Slaughter

Most adjectives and adverbs are like phony friends who will distract you and then stab you in the back….nouns and power verbs are the rock stars of language.
—Bonnie Hearn Hill

If the story doesn’t take off until page 142, you’d better start it there.
—Bonnie Hearn Hill

Just because your life started in childhood doesn’t mean your memoir should.
—Sarah Van Arsdale

The writing life—or any life—is just too short to spend any time on something that doesn’t move us and claim us entirely.
—Lee Smith

If you’re trying to write a line that you want to get a laugh on, you need to put the word that’s going to inspire the laugh at the end of the line, because if it’s in the middle, the audience is going to laugh over the rest of the line and not hear it. And that technique, of taking a strong word in a sentence that is sitting in the middle and moving it to the end for maximum impact, is something I find myself doing as a copy editor.
—Benjamin Dreyer

I am a huge believer in revision. The more times you write it, the more alive it becomes. For me, very often the first, second, and third times it’s kind of dead material, but the more you go over it, the more you rewrite it, the more it comes to life.
—Alice Hoffman

Most writing teachers tell you to write what you know. Write what you can imagine.
—Albert J. Guerard
I'm a big believer in being in a workshop or class, working with other writers, which is not to say to just take anybody’s advice. When you’re in a classroom or a seminar, it makes you write because you know you’re going to go there Thursday. It kind of forces you to do the work. That’s really important because nobody has to write. It’s not like we’re doctors and people will die if we don’t do what we do. There has to be something that makes you sit down and do it. At the beginning, often it could be that you’re in a class and you have to do it. You signed up for it, you’re going to do it.

—Alice Hoffman

I can totally get behind the idea of daily word count goals, as long as you can tell your inner drill sergeant that things happen! At any given moment, kids can start barfing, spouses can have a work trip, and people can tear all kinds of ligaments. So, your goals should not be so rigid that a few missed days will lead to disgruntlement and despair....you can’t expect to have the same high word count every day—that’s just not fair to you.

—Barbara Poelle

Banish your internal editor, plunge into your imagination, and write your story today—not during that novel-killing period of time known as...‘someday.’

—Grant Faulkner

I found my voice by imitating other people. You just try on other personas. I wrote like Joan Didion for a while, and I wrote like Raymond Carver for a while...It’s all part of discovering what you sound like. I think we all do that—we take a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and we put it in a big kettle, and we find ourselves. We stir it up, and it’s the combinations of this and that, that make us who we are.

—David Sedaris

We do not always have to be producing. When I am not writing I am reading, thinking, and taking notes. I was always told to write every morning or evening, and so on. But I am doing the thing they tell you not to do: Writing only when I am there in it. You will produce less but what you produce might be better. At the least: You will have been thoughtful, and that is never a mistake.

—Amanda Goldblatt

Don’t be afraid to let the story tell itself. When I start working on a new novel, I have all these ideas about where it will go. It’s only after I let go of the reins that the real shape of the book finds its form.

—J. Kasper Kramer
REASONS AGAINST USING MATERIAL FROM YOUR OWN LIFE IN FICTION

➢ Your friends/family may never speak to you again. (Actually, that might be OK with you, depending.)
➢ Life, while at times grippingly dramatic, rarely works out as satisfyingly as fiction does. Real-life villains often do not get comeuppance, for instance, and when they do, there is usually a lengthy appeals process.
➢ In real life, the magician’s wife isn’t really swn in half. In real life, a fabulous nanny doesn’t drop down from the sky holding an umbrella as a parachute—it just seems that way when you’re a little kid wishing for deliverance from boredom. Imagination could be better than real life!
   —Elizabeth Sims

I’m sorry to be the bearer of grim news, but most of our lives just aren’t interesting enough to engage a reader for 400 pages of a novel or 110 pages of a screenplay. That leave us with the task of writing what we don’t know. Gulp.
   —Jeanne Veillette Bowerman

If you choose to undertake a story outside of your race, class, gender, or sexuality, you must research, research, research. Interview people who live in those worlds or ask them to be beta readers. Respect their viewpoints and life experience, mindfully bringing their advice to your pages and characters. Don’t just make it up. Learn their world and put a Herculean effort into understanding their unique perspectives.
Beyond interviews, look in the Library of Congress. Sometime you can even find personal letters. What better way to understand someone’s journey than to read their personal writings?
   —Jeanne Veillette Bowerman

If fiction is to be truthful about what human beings really are and do, we have to define knowledge as a goal of the imagination. After all, when I go down to the library and find out about doing the laundry in Borneo or in 1877, I’m not learning through experience, but through the imagination: I read, and recreate the reality in my mind till I know it. That’s what writing, fact or fiction, is for. What I ‘know’ comes to me from experience, maybe from hearsay, maybe from books or other arts. What matters is what I make of it—what I do with it.
   —Ursula K. Le Guin
An artist who’s taking the interest of the audience at heart is going to make crap. The work of genius is something which comes through, in essence, ignoring the audience.

—Amor Towles

I was reading the third page of a newspaper and came across a little story, a tragic accident—very tiny, so there weren’t any details—that I just couldn’t get out of mind. I kept thinking, What would happen next? With careful shaping and a nice dose of craft, real-life stories could become the meat of a great work of fiction if you follow the ida down its serpentine path.

—Jean Hegland

Don’t compare yourself to others except to learn from them—compete only with yourself, maintaining the highest standards of excellence with yourself. (I keep the word excellence on my bulletin board over my word processor, along with mottos that inspire me, such as Keats’s ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That’s all we need on earth, and all we need to know.’ If you need to subsidize your writing by doing other work in order to maintain excellence, do so.

—Rosemary Daniell

Sell books where your customers congregate. For example, skydivers frequent parachute shops more than bookstores. Speciality shops buy books by the carton, think a 40% discount is generous, will pay in 30 days, and have never heard of returns. For most nonfiction subjects, speciality shops move many more books than bookstores.

—Dan Poynter

If I’m not having fun working on a story, I work on something else until inspiration returns. I’ve always done that automatically.

—Larry Niven

We’ve all heard the advice to take a walk when you get stuck. Researchers at the University of Kansas and the University of Utah sent several dozen adults out into nature for four days of backpacking without cell phones or computers. When those hikers came back, their performance on a creative problem-solving task improved by half. But most of us don’t have time for four days of leisurely hiking. Luckily…it turns out you can improve brain function with only a brief walk outside: researchers in the United Kingdom found improvements after less than 10 minutes of strolling through greenspace.

—Valerie E. Polichar
Another scientific study found that simply looking at pleasant photos of nature (the study used pictures of cute penguins) can increase both happiness levels and the ability to perform on tests of creativity and problem-solving. Just relaxing while eyeing a scenic screensaver might be enough to get your brain into the right mode to create.

—Valerie E. Polichar

Before writing a word, read a) Orwell’s essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ and b) Strunk and White’s Elements of Style.

—Jeff Greenfield

The first sentence can’t be written until the final sentence is written.

—Joyce Carol Oates

You should definitely revise as you draft. Otherwise you aren’t really writing—you’re typing. And although it might be fun to type out a whole novel in a rush, Kerouac-style, you really aren’t doing the work of writing, which isn’t merely to get words on the page but to get just the right words, in the best possible order, on the page. I don’t see how you could do that without revising as you go.

—Anthony Varallo

I’d never try to write and revise in the same draft. Revising is a self-critical process. Writing—or drafting—needs permission to try things, to maybe be wrong. I think of drafting like a state of dreaming—you go with the flow.

In contrast, the revision process calls for our analytical side, for imposing order as well as for deciding what is useful, and what is not, and it definitely can’t be done right away. Ideally, you want to have forgotten what you wrote so you can judge it properly. If you’re still thinking, ‘I liked that bit’ or ‘I didn’t like that bit,’ you might not be objective.

—Roz Morris

I find it helpful to begin each writing day by revising the words I wrote the previous day—and then I try to roll forward with a couple more pages of new writing, onward and onward, rinse and repeat.

—Skip Horack

The best way to power through all of those revisions is to have a bluntly honest reader or editor read your pages and let you know what needs work. It’s fine if you want to keep your writing under wraps as you compose it, but once you enter the revision phase, you want to get as many eyes on the manuscript as possible.

—Anthony Varallo
Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it’s just not that good. It’s trying to be good, it has potential, but it’s not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase, they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn’t have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know its normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I’ve ever met. It’s gonna take awhile. It’s normal to take awhile. You’ve just gotta fight your way through.

—Ira Glass

Don’t take yourself or your success seriously. Remember, your last book is only a garage sale away.

—Erma Bombeck

As the editor of one of the so-called ‘Big Four’ magazines once remarked, he doesn’t have to eat a whole boiled egg in order to tell that it is bad. Nor does the trained editor have to read a whole manuscript in order to know that it will be hopelessly uninteresting to his readers….a prominent fiction editor asserted that, whatever his office ‘readers’ might do, he himself seldom found it necessary to read beyond the first page of a story to be able to tell whether he wanted it or not; and, he added, it was very often unnecessary to read more than one or two paragraphs.

—Arthur Leeds

The first thing to remember is that even the experienced author of today, and even when he is writing a long story, must get and hold the readers’ attention from the first paragraph….if you can get a strangle-hold on the reader’s interest by making some extraordinary statement in your opening paragraph—a statement that you can follow up with a logical and convincing explanation—never miss such a bet!

—Arthur Leeds

Go into the arts. I’m not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven’s sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.

—Kurt Vonnegut
Any story you can plot beforehand isn’t going to be that original. The best ideas come while I’m writing, by going slowly and taking small steps—writing a couple of hours a day and letting it sit overnight, writing again for a couple of hours and letting it sit, and not restricting myself to any preplotted outline.

—Louis Sachar

I’d think less about how I was writing and more about what I was writing. A lot of writers romanticize the writing process. Some tell you that you have to write in the morning, you have to put on work clothes, or if you don’t write every day, you’re not a ‘real writer.’ There were days that I stared at my computer for an hour and produced nothing, and days I wrote for 10 hours. Sometime I had real clothes on and sometimes I was in pajamas.

—Kiley Reid

Track down a teenager. She had no interest, doesn’t read nonfiction except for school, wouldn’t read this book, and knew nothing about the topic. It was great because I was reading out loud to see where I was losing her. She had no problem interrupting me. I’m into engaging people who have no interest: Where am I losing You? What don’t you understand? If you’re tripping up on lack of information or I’m getting boring, you’ll put the book down.

—Rachel Slade

Dialogue should be so bright, so sparkling, so lifelike, so wonderfully realistic that our brains ‘hear’ each line instead of merely reading it. We don’t need to be told a character is shouting—we can sense it in the way they spit out words, clench fists, or storm from the room. We long to comfort a tearful character as she speaks each word; we don’t need to be informed that she ‘sobbed’ or ‘wailed’ a particular line….Readers need crackling, believable dialogue. They need voices so compelling that they pop right off the page and into our ears. They need conversations that ripple, evolve, spark in the air. And if you’ve done all that, created dynamic characters who speak words we can really hear, you will never—not once!—need to tell us how something was said.

—Nicki Porter

Terrible at dialogue? Study movie and television scripts. Read your dialogue-heavy scenes out loud—or, better yet, get friends to read them to you—and take note of what makes you cringe. Get as specific with yourself as you can about what’s not working so you can improve those scenes—or find ways to write around them.

—Anica Mrose Rissi
If we describe something as very beautiful, then it’s probably beyond beautiful—maybe it’s exquisite.

—Paula LaRocque

Do your research before you write a word. If you research as you write, you’ll constantly be flipping back and forth between online and off, and more likely to get pulled in different directions as you find new things that catch your attention. If, during the actual writing, you discover additional things you need to look up, make a note of them at the bottom of your document (or on paper) and move on. You can fill in the blanks later.

—Dana Shavin

Reading is the finest teacher of how to write.

—Annie Proulx

All our troubles spring from our failure to use plain, clear-cut language.

—Jean-Paul Satre

If the words are heavy with the writer’s own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise and inaccurate for some other reason—if the worlds are in any way blurred—the reader’s eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved. Henry James called this sort of hapless writing ‘weak specification’.

—Raymond Carver

Don’t say but however. These are pleonasms: the use of more words than necessary to express an idea.

—Stefano Benni

Beware of the compound adjective, beloved of the tyro and the ‘poetess’.

—Ambrose Bierce

If you are stuck, get up and walk until you are unstuck.

—Sarah Smith

Reading voraciously will give you ideas, help you solve structural and narrative problems, inspire you, and make you better.

—Sarah Smith

The best piece of advice any writer can receive is ‘read,’ after all—read widely, read continually, and take notes as you do so. Sadly, the second best piece of advice a writer can receive is ‘Don’t quit your day job.’ The third best piece of advice is that you can Google anything and explain it as research for your novel.

—Jeff Somers
Starting a novel is sometimes the hardest part. Don’t make it harder by worrying about breaking rules—if you read enough books, you’ll find that novels have been started in every possible way, no matter what the internet says. Just go for it and worry about whether it works later.

—Jeff Somers

Begin with the end in mind.

—Stephen Covey

Daily writing discipline, like practicing a musical instrument, is the only way to write better and avoid writers’ block.

—Candy Schulman

Writing about a writer’s block better than not writing at all.

—Charles Bukowski

Practice is the best of all instructors.

—Publilius Syrus

As a writer I learned from Charlie Chaplin. Let’s say the rhythm, the snap of comedy; the reserved comic presence—that beautiful distancing; the funny with sad; the surprise of surprise.

—Bernard Malamud.

Make the reader laugh and he will think you a trivial fellow, but bore him the right way and your reputation is assured.

—Somerset Maugham

My way of getting over doubt is to be like ‘You have a lane and you stay in it and you are good in that lane.’ Don’t try to be smarter or do anything that doesn’t naturally come to you. I know my limits. I guess that is a good way of overcoming doubt. It’s to not tackle anything I can’t actually do.

—Cassandra Lipp

There always is something around you to write about. We do a disservice to ourselves when we think all writing has to be deep and meaningful. I don’t have the pressure of feeling like I have to write about some important thing. I write about nonsense things, and everyone has nonsense things they can write about. Your writing doesn’t have to move mountains. I write to make myself laugh. If other people laugh, that’s a bonus.

—Cassandra Lipp
The pressure to have your writing be good and meaningful could be paralyzing. If you think about all the things your writing should be and what you should be writing about, you’re never going to write anything.

—Cassandra Lipp

Run your own race. Don’t worry about those people who pass you by. And definitely don’t define yourself by the elites—those writers at the front of the pack, whose book covers are stamped with awards. I tell myself that although I’ll never catch up to them, I still have a story to tell and still find joy in the meditative act of writing.

—Elizabeth Christopher

Include comps! [with submissions] It helps anchor the agent in what kind of book this is and demonstrates that you’ve done research into the market/what’s out there/what’s working.

—Rayhané Sanders

Produce at least 1,000 words per day (for any professional author, a conservative number, easily exceeded during a full day of work)....Then celebrate if you write more.

—Elizabeth Sims

A solo writing retreat is a commitment to your craft, a gift to yourself, a chance to see what you can do when unfettered by day-to-day cares. Although group writing retreats have their place, when you go solo you can go when and where you want, and for as long as you want.

—Elizabeth Sims

I switch from a fat mechanical pencil to a thin pen to a wood-cased pencil....Just a few different tools can make a positive difference in your writing experience.

—Elizabeth Sims

➢ Limit email to once or twice a day, and force yourself to keep writing....some writers swear by tools that limit their time online.
➢ Take a one-hour daily walk...even if your normal routine is cycling, swimming, or gym time. Writers and creative people throughout history have found mystical benefit in the simple rhythm of walking, apart from the physical effects....Let your mind relax while walking.
➢ Do not expect yourself to write literally all day, every day....Most of us find the need for a break ever two to three hours. In fact, three hours of completely focused writing is a considerable achievement for a day.

—Elizabeth Sims
Weather—always present in an outdoor scene and sometimes from inside—can enhance the ambiance. Though occasionally overused, a dark, stormy night is a perfect backdrop for a sad or spooky tone. Wind, rain, snow, humid heat, streaks of rose-colored clouds at sunset, the first chill of winter, or a warm touch of spring can all set a mood.

—Barbara Youree

If your muse is on the side of the road, thumb out, you have to pick her up and ask her where she needs to go. And she’ll be the first to tell you that a distraction isn’t a distraction when it becomes all-consuming. It’s what you should be working on.

—Barbara Poelle

Stop rereading that first chapter and write the rest of your book.

—Eric Smith

Any advice to start writing a screenplay?

START.

—Tommy Wiseau

The young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

—William Faulkner

If you show somebody a piece of your work and you ask them ‘What do you think?’, they will probably say it’s okay because they don’t want to offend you. Next time, instead of asking if it’s right, ask them what’s wrong. They may not say what you want to hear, but the chances are they will give you a truthful criticism. “Truth hurts, but in the long run it’s better than a pat on the back.

—Unknown

Abstraction is the sickness of language.

—Marty Rubin

Every sentence needs a subject, verb, and explosion.

—Corinne Duyvis

Unless you are writing a memoir-type book, that [first-person] voice can be very close to whiny if you’re not careful. Try some ironic distance, snarky humor, or self-disparagement when using a first-person narrator—otherwise you can hit a whine at warp speed.

—Jane Yolen
We should not write so that it is possible for the reader to understand us, but so that it is impossible for him to misunderstand us.  
—Quintilian

Motivation is crap. Motivation comes and goes. When you’re driven, whatever is in front of you will get destroyed.  
—David Goggins

Waiting to take the plunge into publishing isn’t about the writer’s age but the writer’s experience. If someone starts writing at age 20 and immediately tries to get published, chances are they’re going to meet some failure—but not because of age because of experience….Writers should wait until they feel that their craft is solid, that they have had their practice with drafting and revising. But waiting until you’ve blown out enough birthday candles is buffoonery.  
—Chloe Gong

I know so many writers who are 100 times better than me and have greater ideas, but they gave up. The biggest talent you can have is determination.  
—Chuck Palahniuk

Write what excites you; that passion can leak into the text and start a chain reaction.  
—Ian Bonaparte

I was only able to get published by being too stubborn and foolish to give up. I know many talented writers who haven’t been published because they find the process discouraging.  
—A. H. Kim

Captivating first pages...in a concise way...should orient us to the setup while also immediately introducing a sense of tension or stakes. Where are we, and what are we reading toward?  
—Caroline Eisenmann

The Art of Writing for Children is the knowledge of what is significant to them.  
—Suzy Davies

If one is talking about a vile thing it is better to talk of it in coarse language; one is less likely to be seduced into excusing it.  
—G. K. Chesterton

Only big words for ordinary things on account of the sound.  
—James Joyce
Find validation and meaning for your work by developing your craft—not by seeking validations such as landing an agent, getting published, winning awards, getting amazing reviews, hitting bestseller lists, etc. Those things are wonderful and should be celebrated, but don’t hang your self-worth and the meaning of your existence on them….If you see the path to being a writer as only a series of prestigious achievements to collect, then you will probably end up disappointed and frustrated. Celebrate the fact that you spent your time developing your craft, meeting people with like minds, and doing something that helped you apprehend your life and the world you live in.

—Julie Stevenson

If we want to matter as writers but don’t know where to start, we can begin…in the daily mess of life. These are the seeds of everyone’s story, no matter how differently they grow. Every time we write about life in meaningful ways, we close the distance between us and the readers we want to reach.

—Connie Schultz

Many people write because they feel called to do so. They believe they must write, not because it’s their nature, but because it’s their purpose. Whether you write fiction or nonfiction, you can focus your writing on contribution—on making a difference. Not only will your work be more memorable if you do so, but you will feel more fulfilled in the process. Your body of work will also become a powerful and meaningful legacy.

—Nina Amir

I have seen authors with their heads up their asses about readers and I am just amazed! There’s not a lot of them, but I am just amazed at the attitude sometimes of some authors and their relationship with people who are paying their mortgage! So I go out of my way to be kind.

—Beverly Jenkins

Nobody wants to see that first draft. Do not send your…first draft to anybody. The first draft is for you, as they writer, to see what sticks on the wall and what doesn’t. Then you go back and pretty it up and face it up and find the plot and fix the characters and write a story.

—Beverly Jenkins

Another piece of advice that I give new writers is not to let the success of others bother you because they’re on their path and you’re on yours. It’s hard to do because you see your critique partner hit the Times list or whatever, but don’t let somebody else’s success make you feel less because you’re not.

—Beverly Jenkins

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Your query is your book’s resume and you want it to have the best shot of moving to the interview round, thus attention to detail is the first step. Again, my cheat for queries is to divide the letter into three sections: the hook (featuring the log line, word count, comp titles), the book (four to five lines of premise), and the cook (author bio—why this book, why me, why now.)

—Barbara Poelle (Agent)

I see manuscripts and books that are spoiled for the literary reader because they are one long stream of top-of-the-head writing, a writer telling a story without concern for precision or freshness in the use of language. Some of this storytelling reads as if it were spoken rather than written, stuffed with tired images that pop into the writer’s head because they are so familiar. The top of the head is fit for growing hair, but not for generating fine prose.

—Sol Stein

Write a six line poem, about anything, but rhymed. No fair tennis without a net. Make it as good as you possibly can. But don’t tell anybody what you’re doing. Don’t show it or recite it to anybody, not even your girlfriend or parents or whatever,… OK? Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces, and discard them into widely separated trash receptacles. You will find that you have already been gloriously rewarded for your poem. You have experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what’s inside you, and you have made your soul grow.

—Kurt Vonnegut

Create something today even if it sucks.

—Internet Meme

I definitely advise anyone who wants to write, write. Don’t let anyone tell you that you shouldn’t. Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t. Because a lot of people can be very discouraging to people who say they want to be a professional writer. If you want to do it, then chase it. Chase your dreams. Follow your heart. If that’s what you want, go after it. Write it out. You never know, you could be the next big thing.

—Helena Lancaster

You cannot protect the title of a book or a movie…as a trademark, which is why you may see several novels with the same title. So long as there is no attempt to pass off the novel of one author as the work of another, this does not cause a problem. Cover photos and subtitles are often used for this purpose. Thus Gone With the Wind: The Definitive Guide to Kite Flying would not be confused with Margaret Mitchell’s Civil War saga, and War and Peace: The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower would never be confused with Tolstoy’s novel.

—Ellen M. Kozak
Is, am, was, were, be, been, are, has, have, had, may, can, must, might, would, could, should, shall, will, do.

‘These class,’ Mrs. Stanton, my fourth-grade teacher, said grimly as she scribbled The Terrible 20 on the chalkboard, ‘constitute the…linking verbs.’ She spat the phrase, as if biting heartily into an apple and finding a worm.

‘Avoid them!’ She snapped. ‘They add little to your writing, and they force you to use the passive voice.’

Ah, the dreaded passive voice! Mrs. Stanton explained to us the day before that the passive voice too often poisoned the 25 sentences (due Mondays, except holidays) each student wrote from weekly vocabulary lists.

‘The passive voice represents the easy way out,’ Mrs. Stanton said with a sneer, ‘but not the best way. Strong sentences use strong verbs. Remember that!’

—Michael Hemmes

My several years in the word game have learnt me several rules:

➣ Avoid alliteration. Always.
➣ Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
➣ Avoid clichés like the plague. (They’re old hat.)
➣ Employ the vernacular.
➣ Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
➣ Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.
➣ It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
➣ Contractions aren’t necessary.
➣ Foreign words are phrases are not apropos.
➣ One should never generalize.
➣ Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: ‘I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.’
➣ Comparisons are as bad as clichés.
➣ Don’t be redundant; don’t use more words than necessary; it’s highly superfluous.
➣ Profanity sucks.
➣ Be more or less specific.
➣ Understatement is always best.
➣ Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
➣ One-word sentences? Eliminate.
➣ Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
➣ The passive voice is to be avoided.
➣ Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
➣ Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
➣ Who needs rhetorical questions?

—Frank L. Visco
Of the 800,000 words in the English language, the most frequently misspelled is *alright*; just remember that *alright* is all wrong. You wouldn’t write *alwrong*, would you? That’s how you know you should write *all right*.

—John Irving

What’s really important about good writing is not good spelling. If you spell badly but write well, you should hold your head up. As the poet T. S. Eliot recommended, ‘Write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible’—and don’t be overly concerned if you can’t spell ‘miscellaneous.’

Also remember that you can spell correctly and write well and still be misunderstood. Hold your head up about that, too. As good old G. C. Lichtenberg said, ‘A book is a mirror: if an ass peers into it, you can’t expect an apostle to look out’—whether you spell ‘apostle’ correctly or not.

—John Irving

General dictionaries, unabridged or ‘collegiate,’ should be, if not writers’ best friends, surely their constant companions. By using our general dictionaries (if we take time to master their overall and particular structures, their ways of indicating pronunciation and syllabication, their labeling of ‘usages,’ their use of abbreviations) we can solve most of those copy-editing-level problems that beset us when we realize that we cannot wholly trust our instincts to tell us which words to use when.

—Robert M. Pierson

It is very important for children to grasp the fact that the term synonym refers to ‘something like’ not ‘the same as.’ Until one clearly realizes this truth, a good deal of semantic precision is lost to children, both as they read and as they write....it helps to demonstrate clearly the uniqueness of each individual word.

—Dale D. Johnson

The best ideas in the world are often expressed in words that can’t be read by half the adults in the world. They are illiterate. Many specialists have not yet learned how to put important political, health, and economic information into interesting, easy-to-read prose. There is an urgent need for writers who can write to the reading level of most Americans. These writers will be word conscious. They will have studied readability levels and will know the importance of giving their reader contextual clues to necessary but hard-to-understand words. They will use the short, simple, vivid, concrete, easily understood words instead of the longer, more abstract equivalents....They will excise obese phraseology—cut out the fat.

—Edgar Dale
The great writers wrote not to confuse or confound their audiences, but to enlighten them, to share with them their discoveries and feelings. They sought clarity and concreteness. Too many writers write to impress rather than to express.

—Edgar Dale

An old interviewer’s secret: Start slow and easy, to let your subject clear his throat and settle in, and to get the two of you talking. Most interviews take flight from there, sounding more like conversations than interrogations. (And always ask the hard questions last.)

—Robert Love

Listen to your gut. There are a thousand different pieces of writing advice out there and some are just plain wrong. Each writer knows what’s best for their unique story.

—Chloe Gong

Fiction, to be effective, must be a form of self-expression, untrammeled by the fear that some critic would prefer to have it differently presented.

—W. Adolphe Roberts

I will write 500 words a day, at about the same hour.
I will write for a definite market and I will carefully read and study that market.
I will seek only professional editorial advice and ignore what the homefolks say about my manuscripts (A newspaperman; a person who loves books; or a minister are not professional editorial advisors.)
I will believe in myself and my ability.
I will keep abreast of the best work done in the writing field that interest me.
I will develop a hobby outside of writing and use it to sell article shorts.

—Writers Digest Cover, (January, 1945)

I hardly ever consider the audience at all. And I don’t think it’s wise to. I have a built-in-desire to please; that should be enough. Beyond that, I’m just trying to amuse myself. Usually that amuses others, too.

—Stephen King

Our brains like to complete anything that’s unfinished, and so if you go to bed that night with a sentence that is half-finished or paragraph that’s half-done, overnight through the magic of the human mind, you’re going to be thinking about that, processing it. So not only will you finish that sentence the next day, you will probably have another two or three pages that you could write.

—Erik Larson
You’ve had a working title for months. Is it still brilliant? As you revise, if a
word or phrase pops out with special meaning or satisfaction, you may have
found your best title.

Go on a cliche hunt. Find, destroy, and recreate the likes of these: grinned
from ear to ear, crawling with cops, strong as an ox, weak as a kitten, for
what seemed like an eternity, my heart skipped a beat.

Intensify your descriptions of scene beyond the visual. Put in the other
senses, even the sixth sense—intuition—when appropriate.

Search out and destroy qualifiers: somewhat, rather, a tad, a bit, kind of,
seemed.

Cut extraneous ‘thats.’

Action is better than dialogue is better than narrative.

Get rid of the passive voice.

UGH: Many mistakes were made by Shelly that day.
BETTER: Shelly made many mistakes that day.
LIVELIER: Shelly made a hot mess of everything that day.

While it’s OK to tell about an emotion, it’s better to show it:

OK: I felt sick with fear.
BETTER: Oh, no. I bent over in case I had to vomit.

Cut most dialogue tags, especially ones that aren’t ‘said:’

SORT OF HORRIBLE: ‘Ready for that colonoscopy?’ he quipped.
FINE: ‘Ready for that colonoscopy?’

Omit most adverbs. Show it.

WEAKER: He said dejectedly, ‘I never knew her.’
STRONGER: He hung his head. ‘I never knew her.’

—Elizabeth Sims

Not everybody can write every day. There’s those rules where they say, Just get up
an hour earlier! But not everybody can do that for any number of reasons. Not
everybody can write every day, which is another piece of advice that’s given.
Sometimes you really need to squeeze out a half an hour in the week. What I’d say
is as long as you’re engaging with your writing on regular basis, tell yourself you’re
doing it right.

—Celeste Ng

What’s most important is getting emotion into your stories…and really make people
care. It still is the thing that I work at the hardest. Sometime my writing makes me
cry, and then I know that I’ve gotten it right.

—Cheryl Katz

Always keep a notebook or stack of paper handy to capture the odd idea. I use index
cards and write one idea only on each so that I can file them under the relevant tab.

—Sofia A. Koutlaki
I encourage awful fist drafts because this is how every real writer I know writes. My students have this illusion that good writers sit there as if they’re just taking dictation and it’s coming out fully formed.

—Anne Lamott

Anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his life.

—Flannery O’Connor

Study Kipling and O’Henry and work like hell.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Collect rejections, not acceptances. First of all, only writers who are brave enough to submit their work get rejections. Secondly, you have no control over any part of the process besides the submission itself. Your work may be the best-written prose an editor has seen all year, but she still may need to reject it due to lack of space, money, time, or fitting subject material. You are privy to none of these factors, so unless you’re doggedly pursuing publication in outlets that aren’t a good fit...there’s no point in reading too much into editorial rejections. What you can do is keep submitting, finding new markets, polishing your work, taking in feedback, and submitting gain. Every rejection you receive is proof that you put yourself out there, and that’s a worthy thing to pursue indeed.

—writermag.com

If an author is capable of doing adequate research, it isn’t always essential to talk only about one’s own personal experience or one’s family’s personal experience.

—Alexandra Diaz