

Learning How to Write

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Society has given up teaching people how to write. Everyone is to blame for this. Teaching people how to write is labor-intensive and therefore costly. It entails unpleasant work. It involves language — lots of it. And it requires prolonged seclusion from noise and moving images.

The real problem is political. Conservatives and liberals, it seems, both value social engineering more than good writing. Conservatives worship order and structure, and their soul-destroying formalism gave writing a bad name. Liberals prefer freedom. They stopped teaching the oppressive forms of language in the name of personal expression. The problem, of course, is that you can't express yourself if you can't write a decent sentence.

Let's ignore the ideologies and just teach people how to write. In this article I have gathered the best ideas on the subject that I have encountered in my years as a writer and teacher.

*You don't learn to write by writing — you learn to write by revising something you have written. Write it once, get detailed comments on it, and then write it again. This is the fundamental law of writing, from which there is no escape, and my central purpose is to make this law intuitive.

*When you write something, you do not know what you have written. You may know what you intended to write, but that's different. And the only way to learn what you have written is by asking somebody else to read it. You can read it yourself, of course, but you have no way to separate what's in your head from what's on the page.

*When you write, you continually make choices. The people who read your drafts should not make judgements. Instead, they should serve as a mirror. Their perceptions will help you to understand that you were making certain choices, and that you could have made different choices.

*Your writing will improve as you develop an internalized dialogue with your readers. That's why other people need to read your drafts. You will listen to their responses, and their responses will become part of your own thinking. As you start to anticipate others' responses, you can take them into account.

*Your readers will often misunderstand what you wrote, and you will feel an urge to blame them or set them straight. Resist this urge, especially when your readers have accused you of saying something stupid. Instead, find ways of writing that anticipate the misunderstanding, or clarify the issue. It doesn't matter whose fault the misunderstanding might have been — the point of writing is to communicate with an audience, and you are either communicating with the audience or you are not. If your readers are dense, unfair,

or unalterably antagonistic to your values, then find different readers, at least until your writing has become more powerful. Start by writing for people who respect you and speak your language, and then work outward through successively wider circles.

*As you learn how to write, you will develop a voice. Inside every person is a powerful drive for wholeness. That drive will integrate every influence on your writing. Nobody knows how this works, but it does work if you invest the effort and give it time.

*Don't try to revolutionize your writing. Instead, shop around in books about writing and choose an aspect of your writing to improve. Try consciously to notice the problem. Try some devices for repairing it. Watch yourself start to notice the problem by habit. Watch yourself start to apply your chosen solutions by habit. Then forget about the issue and move on to the next one.

*The cultivated awareness of choices is also the purpose of formal structures of grammar and rhetoric. Formal structures are evil when they are imposed in a mechanical way from the outside. But they are essential as aids to self-awareness. In the old days, students were advised to master the conservative forms first, and only then develop a personal voice. This idea is dangerous, however, because so many teachers abuse it. Instead, use the forms as tools for parsing your own writing and as a vocabulary for communicating with the people who read your drafts.

*At any given time, your writing skills will consist of a toolkit of devices — words, phrases, grammatical forms, sentence structures, metaphors, and so on — that you use over and over. Your toolkit for writing is probably much narrower than the repertoire of linguistic forms that you use when speaking. As a result, you probably overuse some devices while ignoring others. Your readers can help you to see this, and then you can choose some new devices to add to your kit.

*Styles of writing vary historically. Eighteenth-century English prose, with its fantastically complicated sentences, is almost impossible for contemporary readers to follow. The general trend is toward simplicity. Is simple writing just a fashion, or is it intrinsically better? The answer probably depends on your goals. In the case of advertising, for example, the goal is to communicate an emotionally simple message by the most efficient means. What are your goals?

*Written and spoken English are different languages. Unless you learned English in a classroom as a second language, you probably speak English better than you write it. You cannot write well by transcribing your speech. Spoken intonation, for example, readily disambiguates complex grammatical forms that readers cannot follow. But you have to start somewhere. So read your sentences out loud and hear how they sound. Notice their rhythms and other poetic qualities. As you internalize the responses of your readers, however, you should stop guiding yourself by your own ear, and use your readers' ears instead.

*The English language cannot be understood apart from its history. It is a combination of languages, most importantly Anglo-Saxon and French, that are themselves only distantly related. Nor is this combination random — to the contrary, it reflects the social relationships among the peoples involved. Words for farming, for example, tend to derive from Anglo-Saxon, while words for administration generally derive from French. In the old days, students were advised to write in Anglo-Saxon and avoid Latin (and thus French). This advice is understandable in a world where, Latinate words such as “finalize” are used to project a phony sophistication. Even so, the real point is to be aware of the interactions between these two dimensions of the language. Notice when you’re using a French word, and ask yourself whether an Anglo-Saxon word would be better.

*Even though English is derived from languages of Continental Europe, the European and Anglophone intellectual traditions think about language in different ways. Europeans believe that every language conveys a vast, entangling network of unarticulated assumptions from one generation to the next, so that a central purpose of intellectual work is to cultivate an awareness of its own assumptions. English-speaking intellectuals, by contrast, have contended until recently that human beings stand outside of language, and that they can define it however they like. This contrast accounts in part for the extreme contrasts in literary style between European and Anglophone philosophers and social theorists: the Europeans view themselves as intervening in something, whereas the English-speakers view themselves as imposing a rational order on something. Both schools of thought have their points, and instead of thoughtlessly inheriting one style or another, you should search out what seems true in each of them.

*Graduate students often write badly at first because they are trying to imitate the prose they encounter in seminars. After all, don’t academic writers use a lot of big words? Yes and no. Many academics are posers or show-offs, of course, and others just can’t write. But good academic writing is really no different from regular writing. Start with the English language and work up to the big words from there. The big words do have a purpose. Some serve as flags that a community can use to identify its distinctive approach to research. Others are closely identified with particular authors and their ideas. Sometimes a community chooses a word in order to contrast their position with some other position. Collect these words one at a time. As you gradually become a member of a community you will learn the significance that its words hold.

*You will construct your professional voice, slowly and incrementally, by appropriating fragments of other people’s voices. This is one purpose of reading: read with a highlighter pen, and mark the passages that you wish you had said yourself. Notice when somebody’s turn of phrase solves a rhetorical problem you’ve been having in your writing. Pay attention to the language of people you admire, and pick out the elements that epitomize whatever is admirable about them. If you exert a continual gentle pressure to improve your writing, your mind will scour your linguistic environment and grab hold of whatever it needs. You just have to notice when it grabs something, make a note of it, and weave it into your writing as the opportunity arises.

*Rehearse your voice. Brainstorm new ways of explaining your ideas when you're driving to school in the morning. Explain things — both your own ideas and others' — to anyone who will listen. Internalize the responses of someone who doesn't know the big words. Keep a notebook. Write out every idea that comes into your head. By emptying your head into your notebook, you will make room for more ideas. Continually invent words that name your intuitions, and use those words consistently when writing in your notebook. Work back and forth between the private language of your notebook and the public language that you use with others.

*As you develop your own distinctive voice, you will face the problem of writing about other people's voices. After all, most genres of writing require you to explain what somebody else has said. Many beginning writers find this difficult because they had formerly believed that the purpose of writing was to express somebody else's ideas, not their own. Start, therefore, with obvious devices such as "Smith contends that ...", and so on. Then pay attention to the devices that other, more advanced writers have used for the same purpose. Observe, for example, how good writers paraphrase the views of others. Observe, too, how good writers establish contexts in which their paraphrases can continue for several sentences without tedious repetitions of "Jones argued that ..." and "Jones also argued that ..." and "Jones further argued that ...". Then think about the relationship you want to project between yourself and the people whose views you are writing about. Are you building on those ideas? Accurately stating them and then pounding them into the earth? Drawing on them in a fragmentary way in the course of assembling your own line of argument? Letting your own position emerge from the results of a comparison and contrast between the views of two authors whose views can be used to illuminate one another? The possibilities are endless, and you will do better if you choose clearly which one you intend.

*If you write badly, experience shows that you can improve your writing dramatically by applying a principle from Strunk and White's antediluvian "Elements of Style": use active verbs — verbs that describe a real action rather than a vague state of affairs. Go through your writing and look for two kinds of words: (a) weak verbs such as "be", "do", and "make"; and (b) nominalizations, that is, words such as "suggestion", "encouragement", and "accountability" that entomb active verbs ("suggest", "encourage", and "account", respectively) inside of abstract nouns. Very often, a sentence with a weak verb will also contain a nominalization whose inner verb should be the grammatical verb of the sentence. Using this principle, you can rewrite your sentences one at a time with little regard for their surrounding context. Simply tear each sentence apart and put it back together again: first identify the verb, then ask who (or what) did the action that the verb describes, and then ask who (or what, if anything) the action was done to, and then see if any meaningful words are left over. Most of the old-fashioned books on good writing will explain this process in detail.

*Few writers employ a sufficient repertoire of connectives — words and phrases like "thus", "however", "after all", "therefore", "even so", "what is more", "to the contrary", "then", "yet", "also", "moreover", "for example", and "in particular" that express a

logical connection between sentences. Find all the connectives in ten pages of your own writing. Which ones are missing?

*Some people can write very quickly. The writing that results, however, is usually redundant. The individual sentences might look impressive, but the same ideas will be expressed over and over. Slow down, figure out what you're really trying to say, and say it well, once.

*Don't despair. Good writing takes time — years, to be honest — but your effort will be rewarded. If you care about language then you will never stop trying to improve your writing. But once you internalize some voices and integrate their perceptions into your writing, you will write with much greater confidence. I can't promise that you will enjoy the actual writing, but at least you will enjoy reading it later.