

YOU ARE WHAT YOU WRITE

Every writer is different: distinct in style, sentence structure, surface edits, and specificity. I am no exception. Like a snowflake or a fingerprint, I vary in shape, pattern, and appearance from other writers. Each English, Grammar, Composition, Literature, and Writing class I have ever taken has shaped me and molded me as a writer. Throughout my journey as a writer, there are five primary lessons I've learned about writing which have changed and improved not only my skill but my perspective on writing.

The first and most concrete lesson I have learned was the essential nature of punctuation. In my mind, periods are no longer merely the end of a sentence, commas no longer merely divide sentences, dashes are no longer a nuisance, and semicolons are no longer a daunting mystery. Punctuation in all forms, rather, is a key tool in writing. It can determine the readability and impact of a paper. No periods, no commas, and no punctuation would make the paper tremendously difficult to read. On the other hand, in the case of some forms of punctuation, overuse can significantly harm your writing. The question mark can leave your paper too vague and tough to read, exclamation points can be overbearing, italics can confuse the reader, and the hyphen should only be used when it's grammatically correct to do so.

Interestingly, I have learned much about punctuation by not only reading a book about punctuation but also by reading a book with impeccable punctuation: *A Dash of Style* by Noah Lukeman¹. In this right, in addition to the fact that the concept is discussed in another of my personal readings, Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools*, I learned that reading is a vital

¹ Noah Lukeman, *A Dash of Style*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006).

part of writing. First, researching the topic about which you are writing will give you the confidence to write, an authority on the subject, and ability to express your opinion with a basis in truth. Second, reading can show you literary triumphs and travails of the author. You can learn from their use of punctuation, style of plot, organization, vocabulary, and characterization. Finally, widespread reading provides a discipline of patience. It takes time and mental effort to read, which will help you be patient and promote critical thinking for when it comes time for you to write.² Author William Faulkner wrote, “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's good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window.”³

Next, it is imperative to get a workout on a ladder of abstraction. This means climbing both to the height of abstraction and descending to the depths of detail. It is wise to begin with broad ideas, concepts, and imagery and tie it practically to the reader by way of a thread of specificity. In other words, be succinct. Use examples, anecdotes, statistics, and quotes that fall under the umbrella of the more abstract concepts behind the piece of writing. No writer is perfect, but simply being sure not to bore the reader with statistics while also avoiding boring them with fluffy philosophy can elevate most writing above the masses.

Fourth, throughout my journey, I have learned that original content does not come easy. In Ken Macrorie’s book *Telling Writing*, he discussed the idea that many students begin to learn the so-called ‘language’ of the school they attend. They, as I often do, look for what will get

² Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016), 212.

³ “William Faulkner,” *Random House of High School Teachers*, accessed September 30, 2017, <https://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/catalog/author.pperl?authorid=8449>.

them a good grade rather than what is actually unique, original content. The result is, to be frank, bland, drawn out, meaningless strands of paragraphs inked onto paper that has more flavor than the piece of writing that takes residence there.⁴ However, Paul McHenry Roberts' article *How to Say Nothing in 500 Words* explains that even seemingly bland topics can be viewed as an opportunity rather than an aversion. Instead of cushioning, stretching, or even abandoning such topics, a writer ought to exercise every writing skill they possess to make the piece of writing come to life for the reader.⁵ "Simplicity," an article written by American author William Zinsser, argued that, while simplicity isn't simple to achieve, the results are worth it.⁶ Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do."⁷ When it comes to all topics, especially topics that don't interest a writer initially, the best strategy is to write uniquely, intelligently, and concisely. All three pieces of writing unite under a common thrust: write concisely for the audience, not over-complexly for grades and, coincidentally, one's grades will likely improve.

Finally, I have learned from two enlightening texts—both *Writing Tools* and Donald Murray's "The Maker's Eye"—about the importance of finding your voice when writing. Murray writes, "Voice is the force which drives a piece of writing forward. It is an expression of the writer's authority and concern. It is what is between the words on the page, what glues the piece of writing together. A good piece of writing is always marked by a consistent, individual voice."⁸ In essence, a writer's 'voice' is the level of sincerity, authority, and empathy conveyed through their writing. All writers should seek to have a

⁴ Macrorie, Ken, "The Poison Fish," *Telling Writing* (Boynton/Cook Publishers, Upper Montclair, New Jersey), 1985, 11-14.

⁵ Roberts, Paul, "How to Say Nothing in 500 Words," *The Freshman Reader: Essays and Casebook*, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York), 1983, 5-16.

⁶ William K. Zinsser, "Simplicity," in *On Writing Well: The Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 7-12.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to John Minor, 30 August 1814, including Thomas Jefferson to Bernard Moore," *Founders Online* (August 30, 1814), accessed September 30, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0455>.

⁸ Donald M. Murray, "The Maker's Eye," *A Fine Frenzy*: accessed September 30, 2017, <https://nabuckler.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/the-makers-eye.pdf>.

voice that is genuine, self-effacing, and, above all, effective. What you say is important, but how you say it can make all the difference in the world.

Every writer is different, every paragraph distinct, every printed or written word unique in meaning from one sentence to the next, every seemingly minor point of punctuation impactful, every meaningful detail memorable. Each piece of writing, in its own right, is novel; each narrative, no matter the skill of its author, matchless; each masterpiece, no matter the changing wind of generations, lasting to the end of time. For the writer, those blank pages, those seemingly endless words swimming in their head, those ostensibly bland or thrilling subjects are the soil, the roots, and the seeds of the greatest artistic opportunity humankind can achieve. No matter who you are, where you've been, or what you've done, anyone can write in a way no one has ever written before. It is a gift to mankind to grasp the ability to write, and for some, to impact the world through how they do so. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once boldly exclaimed, "All I need is a sheet of paper and something to write with, and then I can turn the world upside down."⁹

⁹Peter Economy, "26 Brilliant Quotes on the Super Power of Words," *Inc. Magazine* (November 2015), accessed September 30, 2017, <https://www.inc.com/peter-economy/26-brilliant-quotes-on-the-super-power-of-words.html>.

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