

The Day You Became A Better Writer – by Scott Adams

I went from being a bad writer to a good writer after taking a one-day course in “business writing.” I couldn’t believe how simple it was. I’ll tell you the main tricks here so you don’t have to waste a day in class.

Business writing is about clarity and persuasion. The main technique is keeping things simple. Simple writing is persuasive. A good argument in five sentences will sway more people than a brilliant argument in a hundred sentences. Don’t fight it.

Simple means getting rid of extra words. Don’t write, “He was very happy” when you can write “He was happy.” You think the word “very” adds something. It doesn’t. Prune your sentences.

Humor writing is a lot like business writing. It needs to be simple. The main difference is in the choice of words. For humor, don’t say “drink” when you can say “swill.”

Your first sentence needs to grab the reader. Go back and read my first sentence to this post. I rewrote it a dozen times. It makes you curious. That’s the key.

Write short sentences. Avoid putting multiple thoughts in one sentence. Readers aren’t as smart as you’d think.

Learn how brains organize ideas. Readers comprehend “the boy hit the ball” quicker than “the ball was hit by the boy.” Both sentences mean the same, but it’s easier to imagine the object (the boy) before the action (the hitting). All brains work that way. (Notice I didn’t say, “That is the way all brains work”?)

That’s it. You just learned 80% of the rules of good writing. You’re welcome.

David Foster Wallace's 2002 Pomona College handout on five common word usage mistakes for his advanced fiction writing class:

ENGLISH 183A, 25 SEPTEMBER 2002—YOUR LIBERAL-ARTS \$ AT WORK

1. The preposition *towards* is British usage; the US spelling is *toward*. Writing *towards* is like writing *colour* or *judgement*. (Factoid: Except for *backwards* and *afterwards*, no preposition ending in *-ward* takes a final *s* in US usage.)
2. *And* is a conjunction; so is *so*. Except in dialogue between particular kinds of characters, you never need both conjunctions. "He needed to eat, *and so* he bought food" is incorrect. In 95% of cases like this, what you want to do is cut the *and*.
3. For a compound sentence to require a comma plus a conjunction, both its constituent clauses must be independent. An independent clause (a) has both a subject and a main verb, and (b) expresses a complete thought. In a sentence like "He ate all the food, and went back for more," you don't need both the comma and the *and* because the second clause isn't independent.
4. There are certain words whose appearance at the beginning of a clause renders that clause dependent. (They basically keep the clause from expressing a complete thought.) Examples include *since*, *while*, *because*, *although*, and *as*. You may have learned to call these kinds of words Signal Words or Temporal Adverbs in high school. They, too, affect the punctuation of a compound sentence.

The crucial question is whether the clause that starts with a Signal Word occurs first in the sentence or not. If it does, you need a comma:

"As the wave crashed down, the surfer fell." "While Bob ate all the food, Rhonda looked on in horror."

If the relevant clause comes second, you do not need a comma:

"The surfer fell as the wave crashed down." "Rhonda looked on in horror while Bob ate all the food."

5. In real prose stylistics, though, the Signal Word thing can get a little tricky. If you look at the last sentence of item (3) above, you'll notice that there is no comma between "*and*" and "because" in the compound "...you don't need both the comma and the *and* because the second clause isn't independent." This is because of the basic rule outlined in (4). But *because* is a funny word, and sometimes you'll need a comma before its appearance in the second clause in order to keep your sentence from giving the wrong impression. Example: Say Bob's been murdered; the question is whether Rhonda did it. Look at the following two sentences:

- a. "Rhonda didn't do it because she loved him."
- b. "Rhonda didn't do it, because she loved him."

Sentence a, which is grammatically standard, here really says that Rhonda *did* kill Bob but that her reason for the murder wasn't love, i.e., that the reason Rhonda killed Bob was not her love for him. Sentence b says that Rhonda did *not* kill Bob and that the reason she didn't is that she loves him. In 99% of cases, what someone'll be meaning to say is what b says. So, though nonstandard in the abstract, b can be *semantically* correct, correct in a meaning-based context.

A Guide to Writing Well

Compiled by Joshua Sowin

*For a good writer, there is only one measure of success,
and that is found in his honoring the complexity and richness
of his subject while telling his story in a lucid way.*

Joseph Epstein

This guide was mainly distilled from *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser and *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. Other sources are listed in the bibliography. My memory being stubborn and lazy, I compiled this so I could easily refresh myself on writing well. I hope it will also be helpful to others. If you have any suggestions about additions or changes, please let me know.

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Before You Start Writing

Before you start writing an article, ask the following questions:

1. How will I address the reader?
(Reporter? Provider of information? Average man or woman?)
2. What pronoun and tense will I use?
(Impersonal reportorial? Personal but formal? Personal and casual?)
3. What attitude will I take toward the material?
(Involved? Detached? Judgmental? Ironic? Amused?)
4. How much of the subject do I want to cover?
5. Have I done enough research and/or have enough experience with the subject to write intelligently?
6. Is there anyone I can interview to gather more information on the subject and to quote?
(See also: “Interviews”)
7. What is the *one point* I want to make?
 1. “Every successful piece of nonfiction should leave the reader with one provocative thought that he or she didn’t have before. Not two thoughts, or five—just one.” (Zinsser, 53)

General Principles

1. Be yourself. Don’t alter your voice for a subject. Relax and write with confidence and in a way that comes easily and naturally. Sometimes this will mean discarding the first few paragraphs until you start writing naturally. “Never say anything in writing that you wouldn’t comfortably say in conversation” (Zinsser, 27). When possible, use the first person – it usually comes out more natural.
2. Write for yourself – that will make it interesting to the reader.
3. Write with *humanity* and *warmth*.
4. Omit needless words. Write simply and without clutter. Don’t add words for “style.”
 1. “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.” (Strunk and White, 23)
 2. “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 adulterations that weaken the strength of a sentence.” (Zinsser, 8)

3. “Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating.” (Strunk and White, 72)
5. Be clear. Clear writing comes from clear thinking. Know logic, rhetoric and your subject.
 1. “Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram. Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear! When you say something, make sure you have said it.” (Strunk and White, 79)
 2. “Jaw-breaking words often cover up very sloppy thinking.” (Thomas Sowell)
 3. “Remember this: a well-written book with bad arguments will have more influence than a poorly-written book with endless nuance and lifeless prose. Remember this too: lifeless prose comes from lifeless minds.” (Scot McKnight)
 4. “Good writers write in such a way that one can read them aloud and know what they mean. Bad writers have to be studied and re-read and pondered.” (Scot McKnight)
6. Avoid fancy words.
 1. “Never use a long word where a short one will do.” (George Orwell)
 2. “Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able. Anglo-Saxon is a livelier tongue than Latin, so use Anglo-Saxon words. In this, as in so many matters pertaining to style, one’s ear must be one’s guide...” (Strunk and White, 77)
 3. “Look for all fancy wordings and get rid of them.” (Jacques Barzun)
7. “Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?” (Dillard, 68)
8. Develop a respect for words and a curiosity about their shades of meaning. Use a dictionary for any word whose meaning you are unsure of. Use a thesaurus to “nudge your memory.” (Zinsser, 36)
9. Talk about a person, not people. Specificity will raise interest.
10. Pay attention to your metaphors – what are you communicating with them?
11. Have a unity of pronoun (first person, etc.), unity of tense (past, present, future) and unity of mood (casual, comedy, irony).

12. “Don’t ever become the prisoner of a preconceived plan. Writing is no respecter of blueprints.” (Zinsser, 53)
13. Don’t save good ideas for later.
 1. “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. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better.” (Dillard, 78-79)
14. Don’t over-explain.
 1. “Don’t annoy your readers by over-explaining—by telling them something they already know or can surmise. Try not to use words like ‘surprisingly,’ ‘predictably,’ and ‘of course,’ which put a value on a fact before the reader encounters the fact.” (Zinsser, 92)
 2. “It is seldom advisable to tell all.” (Strunk and White, 75)
15. After every sentence, ask yourself what the reader wants to know next.
16. Use orthodox spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.
 1. “Do not write *nite* for *night*, *thru* for *through*, *pleez* for *please*, unless you plan to introduce a complete system of simplified spelling and are prepared to take the consequences.” (Strunk and White, 74)
17. Make your writing interesting. (See also: “Humor ”)
 1. “[F]ind some way to elevate your act of writing into an entertainment. Usually this means giving the reader an enjoyable surprise. Any number of devices will do the job: humor, anecdote, paradox, an unexpected quotation, a powerful fact, an outlandish detail, a circuitous approach, an elegant arrangement of words. These seeming amusements in fact become your ‘style.’ When we say we like a writer’s style, what we mean is that we like his personality as he expresses it on paper.” (Zinsser, 288)
 2. “Every book should be entertaining. A good book will be more; it must not be less. Entertainment, in this sense, is like a qualifying examination. If a fiction can’t provide even that, we may be excused from inquiry into its higher qualities.” (C. S. Lewis)
18. Learn to interview others and weave their quotes into your writing. “Whatever form of nonfiction you write, it will come alive in proportion to the number of ‘quotes’ you can weave into it as you go along” (Zinsser, 101). (See also: “Interviews ”)
19. Learn to write about place, because “people and places are the twin pillars on which most nonfiction is built” (Zinsser, 116). (See also: “Travel ”)

Usage Principles

1. Use active verbs. Example: “He was seen by Joe” should be “Joe saw him.”
 1. “Make active verbs activate your sentences, and try to avoid the kind that need an appended preposition to complete their work. Don’t set up a business that you can start or launch. Don’t say that the president of the company stepped down. Did he resign? Did he retire? Did he get fired? Be precise. Use precise verbs.” (Zinsser, 69)
2. Most adverbs are unnecessary. Replace them with precise verbs. Beware of adverbs that have the same meaning as the verb (“grinned widely,” “sadly moped”).
3. Most adjectives are unnecessary. Kick the “adjective-by-habit.”
4. Remove common clichés, cheap words, and made-up words.
5. Remove qualifiers: a bit, a little, sort of, kind of, rather, quite, very, too, pretty much, in a sense.
 1. “[Qualifiers] are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.” (Strunk and White, 73)
 2. “Good writing is lean and confident.” (Zinsser, 71)
6. Keep sentences short.
 1. “There’s not much to be said about the period except that most writers don’t reach it soon enough.” (Zinsser, 71)
7. Remove laborious phrases. Why use “at the present time” instead of “now”?
8. Remove “experiencing.” “Are you experiencing pain?” could be “Does it hurt?”
9. Remove unnecessary euphemism. A “depressed socioeconomic area” is a “slum.”
10. Remove long words when a short one will do. Examples: Assistance (help), facilitate (ease), implement (do), referred to as (called).
11. Remove word clusters that explain to go about explaining: “I might add,” “It should be pointed out,” “It is interesting to note.”
12. Remove verbal camouflage. Corporations and governments are often tempted to use this. “A negative cash-flow position” means a corporation is bankrupt. “Involuntary methodologies” means layoffs.
13. “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)
14. Use exclamation points sparingly. Instead, try to “construct your sentence so that the order of the words will put the emphasis where you want it.” (Zinsser, 72)
15. Alert the reader to mood or subject changes. Examples: but, yet, however, nevertheless, still, instead, thus, therefore, meanwhile, now, later, today.

1. Sentences can begin with “but,” no matter what your teacher said.
2. “Don’t start a sentence with ‘however’—it hangs there like a wet dishrag. And don’t end with ‘however’—by that time it has lost its howeverness. Put it as early as you reasonably can.... Its abruptness then becomes a virtue.” (Zinsser, 74)
16. Use contractions when they sound natural.
17. Don’t be ambiguous – use personal nouns. For instance, “The common reaction is incredulous laughter” could be “Most people just laugh with disbelief.” (Zinsser, 77)
18. Don’t use overstatement or people will never believe you in a million years.
19. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end. For instance, “Humanity has hardly advanced in fortitude since that time, though it has advanced in many other ways” could be “Since that time, humanity has advanced in many ways, but it has hardly advanced in fortitude.” (Strunk and White, 32)
20. Don’t use dialect unless your ear is good.
21. Avoid foreign words. Use English.
22. Regarding quotations:
 1. “When you use a quotation, start the sentence with it.... Nothing is deader than to start a sentence with a ‘Mr. Smith said’ construction—it’s where many readers stop reading.” (Zinsser, 110)
 2. “Don’t strain to find synonyms for ‘he said.’ Don’t make your man assert, aver and expostulate just to avoid repeating ‘he said,’ and please—please!—don’t write ‘he smiled’ or ‘he grinned.’ I’ve never heard anybody smile. The reader’s eye skips over ‘he said’ anyway, so it’s not worth a lot of fuss.” (Zinsser, 111)
23. That/which: Always use “that” unless it makes your meaning ambiguous. If your sentence needs a comma to achieve its precise meaning, it probably needs “which.” (Zinsser, 76)
24. Regarding e.g./i.e.:
 1. For “e.g.,” think of “example given.” (It is an abbreviation for the latin *exempli gratia*, which means “for the sake of an example.”)
 2. For “i.e.,” think of “in effect.” (It is an abbreviation for the Latin *id est*, which means “that is.”)

The Introduction

The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead. And if the second sentence doesn’t induce him to continue to the third sentence, it’s equally dead. Of such a progression of sentences, each

tugging the reader forward until he is hooked, a writer constructs that fateful unit, the “lead.”
–William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 55

General Principles

1. Make your lead as long or short as it requires – each article requires a different lead.
2. Look for material everywhere. Many good leads come from finding some odd fact or overlooked daily absurdity.
 1. “Our daily landscape is thick with absurd messages and portents. Notice them. They not only have social significance; they are often just quirky enough to make a lead that’s different from everybody else’s.” (Zinsser, 60)
 2. “Push it. Examine all things intensely and relentlessly. Probe and search each object in a piece of art. Do not leave it, do not course over it, as if it were understood, but instead follow it down until you see it in the mystery of its own specificity and strength.” (Dillard, 78)
3. Tell a story if possible – “look for ways to convey your information in narrative form.” (Zinsser, 62)

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. Does my lead capture the reader’s attention and force him to keep reading?
2. Does it tell the reader why this is written and why he ought to read it?
3. Is my lead fresh?
 1. If it has to do with future archaeologists, visitors from Mars, what various figures have in common, or a recent cute event, it probably isn’t.
 2. If it starts with “John Doe was born on...” then it definitely isn’t.

The Conclusion

Like the minister’s sermon that builds to a series of perfect conclusions that never conclude, an article that doesn’t stop where it should stop becomes a drag and therefore a failure.

–William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 64

1. Give as much thought to the last sentence as the first.
2. Don’t conclude with a summary.
 1. “[Y]our readers hear the laborious sound of cranking. They notice what you are doing and how bored you are by it. They feel the stirrings of resentment. Why didn’t you give more thought to how you were going to wind this thing up? Or are

you summarizing because you think they're too dumb to get the point? Still, you keep cranking. But the readers have another option. They quit." (Zinsser, 65)

3. "When you're ready to stop, stop." (Zinsser, 66)
4. Don't use "In conclusion," or other derivatives.
5. "The perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right. They didn't expect the article to end so soon, or so abruptly, or to say what is said. But they know it when they see it." (Zinsser, 65-6)
6. "Conclude with a sentence that jolts ... with its fitness or unexpectedness." (Zinsser, 66)
7. If possible, bring the lead story full circle. It gives symmetry and pleases the reader.
8. Often a quotation works best – especially one that is surprising.

Rewriting

You can save some sentences, like bricks. It will be a miracle if you can save some of the paragraphs, no matter how excellent in themselves or hard-won.

–Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, p. 5

1. Rewriting is the essence of writing well. Clear writing is the result of much tinkering.
2. A first draft is never perfect. "Most first drafts can be cut by 50 percent without losing any information or losing the author's voice." (Zinsser, 17)
3. Rewriting is tweaking the text, not starting over. Simplify, clarify, rephrase drab sentences, add information and alter the sequence.
4. Listen to how your words sound – rhythm and alliteration are important. Read all your writing aloud.
5. Have a friend read your article before making it public – writers often miss obvious errors in their writing.
6. Rewriting is rereading. "I reread a sentence maybe a hundred times, and if I kept it I changed it seven or eight times, often substantially." (Dillard, 31)

Genre Specific

Interviews

1. Interview people who are passionate and know more about a subject than you. Have them tell your story.
2. Learn about the person you are interviewing, if possible, *before* your interview. "You will be resented if you inquire about facts you could have learned in advance." (Zinsser, 105)

3. Interesting information is “locked inside people’s heads, which a good nonfiction writer must unlock” (Zinsser, 103). Ask questions that elicit interesting answers.
4. Make a list of likely questions, but better questions will often occur to you in the interview. Tailor your questions to the conversation.
5. During the interview:
 1. “Interviewing is one of those skills you can only get better at. You will never again feel so ill at ease as when you try it for the first time, and probably you’ll never feel entirely comfortable prodding another person for answers he or she may be too shy or too inarticulate to reveal. But much of the skill is mechanical. The rest is instinct—knowing how to make the other person relax, when to push, when to listen, when to stop. This can all be learned with experience.” (Zinsser, 104)
 2. Take time to chat before you start interviewing. It will put them at ease.
 3. Use pad and pen/pencil. Use a tape recorder only when it is important to transcribe every word (for instance, when someone speaks a different dialect than you.) (Zinsser, 105-107)
 4. If you get behind in your notes, politely ask them to stop talking while you finish. Nobody wants to be misquoted. But as you interview more, you will develop shorthand and get faster at writing.
6. After the interview, distill the essence of the interview. Single out sentences that are most important or colorful. Present his position accurately, even if that means putting two quotes together that were not together in the interview:
 1. “If you find on page 5 of your notes a comment that perfectly amplifies a point on page 2—a point made earlier in the interview—you will do everyone a favor if you link the two thoughts, letting the second sentence follow and illustrate the first. This may violate the truth of how the interview actually progressed, but you will be true to the intent of what was said.” (Zinsser, 109)
7. When unsure about a point, contact the person for clarification. Again, nobody wants to be misquoted.
8. *Never* fabricate quotes.

Travel

1. Travel writing is very hard. “It must be hard, because it’s in this area that most writers—professional and amateur—produce not only their worst work but work that is just plain terrible.” (Zinsser, 117)
2. While traveling, keep in mind what will interest the reader.

3. Be specific and avoid travelese. “Travelese is also a style of soft words that under hard examination mean nothing, or mean different things to different people: ‘attractive,’ ‘charming,’ ‘romantic.’” (Zinsser, 118)
4. Choose words with unusual care. Keep a reign on adjectives. “If a phrase comes to you easily, look at it with deep suspicion; it’s probably one of the countless clichés that have woven their way so tightly into the fabric of travel writing that you have to make a special effort *not* to use them.... Strive for fresh words and images.” (Zinsser, 118)
5. Be selective about descriptions and events. Find details that are significant and concrete; talk about things that will interest others. Leave out the rest.
6. Practice travel writing locally before trying something more ambitious.
7. Bring out the *place* and the *people*.
8. Examples of travel writers: Bill Bryson, Joan Didion, John McPhee, Jonathan Raban, V. S. Pritchett, James Baldwin.

Memoir

1. Write what you know, what you think and what makes you unique.
2. “Think narrow.... Memoir isn’t the summary of life; it’s a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition.” (Zinsser, 136)
3. Bring in details whenever possible.
4. “Summon back the men and women and children who notably crossed your life. What was it that made them memorable—what turn of mind, what crazy habits?” (Zinsser, 145)
5. Remember that people are hoping *you* are the most interesting character in the book.
6. Examples of good memoirs: *Speak, Memory* by Nabokov, *Surprised by Joy* by C.S. Lewis, *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard, *The Education of Henry Adams*, *The Confessions* by St. Augustine.

Science and Technology

1. Assume the reader knows nothing and explain concepts accordingly.
2. Start with too much material.
3. “Imagine science writing as an upside-down pyramid. Start at the bottom with the one fact a reader must know before he can learn any more. The second sentence broadens what was stated first, making the pyramid wider, [and so on.]” (Zinsser, 150)
4. Include the human element using yourself or others. Weave a story around a person.
5. “Relate [unfamiliar facts] to sights [your readers] are familiar with. Reduce the abstract principle to an image they can visualize.” (Zinsser, 155)
6. Write like a person and not like a scientist.

7. Examples of good science and technology writers: Stephen Jay Gould, Neil Postman, Lewis Thomas, Bill Bryson, Oliver Sacks.

Reviews

1. Know and love the medium you are reviewing.
2. Don't give away too much of the plot.
3. Use specific detail. Don't only say "Mr. Jones is a poor writer" – give *examples* of what you think are poor writing and let the reader decide.
4. Avoid the ecstatic adjectives: wonderful, marvelous, dazzling, etc.
5. For critics:
 1. Steep yourself in the literature of the medium. Place each work into its tradition.
 2. You can presuppose certain shared knowledge with your readers, unlike general reviews.
 3. Be personable. "We like good critics as much for their personality as for their opinions." (Zinsser, 199)
 4. Criticism should be stylish, allusive, disturbing. It should "jog a set of beliefs and force us to reexamine them." (Zinsser, 202)
 5. Humor is a good lubricant.
 6. "How should a good piece of criticism start? You must make an immediate effort to orient your readers to the special world they are about to enter. Even if they are broadly educated men and women they need to be told or reminded of certain facts." (Zinsser, 204) (See also: "[The Introduction](#)")
 7. Take your stand with conviction.

Humor

Humor is the secret weapon of the nonfiction writer. It's secret because so few writers realize that humor is often their best tool—and sometimes their only tool—for making an important point.

–William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 208

1. "Humor... is urgent work. It's an attempt to say important things in a special way that regular writers aren't getting said in a regular way—or if they are, it's so regular that nobody is reading it." (Zinsser, 209)
2. "Don't strain for laughs; humor is built on surprise, and you can surprise the reader only so often." (Zinsser, 215)

3. Control is vital. Know when stop.
4. Be vulnerable. Making yourself the victim or dunce can be funny – to a point.
5. Example humor writers: Mark Twain, Woody Allen, Robert Benchley, S. K. Perelman, Bill Bryson, Garrison Keillor.

Questions

How do I get better at writing?

1. Know the rules of writing and learn when to break them.
2. Establish a schedule for writing and stick to it. Force yourself to write regularly.
 1. “Every day for years, Trollope reported in his ‘Autobiography,’ he woke in darkness and wrote from 5:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., with his watch in front of him. He required of himself two hundred and fifty words every quarter of an hour. If he finished one novel before eight-thirty, he took out a fresh piece of paper and started the next. The writing session was followed, for a long stretch of time, by a day job with the postal service. Plus, he said, he always hunted at least twice a week. Under this regimen, he produced forty-nine novels in thirty-five years.
3. Practice, practice, practice.
4. Read good writers. Writing is learned by imitation. Find model writers, read them, and imitate them.
 1. “[The writer] is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know.” (Dillard, 68)
 2. “Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or craft.... Find the best writers in the fields that interest you and read their work aloud.” (Zinsser, 238)
 3. “We should accustom the mind to keep the best company by introducing it only to the best books.” (Sydney Smith)
 4. “To learn to write one must learn both a considerable portion of what has been written and *how* it was written.” (Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 71)
5. Ask friends to read and critique your writing. Be sure to tell them you want the *truth*.

Where should I write?

1. Write where you are most productive (it is not always the place you think).
 1. Experiment with various locations. Wendell Berry writes in front of a large window; Wallace Stephens and Osip Mandelstam composed poetry on the horseback; Annie Dillard, on the other hand, says “Appealing workplaces are to

be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark.” (Dillard, 26)

2. Regarding computers:

1. Writing at the computer is often an invitation to distraction, unless you don't have internet access. Paper and pencil are old favorites that many writers still use today. If you must use a computer, turn off your email and other distractions.
2. “A computer, I am told, offers a kind of help that you can't get from other humans; a computer will help you write faster, easier, and more. For a while, it seemed to me that every university professor I met told me this. Do I, then, want to write faster, easier, and more? No. My standards are not speed, ease, and quantity. I have already left behind too much evidence that, writing with a pencil, I have written too fast, too easily, and too much. I would like to be a better writer, and for that I need help from other humans, not a machine.” (Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, 74)

What should I write?

1. Write about what you know and love, like hobbies or work. Your love of the subject will come out and make it interesting.
 1. “Why do you never find anything written about that idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands? Because it is up to you. There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain. It is hard to explain because you have never read it on any page; there you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.” (Dillard, 67-68)
2. “It makes more sense to write one big book—a novel or nonfiction narrative—than to write many stories or essays. Into a long, ambitious project you can fit or pour all you possess and learn. A project that takes five years will accumulate those years' inventions and richnesses. Much of those years' reading will feed the work.... It is no less difficult to write sentences in a recipe than sentences in *Moby-Dick*. So you might as well write *Moby-Dick*.” (Dillard, 71)

I'm stuck on a sentence, what should I do?

Often a difficult problem in a sentence can be solved by getting rid of it, or starting the sentence over again. If that doesn't solve it, move on and come back to it.

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Appendix 1: Orwell’s Six Rules of Clear English

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Taken from George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” (1946).

Appendix 2: Mark Twain's Rules of Story Writing

1. A tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere.
2. The episodes in a tale shall be necessary parts of the tale, and shall help to develop it.
3. The personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and that always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the others.
4. The personages in a tale, both dead and alive, shall exhibit a sufficient excuse for being there.
5. When the personages of a tale deal in conversation, the talk shall sound like human talk, and be talk such as human beings would be likely to talk in the given circumstances, and have a discoverable meaning, also a discoverable purpose, and a show of relevancy, and remain in the neighborhood of the subject at hand, and be interesting to the reader, and help out the tale, and stop when the people cannot think of anything more to say.
6. When the author describes the character of a personage in the tale, the conduct and conversation of that personage shall justify said description.
7. When a personage talks like an illustrated, gilt-edged, tree-calf, hand-tooled, seven-dollar Friendship's Offering in the beginning of a paragraph, he shall not talk like a negro minstrel in the end of it.
8. Crass stupidities shall not be played upon the reader as "the craft of the woodsman, the delicate art of the forest," by either the author or the people in the tale.
9. The personages of a tale shall confine themselves to possibilities and let miracles alone; or, if they venture a miracle, the author must so plausibly set it forth as to make it look possible and reasonable.
10. The author shall make the reader feel a deep interest in the personages of his tale and in their fate; and that he shall make the reader love the good people in the tale and hate the bad ones.
11. The characters in a tale shall be so clearly defined that the reader can tell beforehand what each will do in a given emergency.

In addition to these large rules, there are some little ones. These require that the author shall:

1. Say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.
2. Use the right word, not its second cousin.
3. Eschew surplusage.
4. Not omit necessary details.
5. Avoid slovenliness of form.
6. Use good grammar.
7. Employ a simple and straightforward style.

Adapted from Mark Twain's "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" (1895).

Jason Zweig on writing better (highlights via Chris Pavese's post "On Writing"):

- Good sentences come in all shapes and sizes. Good writing flashes between the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the general.
- Just talk it out onto the page without overthinking.
- Once you pop the cork out of the bottle, keep pouring as fast and as long as you can. Do not revise or edit sentences you've already written. Keep rolling forward and don't look back or you'll lose momentum. If you lose momentum, step away and come back. Try again. Where you left off.
- If you get stuck, say these words out loud: "I want you to know about all this because" and immediately write down what you just said.
- If you're writing something long and don't have time to finish, stop midstream and pick it up the next day.
- Instead of trying to sound distinctive, just sound like you. Your style is yourself. How you write is who you are. Don't show off vocabulary you don't have; don't hide a sophistication that you do have.
- Writing is like peeling the onion of your own ignorance.
- If you want to become a better writer, write more, and read more. Treat every opportunity to write anything as a chance to improve. Challenge yourself to avoid lazy language and phrases that feel effortless.
- Use words that are fresh; not other people's leftover language.
- Don't use nine words when six will do better. Be relentless in stripping your sentences of any extraneous words.
- Trying to purge every instance of passive language from every sentence will make your writing far better than it is.
- Cliches are just another form of passive language. A cliché is any wording that automatically comes to mind and types itself.
- Whatever you like most in your own writing is the thing your readers probably like the least.
- A little bit of boldface can go a long way. But if it's a habit, stop.

- The point of cutting your writing isn't to make it shorter. It's to make it better. Cutting your writing is the surest way to find its weaknesses.

And here are a few tips for cutting your writing:

- First, make it longer. Throwing in every idea that stands a remote chance of being usable is liberating.
- Next, make a copy for posterity. Take a word count and put that at the top. Now take two-thirds of that and put it even bigger at the top. That's where you need to end up. If you can't cut your writing by a third, it isn't worth reading.
- Now, cut hard and deep. Read as fast as you can. Identify the weakest paragraphs and delete them. Find the weakest sentences and kill them. Keep searching for sentences to kill.
- Kill all the adverbs. Slaughter every single weasel word.
- Finally, set it aside for a day or longer. Don't touch it. Don't think about it. Let it rest. And get some rest yourself.
- You have to regard your own work as garbage if it is to end up anything better than garbage.
- The essence of rewriting is destruction. It's killing your darlings. Let go of pride.
- Let go of the idea that you wrote it. Do whatever it takes to see it as someone else's work – paste it into another tool in a different font.
- If it sounds like writing, rewrite it.
- Great writers don't try to fix their own work. They try to destroy it.
- If you're afraid something isn't good enough, it's not. Start from scratch.