



Five Tips to Make You a Better Writer TODAY!

For the past 30 years I've made a nice living as a writer. I have a comfortable home. I was able to afford to send my two girls to out of state colleges and paid for two weddings. I did all of this while working my own schedule in comfortable clothes in our extra bedroom. During this time I've had 15 novels published, sold two screenplays, had five other screenplays optioned and over 400 articles and features have appeared under my byline. And this doesn't even include the numerous "Work for Hire" Ghostwriting assignments I've written.

You may ask, what separates the professional writer from the "Wannabes"? You'll be surprised to learn -- not a whole heck of a lot. In most cases those who make their living at a keyboard have no more talent (often less) than those who are struggling to sell their first piece. What is the difference then? The professionals avoid the most common mistakes and they have discovered some of the secrets that make their work marketable.

Here are 5 Tips to Make You a Better Writer TODAY

1) Master the Simple Declarative Sentence

Think of some of the great quotes of our time:

"The buck stops here."

Harry S. Truman

"I have a dream."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Make my day."

"Dirty Harry" Callahan

"Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

Ronald Reagan

"Give peace a chance."

John Lennon

"Yes we can."

Barack Obama

What do they have in common? They are all simple, direct, declarative sentences. All of these quotes are only a few words long and, if you take out the proper name, none of the words are longer than 6 letters. A bright elementary student would have all of these words in their vocabulary. A dull elementary student can understand them. A genius created them.

Unless you are writing academic gobbledegook or legal briefs, the goal of good writing is to communicate and not to impress everyone with your mastery of obscure linguistics. This bears repeating: **Write to communicate and not to impress**. Too often the "rookie" will wear out their thesaurus and dictionary looking for impressive words when a simple word would have been better. Much better.

If you want a larger -- and paying -- audience for your work, use the language that most people will understand presented in a straightforward manner.

2) Use as Few Words as Possible

Most everyone has heard the old Urban Legend of the rock hard English professor who gave a final essay exam with only one question. Most of the class filled their "blue book" while one student was done in a matter of moments. The student who finished early got the only A in the class. To the question, **"What is the essence of great writing?"** he wrote one word: **"Brevity."**

With that thought in mind, you may want to print out the next section and paste it on your computer monitor:

Pythagorean Theorem: 24 words

The Lord's Prayer: 66 words

Archimedes' Principle: 67 words

The Ten Commandments: 179 words

The Gettysburg Address: 286 words

The US Government's Regulations on the Sale of Cabbage: 26,911 words

Are you writing memorable words or cabbage reports?

3) "*The Elements of Style*"

Written in 1918 by William Strunk, and later championed by E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* is the gold standard of writing manuals. This thin volume will keep you from making stupid, amateur mistakes and bring a smile to the face of your Freshman English composition teacher. My original copy is so old it doesn't have a bar scan code or ISBN number. I bought it for less than a dollar including tax. Last count I have more than a half dozen copies of "*The Elements of Style*" spread around my office. It is hard to go a single day without stumbling across one. That's the whole point. Just by seeing the cover I'm reminded that writing is a craft and not an art. There are timeless rules that can intentionally be broken for effect. But if you don't know the rules, you may be breaking a few of them unknowingly which will brand you as an amateur.

If you are too cheap to buy it, it is available online at Bartleby's online bookstore. They are a great resource for **FREE** information, quotes, etc. You can find them at www.bartleby.com. To find "The Elements of Style" visit:

<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

Just reading the table of contents and absorbing these few words will immediately improve your skill level. If you are reading this in electronic format, you can click on each item to learn more:

I. INTRODUCTORY

II. ELEMENTARY RULES OF USAGE

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns with 's
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last
3. Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas
4. Place a comma before *and* or *but* introducing an independent clause
5. Do not join independent clauses by a comma
6. Do not break sentences in two
7. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject
8. Divide words at line-ends, in accordance with their formation and pronunciation

III. ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

9. Make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic
10. As a rule, begin each paragraph with a topic sentence; end it in conformity with the beginning
11. Use the active voice
12. Put statements in positive form
13. Omit needless words
14. Avoid a succession of loose sentences
15. Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form
16. Keep related words together
17. In summaries, keep to one tense
18. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end

IV. A FEW MATTERS OF FORM

V. WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS COMMONLY MISUSED

VI. WORDS COMMONLY MISSPELLED

Read every word of this book -- it will only take a few hours at the most. Put it in a drawer and reread it 2 days later. Thumb through it at least once a month. And, whenever you happen to stumble across a copy of it in your office, pick it up and read a few pages. It doesn't matter which ones. They are all golden.

4) Focus Your Thoughts

Whenever I teach an advanced screenwriting or novel writing class (for those with works already in progress) the first exercise I give my students is to summarize their idea in 25 words or less. The groans and complaints are silenced when I tell them I'll do **ALL** 6 Star Wars movies in 21 words. Here goes....

"Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, the forces of good overcame terrible obstacles to conquer the forces of evil."

No Luke Skywalker. No Darth Vader. No Empire and no Alliance. Hans Solo didn't make the cut and neither did Yoda or R2D2. They are elements of the story but they are not important when defining the focus and direction of the plot.

In Hollywood they take this idea a step further; it's called a high concept. Give me your idea in **5 words or less**. An example would be my Hollywood optioned "Family Business" pilot script based on the five "Charon Family Adventure" novels.

The concept: **A dark-comedy about a dysfunctional family of four of the world's best assassins.**

The high concept: **"Assassin's Creed" meets "Modern Family."**

If you can't distill your idea into 25 words then it is unlikely anyone will pay you for your creation.

5) Open with Your Strongest Point

I've always had a weakness for pulp fiction and one of my favorite writers is the late John D. MacDonald. He wrote over 2 dozen "Travis McGee" books -- each with a color in the title. He broke ground for most of the current mystery writers who use a continuing character as their protagonist and/or a gimmick in the naming of their books (Sue Grafton's alphabet titles, "A is for Alibi", "B is for Burglar"; James Patterson's nursery rhymes, "Along Came a Spider", "Kiss the Girls", etc.)

The theory with pulp fiction and novels in general is often a potential buyer will pick up a book and read the first page before deciding whether to reach for their wallet. MacDonald was a master of the opening "grabber." Here is the first sentence of his novel "Darker than Amber."

"We were just about to call it a night when somebody dropped the girl off the bridge."

If that doesn't make you want to read the next sentence, then you may want to check your pulse and see if you are still among us.

Pulp fiction not your cup of tea? Try these great opening sentences:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."
Charles Dickens "A Tale of Two Cities"

"Call me Ismael."
Herman Melville "Moby Dick"

"This is a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast."
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. "Breakfast of Champions"

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."
Jane Austen, "Pride and Prejudice"

"Lot ninety-seven," the auctioneer announced. "A boy."
Robert Heinlein, "Citizen of the Galaxy"

What's the first line of your novel or screenplay?

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