

# Writing Well

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Below you'll find writing advice that I have encountered over the years and found both memorable and useful. The four topics are *syntax and composition*, *style*, *what makes a (short) story*, and *virtues of revising*. The last point may be the most important.

## Syntax and Composition

The bones of a sentence are just a noun and a verb, so put the right nouns and verbs in the right slots and the other words fall into place around them. —**Joe Moran**

Take any noun, put it with any verb, and you have a sentence. It never fails. Rocks explode. Jane transmits. Mountains float. These are all perfect sentences. Many such thoughts make little rational sense, but even the stranger ones (Plums deify!) have a kind of poetic weight that's nice. The simplicity of noun-verb construction is useful—at the very least it can provide a safety net for your writing. —**Stephen King**

**Brush up on grammar.** No need to make this too complicated: **William Strunk & E.B. Whyte**'s classic remains your best guide for learning the dos and don'ts of syntax. It's old, hence freely available [HERE](#). Return to it often; you'll always find some rule or principle that you realize you've been violating.

**Nouns make your sentences stand tall.** Agonize over noun choices. Always opt for the simple and short one over the lengthy and verbose. The linguist **Sam Hayakawa** wrote that all nouns exist as if on a ladder, and the higher you climb, the more abstract the nouns get. On the bottom rung, you have concrete words like *chair*, *egg*, *fork*. The middle rung is for specific-general words like *breakfast*, *scraps*, *firewood*. They are concrete but you cannot count them or split them into smaller units. The top rung is the most abstract: *depression*, *recession*, *infection*. **Joe Moran** recommends that you make your sentences move up and down the ladder of nouns:

No single noun fully describes anything. The more concrete a noun, the more people agree on its meaning. But being concrete limits a noun's use, too, by tethering it tight to one sense. [...] Writing stuck on one rung of the ladder of abstraction is too monotone. [...] Keep shinning up and down the ladder, though, and the reader gets the gist in different ways. She grasps big ideas through concrete things, and concrete things through big ideas. The tangible ignites the elusive and both of them shine brighter.

**Verbs keep your story moving.** Verbs move the text forward and make it dynamic. They deserve similar care in selection as nouns. Verbs vary between transitive and intransitive verbs

and **Virginia Tufte** encourages us think of these as different levels of heat that the writer can dial either up or down, like a thermostat. Transitive verbs act on objects and have the most heat. *He punched his bother.* Intransitive words do not act on objects and have less heat. *I yawned.* Remember that a text shouldn't be moving forward so fast as to feel hurried. Too many transitive verbs will do that.

**Ration “to be.”** Most writers overuse “to be.” They write “Jack is walking” rather than “Jack walks.” Quite a few experienced writers start revising by first searching for every “is” and “are” and replacing them with verbs better suited for the occasion. Think of “to be” as a finite resource; you want to save it for profound declarations.

*To be* works best for crisp observations and assertions that make us see things afresh. Check all the times you use *is* and *was* in your writing and see if they are just linking things weakly or actually saying something worth saying. A *to be* sentence can be mind-altering. This is the way the world is, it says: hadn't you noticed? – **Joe Moran**

**Beware the passive voice.** The assignment was not completed by the student; the student completed the assignment. Assign responsibility. Tell the reader who is doing what.

**Connect your sentences.** All sentences should always connect to the previous one, and lead to the next one. If your text is hard to follow, it is probably because of this. Sentences that do not connect just feel plain wrong. The Amazon is burning. See?

**Vary your sentence lengths.** Short sentences are the writer's primary tool. They are firm and confident. They are easier to digest. They give the reader frequent resting stops at every comma. Yet a writer should, without question, bust a longer sentence every now and then, either for dramatic effect, to resist the buildup of monotony in style, or just for the sheer fun and creativity of it. Like so.

**Aim for a short paragraph.** A short paragraph forces you to be clear and focused, since a paragraph should be about one idea, or unity.

Writing is visual—it catches the eye before it has a chance to catch the brain. Short paragraphs put air around what you write and make it look inviting, whereas a long chunk of type can discourage a reader from even starting to read. – **William Zinsser**

**Establish the subject, verb, and object.** The reader wants to know what's going on, and the holy trinity of subject-verb-object establishes that. The writer should not withhold these three from the reader for too long; establish them early in the sentence. Or to quote **Joe Moran**, “If you swiftly deliver the main news of the sentence, the subject and verb, then the rest of the sentence can unfurl itself less hurriedly.” Avoid meandering sentences like: “It was on a beautiful

and sunny April morning on the coast of Normandy, a morning like just any other, but still special in its own way, when Pierre entered his boat and hosted his sails.” Pierre should be on the boat earlier in the sentence.

**Master the Separators: dash, semicolon, parentheses, and comma.** The safest bet is to stick to periods and commas, breaking the sentence with a comma whenever it has a natural pause, as in speech, like so. Semicolons are risky appropriate when a sentence directly connects to the one preceding it. **Malcolm Gladwell** never uses semicolons; he feels they are like a confusing no-man’s land between the comma and the period. Dashes are helpful when you want to interrupt a thought—usually in the middle of the sentence—or if you want to punctuate the end, to add either drama or humor. Parentheses are more subtle and are usually used to add in incidental information, like whispering something important to the reader. Many humorists favor parentheses for their understated effectiveness (see below).

I could never learn to like her—except on a raft at sea with no other provisions in sight. —**Mark Twain**

My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.—**Vladimir Nabokov**

## Style

**Listen to your reader, listen like your reader.** **John Trimble** says that novice writers write for themselves, whereas veteran writers always write with other people in mind. Good writers anticipate the reactions of their readers and seek to delight them. They edit with the audience always in their ear. They know when and how to carry to story forward as the reader expects, and when to surprise them with a sharp left turn. **Howard Becker** says good writers “edit by ear” and sense how a sentence sounds when said out loud, if it has a good rhythm. A good sentence sounds pleasant when said out loud; it has just the right cadence in the beginning and middle, and an ending that feels like a solid landing. Ear-editors also favor shorter words.

Train your ears, for how a sentence sounds in the head is also what it says to the heart. —**Joe Moran**

**Go for concrete.** Sentences made of concrete nouns and determinative verbs are usually better. Don’t write “A period of unfavorable weather set in.” Instead, try “It rained every day of the week.” **George Orwell** once took a passage from the Bible and, to quote **Strunk & Whyte**, “drained it of its blood” to illustrate the necessity of concrete expression. Below you’ll see Orwell’s version (left) and the original King James version (right):

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

**Kill all bullshit qualifiers.** Bullshit qualifiers are redundant words that hedge the writer's claims. "It could be argued that...; Some people tend to occasionally..." You can get away with them in academic writing, but not in storytelling. Aim for strong prose. Be firm.

**Be better than the adjective.** Adjectives are the lazy man's alternative for good description. When words fail a novice writer trying to describe the beauty of a pond, they call it a beautiful pond. The reader might even suspect the writer has never really seen what they are describing.

[Ezra Pund was]...the man who had taught me to distrust adjectives as I would later learn to distrust certain people in certain situations.—**Ernest Hemingway**

About adjectives: all fine prose is based on the verbs carrying the sentences. They make sentences move. Probably the finest technical poem in English is Keats' "Eve of Saint Agnes." A line like "The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass," is so alive that you race through it, scarcely noticing it, yet it has colored the whole poem with its movement--the limping, trembling and freezing is going on before your own eyes. —**F. Scott Fitzgerald**

**Adverbs must go.** Adverbs are the timid cousin of adjectives. They are a crutch for writers who fear they aren't being clear enough and come across as insisting. "You can't be serious!" said Billy *incredulously*. Use adverbs selectively, like this. If a verb needs a modifier, find a better verb.

The adverb is not your friend.—**Stephen King**

**Don't be very careful, be meticulous.** "Very" is very overused. Removing it and changing the verb or adjective that accompanied it will usually improve the sentence. Sheila isn't very fast; she is swift. The hole isn't very big; it is gaping. The assignment isn't very stupid; it is idiotic. "Much" often very much deserves the same fate as "very."

**Embrace metaphors and similes.** A simile compares two things using like or as ("That class was like a kindergarten"). A metaphor makes the comparison without using like or as ("That class is a kindergarten"). Metaphors and similes are the best way to solve the adjective and adverb problem. Don't write that the pond was beautiful. Write that the pond looked like it belonged on a Hallmark greeting card. Well-crafted metaphors or similes are usually the bits of your story that readers will remember and quote. **John Trimble** encourages writers to train their creative

brains to spot insertion opportunities for similes and metaphors: “Always be thinking in terms of “like.” Such-and-such is like—like what? Challenge your imagination. What is it similar to? Do this with every sentence you write. Make it part of your writing habit.”

A professor must have a theory, as a dog must have fleas. —**H. L. Mencken**

**Describe the details and engage the senses.** The best way to take the reader “there” is through good description. Describe the surroundings. What are the sounds? The smells? What is the mood of the place? How would you feel being in this place? How does this feeling inform character behavior?

It is not that every detail is given — that would be impossible, as well as to no purpose — but that all the significant details are given, and with such accuracy and vigor that readers, in imagination, can project themselves into the scene. —**William Strunk & E.B. Whyte**

The key to good description begins with clear seeing and ends with clear writing, the kind of writing that employs fresh images and simple vocabulary. —**Stephen King**

Remember to get the weather in your god damned book—weather is very important. —**Ernest Hemingway** to **F. Scott Fitzgerald**

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, above all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything. —**Joseph Conrad**

### **Trust the reader.**

A reader needs no chaperone: signposting should be invisible and the sentences cohere through suggestive arrangement, not coercive connection.—**Joe Moran**

**Go for natural language, but not an interview transcript.** Avoid using edgy language for edginess’s sake and slang for slang’s sake. The reader will catch you on it. It is good to mimic natural speech, but not to a fault. Omit the kinds of words or phrases that appear in real speech, like “well,” “so,” “just,” “um,” “you know?” and “c’mon.”

I have never understood, to this day, how Hemingway achieved his powerful dialogue... Hemingway offered... not dialogue overheard, but a concentrate of it, often made up of superficially insignificant elements—mere fragments of everyday phrases, which always managed to convey what was most important. —**Ilya Ehrenburg**

## What Makes a (Short) Story

I thought I'd gotten the definition of a short story straight. Almost every conversation on the topic starts with Edgar Allan Poe's famous quote: "A short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build toward it." But an overwhelming number of opinions and definitions flow from there. - **Natali Petritic**, citing **Edgar Allan Poe's** (alleged) quote.

The plot of a short story should allow of expression in a single short, fairly simple sentence; if it cannot be so compressed there is something radically wrong with it. - **Charles Raymond Barrett**

**Aristotle's** principles of "**Unity of Drama**" that are often used in short stories:

- 1) Unity of place: the story unfolds in a particular location or a small set of locations and avoids unnecessary jumps to new locations.
- 2) Unity of time: the story unfolds within a well-bounded time span (a day, the length of a conversation etc.) and avoids unnecessary temporal shifts ("The next day...")
- 3) Unity of action: the story focuses on a particular activity between (a group of people having dinner; father and son on a fishing trip etc.) and avoids unnecessary shifts between activities.

The correct short story possesses unity of form as well as unity of plot. In the novel there may be wide gaps of time and scene between adjacent chapters; but the short story allows of no such chasms of thought, much less of chapters. - **Charles Raymond Barrett**

**Robert A. Heinlein's** (disputed) theory that there are only three main types of fiction stories:

- a. "Boy meets girl" (or girl meet boy, girl meets girl etc.)
  - i. boy-fails-to-meet-girl
  - ii. boy-meets-girl-too-late
  - iii. boy-meets-too-many-girls
  - iv. boy-loses-girl
  - v. boy-and-girl-renounce-love-for-higher-purpose.
  - vi. Etc.
- b. "The little Tailor"
  - i. "Rags to riches"
  - ii. Fall from grace
  - iii. Rise and fall
- c. "Man learns a lesson"
  - i. Man has opinion or worldview at the beginning of story, faces some "harsh truths" and is transformed as a result.

**Find the real beginning.** Experienced writers avoid the lengthy and tedious *mise en scène* ("Once upon a time..."). Instead, they bring their readers into the story *in media res* where you open the story "in the middle of the action and fill in details later" (**Neil Gaiman**). **Robert A. Heinlein** writes that a good beginning establishes that the protagonist has found themselves in new circumstances, and these new circumstances create a problem for them. Make sure you have

a compelling first sentence, one that sucks the reader in immediately. It can be dialogue, or it can be something mysterious, one that forces the reader to ask: “what’s going on here?” If your opening features a character, be sure that the first one to speak or act is your main protagonist, to not confuse the reader later. Also remember that even experienced writers struggle to decide when the reader should be brought into the story. **Margaret Atwood** and **Joyce Carol Oates** recommend that you try deleting the first few paragraphs or even pages, to see if the story could start from there. The ideal beginning often hides quite late in the text. In a manner of speaking, the story should start as close to the beginning as possible, but no later.

**Conflict drives story.** The beginning of the story brings the reader in and orients them into the story’s world, the characters, and the story’s stakes. The middle of the story expands on that knowledge—the world becomes richer, the characters become more complex, and the stakes grow ever higher. All stories need a central conflict to remain interesting. Conflict and the ensuing struggle make you want to root for the character, or at least identify with them even when the character is otherwise lacking in likable qualities.

The storyteller discovers a story by asking certain key questions. First, what does my protagonist want in order to restore balance in his or her life? Desire is the blood of a story. Desire is not a shopping list but a core need that, if satisfied, would stop the story in its tracks. Next, what is keeping my protagonist from achieving his or her desire? Forces within? Doubt? Fear? Confusion? Personal conflicts with friends, family, lovers? Social conflicts arising in the various institutions in society? Physical conflicts? The forces of Mother Nature? Lethal diseases in the air? Not enough time to get things done? The damned automobile that won’t start? Antagonists come from people, society, time, space, and every object in it, or any combination of these forces at once. Then, how would my protagonist decide to act in order to achieve his or her desire in the face of these antagonistic forces? It’s in the answer to that question that storytellers discover the truth of their characters, because the heart of a human being is revealed in the choices he or she makes under pressure. Finally, the storyteller leans back from the design of events he or she has created and asks, “Do I believe this? Is it neither an exaggeration nor a soft-soaping of the struggle? Is this an honest telling, though heaven may fall?” - **Robert McKee**

The foundations of your main conflict or theme often form a short story’s rising action. To create tension and movement, you must know exactly what your character wants and what would prevent them from getting it. Conflicts can be internal or external, so imagine at what stage the reader will be meeting your character. Are they already in the throes of defeat? Or do their obstacles provide the action for the story? – **David Sedaris**

Hold my attention; that’s all I ask. Make me believe. — **Margaret Atwood**

**Characters are revealed gradually and through action.** A classic novice mistake is to reveal character by describing what they are currently thinking or feeling. Action is always more compelling in revealing a character’s desires, thoughts, and values than simply stating them. If you do need to go “inside” the character, memories are more compelling than describing current emotions. Memories or flashbacks can also be used to give backstory or reveal the special significance of surroundings or give insights to character relationships.

**Be patient when writing dialogue.** Writing good dialogue is one the hardest challenges in writing a short story. Use dialogue to carry the story forward if you cannot do so through action. Dialogue helps you paint a richer portrait of your characters, especially when it comes to displaying their personality quirks. Make sure your dialogue always reveals something about characters and their relationships to each other or the world around them—especially the kind of stuff that are relevant to their struggles and desires. But be careful here: novice writers often overuse dialogue as a means for conveying information about the world, to establish backstory. To paraphrase **Neil Gaiman**, there’s nothing worse than two characters telling each other things that they already know. Always remember: the reader does not need to know the character in full in the beginning of the story; the character is introduced throughout the story, and the ending makes the portrait complete.

A mistake which it seems hard for the novice to avoid is that of telling everything possible about a character and leaving nothing to the imagination of the reader. This exhaustive method leads to a multiplicity of detail which verges on baldness, and which is very apt to contain considerable irrelevant matter; the details are usually arranged with little regard for their true value; and the intended description becomes a mere catalogue of personal charms... Clever character depiction consists in selecting and presenting only those salient details which will serve to body forth rather a vague image, which shall yet possess a definite personality, to which the reader may give such distinctness as his imagination may impart to the hints offered. – **Charles Raymond Barrett**

Good short stories have been written and will be written which contain little or no dialogue; they succeed through vividness of plot, skill in character depiction, ingenuity of construction, or some such quality; but they would be more interesting and more natural if they held more conversation. A short story should be full of talk of the proper kind; there are few people who preserve silence at all times, and in the exciting moments which a short story usually presents, most persons would find tongue to voice their teeming thoughts. – **Charles Raymond Barrett**

**Nailing the Ending.** The ending is crucial. A good ending is a logical conclusion to the character’s struggles, and usually brings about some form of transformation. Many writers write with the ending already in mind and spend most of their energy on imagining the ideal buildup for it. Using call-backs is popular among short story writers: the story concludes with some detail or a piece of dialogue that is familiar from earlier in the story but has now acquired new meaning at the end. **Aristotle** states that a great ending is paradoxical: it is surprising, yet once the story concludes we feel that the story could not have ended in any other way.

The climax must seem the logical result of events and personal characteristics already recited. If it is too startling or unexpected it will be a strain on the credulity of the reader, and will be dubbed "unnatural;" for though fiction allows great license in the employment of strange people and situations, it demands that they be used with some regard for plausibility. The ending must appear inevitable—but its inevitableness must not be apparent until the end has come. It is only after the story has been read that the reader should be able to look back through the narrative and pick out the preparatory touches. They must have influenced him when first he read them and prepared him for what was to come, but without his being conscious of their influence. — **Charles Raymond Barrett**

In coping with the problem, the protagonist is somehow transformed, and the story concludes when the transformation is complete. – **Robert A. Heinlein**



## The Virtues of ~~Editing~~-Revising

**Lumps of coal turn into diamonds.** There's no such thing as writer's block; there are only writers who have too high standards for their early production. Experienced writers know that their early drafts are crap, and they are okay with it, because that early crap is like manure from which the eventual brilliant stuff will grow. Producing brilliant text on the first go only happens at later stages when you have already figured out the story and is rare even then. Do not just sit around waiting for inspiration; inspiration only comes to those who write. In the early going you need to just write and silence that inner critic. The critic will have their say during revision.

All good writers write [shitty first drafts]. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. — **Anne Lamott**

Genius is the ability to edit. —**Charlie Chaplin**

**Interviewer:** How much rewriting do you do?

**Ernest Hemingway:** It depends. I rewrote the ending of Farewell to Arms, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

**Interviewer:** Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?

**Ernest Hemingway:** Getting the words right.

I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's great rewriters. —**James A. Michener**

I am an obsessive rewriter, doing one draft and then another and another, usually five. In a way, I have nothing to say, but a great deal to add. —**Gore Vidal**

Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short. —**Henry David Thoreau**

Revision is one of the exquisite pleasures of writing. —**Bernard Malamud**

Simplify, simplify, simplify!—**Henry David Thoreau**

Surely one “Simplify!” would have been enough?—**John Rosling**

Read and re-read every sentence and ask yourself: does it really need to be there? Does it serve the higher purpose of illuminating your story’s mood? **-Neil Gaiman**

Verbal economy in a sentence is a virtue but an overprized one: words are precious but they need to be spent. —**Joe Moran**

**Gain distance.** Whenever you return to a piece of writing after a break, read the whole thing from start to finish and edit as you go. If your text has already reached a respectable length, just read the latest chapters. Whenever your text reaches a draft stage, meaning that it’s now a full text, with an ending, middle, and beginning, it is necessary—*necessary*—that you do not look at it for at least a few days. When you return to the text, you’ll have “fresh eyes” to revise with.

**Play with paragraphs.** Experiment with your paragraphs and their structures when you revise a text. Break paragraphs into two or combine two (or more) into one. Move sentences from one paragraph to the next. As **Joe Moran** says: “You can change the whole tone of a sentence by moving it from the end of a paragraph to the start of a new one, and vice versa.” Like sentences, paragraphs should, as a rule, lead from one to the next. But sometimes, especially in short stories, you can rebel against this principle. **Joyce Carol Oates** likes to experiment with composition, especially during the revision process. She shuffles paragraphs around to make the text feel like you were listening to a person recount how the events unfolded. As she describes this: “Nobody has a chronological memory—all our memories are ripples in the pan.”

**Grow the Iceberg.** **Hemingway** described his style of writing through his “iceberg theory.” He encouraged omission of key details, especially during the revision process, and letting the reader’s imagination to do most of the work. An overt style can indeed be insulting to the reader. For example, rather than explicitly telling the reader that such and such character was feeling miserable, you would describe their unwillingness to engage with others, or their face being expressionless. **Hemingway** described his theory in *Death in the Afternoon*:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. A writer who appreciates the seriousness of writing so little that he is anxious to make people see he is formally educated, cultured or well-bred is merely a popinjay.