

-- Edward Albee in *The Paris Review*:

I find that when my plays are going well, they seem to resemble pieces of music.

In a radio interview, Jonathan Sheffer (sp?) recalls how Leonard Bernstein pointed out to a class that the "Flower Aria" in Act 2 of *Carmen* doesn't repeat a single phrase throughout; Bernstein described it therefore as "an unfolding of unrehearsed passion."

=

First thought best thought.

Jack Kerouac

=

have to not play what's in my ears, if there's something in my ears. I have to find a way for my hands to start the concert without me.

Pianist Keith Jarrett

Dreams may also have supplied inspiration. When asked how he came up with some of his ideas, McKillop is reputed to have said, "Well, you just eat a big mess of fatback and go to bed and go to sleep and dream how to do it."

(Jack L. Lindsay, *Edgar Alexander McKillop* [a N.Carolina wood carver ca. 1930's])

=

Only paradise or the sea could make me give up music.

Music is everything.

God himself is nothing more than an acoustic hallucination.

-- E.M. Cioran (*Tears & Saints*)

=

Calisthenics:

*LEFT hand drawing followed by listening to music followed by playing music and making up songs as you go along -*

=

as for publishing he advised me  
to paper my wall with rejection slips  
his lips and the bones of his long fingers trembled  
with the vehemence of his views about poetry

he said the great presence  
that permitted everything and transmuted it  
in poetry was passion  
passion was genius and he praised movement and invention

I had hardly begun to read  
I asked how can you ever be sure  
that what you write is really  
any good at all and he said you can't

you can't you can never be sure  
you die without knowing  
whether anything you wrote was any good  
if you have to be sure don't write

W.S. Merwin –“Berryman”

=

Write as if all too soon you'll be dead.

=

==

Nietzsche ("Of Reading and Writing"):

Of all writings I love only that which is written with blood. Write with  
blood: and you will discover that blood is spirit.

It is not an easy thing to understand unfamiliar blood: I hate the  
reading idler.

He who writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, he wants to be learned by heart.

=====

His Book, as indeed most good Books are, has been written, in many senses, with his heart's blood. It is his whole history, this Book.

Thomas Carlyle on Dante ["On Great Men"]

= = = =

From Pablo Neruda's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1971  
(*Translation*):

I render my thanks and return to my work, to the blank page which every day awaits us poets so that we shall fill it with our blood and our darkness, for with blood and darkness poetry is written, poetry should be written.

=====

The best American novelists have themselves been liberal in this sense, courting isolation and risking incoherence in the hope of making something new.

--Frederick Crews

=====

Walt Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy,

devote your income and labor to others,  
hate tyrants, argue not concerning God,  
have patience and indulgence toward the  
people, take off your hat to nothing  
known or unknown or to any man or number  
of men, go freely with powerful  
uneducated persons and with the young  
and with the mothers of families, read  
these leaves in the open air every  
season of every year of your life, re-  
examine all you have been told at school  
or church or in any book, dismiss  
whatever insults your own soul, and your  
very flesh shall be a great poem and  
have the richest fluency not only in its  
words but in the silent lines of its  
lips and face and between the lashes of  
your eyes and in every motion and joint  
of your body. . . .

=x=x=x=

When besieged by doubt or depression, take a  
shower and change your clothes.

-- Donald Justice

In exile, the road home lies through  
language, through dreams. So I wrote  
stories.

-- Mircea Eliade

=x=x=x=

They look at my paintings and say, "My four-year-old could have done that!"

And I say, "Yes. But could you?"

-- Sam Messer

==

In genius we perceive our own rejected thoughts, returning to us with a kind of alienated majesty.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

===

Basho said: avoid adjectives of scale, you will love the world more and desire it less.

Suppose, before they said *silver* or *moonlight* or *wet grass*, each poet had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth.

-- Robert Haas (*Human*

*Wishes*)

===

The other night I had a dream that I was sitting on the sidewalk on Moody Street, Pawtucketville, Lowell, Mass., with a pencil and paper in my hand saying to myself "Describe the wrinkly tar of this sidewalk, also the iron pickets of Textile Institute, of the doorway where Lousy and you and G.J.'s always sittin and don't stop to think of words when you do stop, just stop to think of the picture better -- and let your mind off yourself in this work."

Jack Kerouac (*Dr. Sax*)

and don't stop to think of words when you do  
stop, just stop to think of the picture  
better

-----

The first and most obvious characteristic of  
fiction is that it deals with reality  
through what can be seen, heard, smelt,  
tasted, and touched.

-- Flannery O'Connor  
(*Mystery and Manners*)

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, before all,  
to make you see. That -- and no more, and  
it is everything.

-- Joseph Conrad (Intro to *The Nigger of  
the Narcissus*)

The four elements are all empty in their ultimate nature;  
Where could the Buddha's abode be? --  
But lo!  
The truth is unfolding itself right before your eye.  
This is all there is to it --  
And indeed nothing more!  
-- DT Suzuki on Zen

I know a good many fiction writers who  
paint, not because they're any good at

painting, but because it helps their  
writing. It forces them to look at things.  
Flannery O'Connor (*Mystery and  
Manners*)

That which is before you is it.  
Begin to reason about it and you at once fall into  
error.

Huang Po

Harold Evans on Winston Churchill:  
He knew people would not march behind a subordinate clause.  
("If the Germans land on the beaches, we shall fight. . .")  
[Churchill's speech: "We shall fight on the beaches. . . we shall fight  
in the fields and in the streets. . . we shall never surrender."]

If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever.  
Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again.  
Then hit it a third time a tremendous whack.

Winston Churchill

"In Kharkov I have a friend, a man of letters. I'll go up to him and say:  
'Come, brother, put aside those abominable subjects you write about,  
the loves of women and the beauties of nature, and show us the two-  
legged vermin. There's a theme for you. . . .'"  
(-- the character Pavel Ivanich in Anton Chekhov's, story "Gusev")

===

I will never scream *I'M A GENIUS!* at you again.

(-- One of a list of several promises to his wife, hand-lettered and  
ornately framed, hanging on the wall of Tom Johnston (an  
architect)

==

Ben Ratliff on John Coltrane:

His Stockholm solos are long and searching, making surging blues figures out of split-tones, turning what were once harmonic convolutions into a sensuous new way of phrase-smearing. It sounded, absolutely, like a new way of speaking an established language. (Not long before this, the saxophonist Wayne Shorter reported, Coltrane had mentioned -- apparently in earnest -- that he wanted to learn how to speak English backward.)

==

The poor writer is dishonest without knowing it, and the fairly good one can be dishonest because he doesn't know what to be honest about.

-- Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"

==

My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two take.

-- Chekhov (in a letter)

Chekhov, in a letter to his brother Alexander, set down the principles he felt make a good story: "1. Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature; 2. total objectivity; 3. truthful descriptions of persons and objects; 4. extreme brevity; 5. audacity and originality: flee the stereotype; 6. compassion."

. . . I'll have to limit myself to descriptions of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak.

-- Chekhov (in a letter)

==

According to Baudelaire ["E.A. Poe, His Life and Work"], Poe in *The Domain of Arnheim* "declares that the four essential conditions for happiness are: life in the open air, the love of a woman, the indifference to any feeling of ambition, and the creation of a new type of beauty."

==

From the journals of Soren Kierkegaard:



I bow unconditionally to no one regarding punctuation.

My whole makeup as a dialectician with an unusual sense of the rhetorical, all the silent intercourse I constantly have with my thoughts, my practice in reading aloud: all of this can't help but make me pre-eminent in this regard.

I always imagine a reader reading aloud.

I repudiate all reviews. To me a reviewer is just as loathsome as a streetwalking assistant barber, who comes running with the shaving water which is used for all customers and fumbles about my face with his clammy fingers.

-- Soren Kierkegaard journal entry 43IVA167 (8/4/43)

====

A critic is a gong at a railroad crossing  
clanging loudly and vainly as the train goes by.

-- Christopher Morley

I was led astray, because of unconsciously successful work, into conceiving similar ones consciously and deliberately: this was a mistake that I was to make again and again, until I understood it and was able to avoid it.

-- Paul Klee (Journals)

Having the critics praise you is like having the  
hangman say you have a pretty neck.

-- Eli Wallach

The important thing is that you make sure that neither the favorable nor the unfavorable critics move into your head and take part in the composition of your next work.

-- Thornton Wilder (*Paris Review* interview)

He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame.

=

What shouldn't you do if you're a young playwright? *Don't bore the audience!* I mean, even if you have to resort to totally arbitrary killing onstage, or pointless gunfire. . .

-- Tennessee Williams (PR interview)

=

I'll tell you about a dream I had recently. When I was a schoolboy in Bucharest, my father used to come into my room in the evening and check my homework. He would open my drawers and find nothing but bits of poetry, drawings, and papers. He would get very angry and say that I was a lazybones, a good-for-nothing. In my dream, he comes into my room and says, "I hear you have done things in the world, you have written books. Show me what you have done." And I open my drawers and find only singed papers, dust, and ashes. He gets very angry and I try to appease him, saying, "You are right, Daddy, I've done nothing, nothing."

-- Eugene Ionesco (PR Int.)

=

Arthur Miller in *The Paris Review*:

What Chekhov was doing was eliminating the histrionics of his actors by incorporating them in the writing: the internal life was what he was writing about.

[A play should deal in] the kind of communication that a child demands.

- Arthur Miller

==

--Neil Simon in *The Paris Review*:

The "well-made play" – a play that tells you what the problem is, then shows you how it affects everybody, then resolves it.

When I was writing three-act plays, a producer told me the curtain should always come down on the beginning of the fourth act. A play should never really come to an end.

==

-- Edward Albee in *The Paris Review*:

I find that when my plays are going well, they seem to resemble pieces of music.

After a certain point, I make experiments to see how well I *know* the characters. I'll improvise and try them out in a situation that I'm fairly sure *won't* be in the play. And if they behave quite naturally, in this improvisatory situation, and create their own dialogue, and behave according to what I consider to be their own natures, then I suppose I have the play far enough along to sit down and write it.

==

E.M. Cioran (*The Trouble with Being Born*):

Write books only if you are going to say in them the things you would never dare confide to anyone.

Only what you hide is profound, is true.  
Whence the power of base feelings.

In a work of psychiatry, only the patients' remarks interest me;  
in a work of criticism, only the quotations.

No one approaches the condition of a *sage* if he has not had the good luck to be forgotten in his lifetime.

A book is a postponed suicide.

====

=X=X=

We work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have. Our doubt is our passion. Our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.

--Henry James

===

=

Eliot's review of Joyce's *Ulysses*:

"Instead of narrative method, we may now use mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art... And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid... can be of any use in furthering this advance."

(-1923 or 24, some time after the publication of "The Wasteland")

= = =

On the wall of the john in the Starseeds Café,  
Austin, TX:

I'm a manta ray in  
The sea  
A poet  
In the city

[*in another hand:*] a dork  
in the bathroom

=

Same bathroom wall, an example of implied  
narrative:

NEVER

Get a tattoo  
By Mondo Medrano

==

...Poet... Prophet... The one we may call a revealer of what we are to do, the other of what we are to love.

We are all poets when we *read* a poem well.

Thomas Carlyle, *On Great Men*

He is world-great not because he is world-wide but because he is world-deep.

- Carlyle on Dante, *ibid.*

=

The man who goes farthest, it has been said, is the man who does not know where he is going.

Sinclair's commentary  
On *Purgatorio* Canto IV

=

[After the Armory show] students of the Chicago Art Institute burned Brancusi and Matisse in effigy.

--commentary for "The Rise of Modernism" show, Austin TX 2004.

-

Some ideas require a graphic language if they are not to be violated.

Marcel Duchamps of his "Glass".

= = =

Proust was a student of philosopher Henri Bergson. Among Bergson's chief tenets:

Experience should be conceived as duration, or *lived time*, rather than as the abstraction we measure with calendars and clocks.

Only intuition (not intellect) is capable of perceiving the nature of ever-transient reality [what might therefore be called "the transient" or "what-is-passing"].

=

Henri Bergson: "The novelist might describe his [the character's] traits of character again and again, he could have his hero speak and act as often as he desired; yet all this would not counterbalance the simple and undivided feeling that I would experience, were I in this person's company, but for an instant."

*(The Introduction to a New Philosophy)*

In God's eyes the characters we create must look like monstrous artifices – foul taxidermy – put together from my ideas or the memories or impression of different people, real people whom He loves, and then shot with the feebly grotesquely animating dregs of my own life-power...

=

In a radio interview, Jonathan Sheffer (sp?) recalls how Leonard Bernstein pointed out to a class that the "Flower Aria" in Act 2 of *Carmen* doesn't repeat a single phrase throughout; Bernstein described it therefore as "an unfolding of unrehearsed passion."

= = =

Every man wants to experience certain perilous situations, to confront exceptional ordeals, to make his way into the Other World – and he experiences this, on the level of his imaginative life, by hearing or reading fairy tales.

--Mircea Eliade [in either *Birth and Rebirth* or *Myth and Reality*], quoted in Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*

=

= = =

. . . little pictures in which an originality of execution dominates content.

- Chekhov ("A Boring Story")

= = =

Simplicity is not an end in art, but we usually arrive at simplicity as we approach the true sense of things.

- Constantin Brancusi (sculptor)

= = = =

In his next class, watercolor painting, he felt unusually calm and insightful. "Like this, like this," he said, guiding their hands. "Delicately. Like a breath of air on the paper. Just a touch. Like so. See?" he'd say and felt on the edge of discovery himself. "Suggestion is what it's all about," he said, holding lightly to Sue Colvin's fingers as he guided her brush. "You've got to work with your mistakes until they look intended. Understand?"

-- Raymond Carver ("Fever")

= = =

Writers as diverse as George Moore and Vladimir Nabokov have argued that translations should sound like translations.

James E Irby, intro to Borges's  
*Labyrinths*

As for the adjective: when in doubt, strike it out.

Mark Twain (*Pudd'nhead Wilson*)

=

*Now I held in my hands a vast methodical fragment of an unknown planet's entire history, with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages, with its emperors and its seas, with its minerals and its birds and its fish, with its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversy. And all of it articulated, coherent, with no visible doctrinal intent or tone of parody.*

Borges: "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

= = = =

. . . Follain's concern is finally with the mystery of the present – the mystery which gives the recalled concrete details their form, at once luminous and removed, when they are seen at last in their places, as they seem to be in the



best of his poems. This is their value "in themselves." At the same time it is what gives them the authority of parts of a rite, of an unchanging ceremony heralding some inexorable splendor, over a ground of silence. And for Follain it is a fulfillment not only of a need for ceremony but of a fondness for the ceremonious, in which each detail, seen as itself, is an evocation of the processions of an immeasurable continuum.

-- W.S. Merwin's intro to *Transparence of the World*, poems by Jean Follain

= = = =

No other living writer has yielded himself so completely and recklessly as has Isaac Bashevis Singer to the claims of the human imagination.

Singer writes in Yiddish, a language that no amount of energy or affections seems likely to save from extinction. He writes about a world that is gone, destroyed with a brutality beyond historical comparison. . . . He seems to take for granted his role as a traditional storyteller speaking to an audience attuned to his every hint and nuance, an audience that values storytelling both in its own right and as a binding communal action – but also, as it happens, an audience that keeps fading week by week, shrinking day by day. And he does all this without a sigh or apology. . . . here is a man living in New York City, a sophisticated and

clever writer, who composes stories about Frampol, Bilgoray, Kreshev *as if they were still there*. . . the Hasidim still dancing, the rabbis still pondering, the children still studying, the poor still hungering, as if it had not all ended in ashes and death.

Irving Howe, intro to *The Stories of I.B. Singer*

= = = =

From Isaac Bashevis Singer's speech at the Nobel Banquet, December 10, 1978:

People ask me often, 'Why do you write in a dying language?' And I want to explain it in a few words.

Firstly, I like to write ghost stories and nothing fits a ghost better than a dying language. The deader the language the more alive is the ghost. Ghosts love Yiddish and as far as I know, they all speak it.

Secondly, not only do I believe in ghosts, but also in resurrection. I am sure that millions of Yiddish speaking corpses will rise from their graves one day and their first question will be: "Is there any new Yiddish book to read?" For them Yiddish will not be dead. . .

Ladies and Gentlemen: There are five hundred reasons why I began to write for children, but to save time I will mention only ten of them. Number 1) Children read books, not reviews. They don't give a hoot about the critics. Number 2) Children don't read

to find their identity. Number 3) They don't read to free themselves of guilt, to quench the thirst for rebellion, or to get rid of alienation. Number 4) They have no use for psychology. Number 5) They detest sociology. Number 6) They don't try to understand Kafka or *Finnegans Wake*. Number 7) They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff. Number 8) They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides, or footnotes. Number 9) When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority. Number 10) They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that it is not in his power. Only the adults have such childish illusions.

= = = =  
=

Machado himself was living then in a shabby lodging on a street called *Calle de los Desamparados* – Street of Abandoned Children. He couldn't have had an address more characteristic of him. A lonely widower, in his forties I suppose, he gave the impression of being helpless in life's contests and struggles, a man without defenses. There was no trace of worldliness about him. Long ago he had accepted the pain and ignominy of being what he was, a poet, a man who had given up all hope of reward to live for the delicately imagined mood, the counterpoint of words, the accurately recording ear.

John Dos Passos (1957) describing Antonio Machado ca. 1920's

= = =

Man possesses four things  
That are no good at sea:  
Anchor, rudder, oars,  
And the fear of going down.

-- Attributed to Antonio Machado by  
Marvin Bell

=

= = = =

Problems cannot be solved at the same level of  
consciousness that created them.

Albert Einstein

= = =

Once upon a time Antimachus was reading to a selected  
company that lengthy poem of his and before he finished  
everybody left except Plato. "I shall proceed  
nevertheless," he said; "to me Plato is worth a hundred  
thousand." He was right, of course: a difficult and  
involved poem cannot be expected to make a wide appeal;  
but an oration which is to be delivered to the public must  
merit the applause of the public.

-- Marcus Tullius Cicero *Brutus. On the  
Nature of the Gods. On Divination. On Duties.* Tr. Hubert  
M. Poteat U of Chicago Press p 125

=

= = = =

From Saul Bellow's speech at the Nobel Banquet,  
December 10, 1976:

I loved books and I wrote some. For some reason they were taken seriously. I am glad of that, of course. No one can bear to be ignored.

= = =

Ernest Hemingway's letter accepting the Nobel Prize, 1954:

Writing, at its best, is a lonely life. Organizations for writers palliate the writer's loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing. He grows in public stature as he sheds his loneliness and often his work deteriorates. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day.

For a true writer each book should be a new beginning where he tries again for something that is beyond attainment. He should always try for something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed. Then sometimes, with great luck, he will succeed.

How simple the writing of literature would be if it were only necessary to write in another way what has been well written. It is because we have had such great writers in the past that a writer is driven far out past where he can go, out to where no one can help him.

= = = =

=

Mortals, because they are mortal, fear the very name of death; and those who have never loved or been loved, or have been abandoned and betrayed or have vainly pursued a being inaccessible to them without as much as a look for the creature that pursued them and which they did not love - all these are astonished and scandalized when a work of fiction describes the loneliness in the very heart of love.

-- Francois Mauriac, Nobel acceptance speech, 1952

= = = =

Paul Klee, "Memories of Childhood 1880-1895":

Evil spirits that I had drawn (three to four years) suddenly acquired real presence. I ran to my mother for protection and complained to her that little devils had peeked in through the window (four years).

= = = =

August Wilson (*PR* Interview):

I have quotes, no more than two or three, that I use to keep me focused and inspired. For my new play, *King Hedley II*, I had a quote by Frank Gehry on his plans for the Corcoran Gallery addition: "I hope to take it to the moon." And a quote attributed to Charlie Parker: "Don't be afraid. Just play the music." And a quote from the Bhagavad-Gita: "You have the right to the work but not the reward."

Writing, ideally, is recognizing your bad writing.

I don't write for a production. I write for the page, just as I would with a poem. A play exists on the page even if no one ever reads it aloud. . . . depending on the readers' imagination they may get more by reading the play than by seeing a weak production.

= = = =

And a title of a Charles Mingus composition:  
"Don't be afraid, the clown's afraid too"

= = =

"A first-rate play exists completely on the page and is never improved by production."

-- attributed to Edward Albee by  
George Plimpton in *PR* Interview w/  
August Wilson

= = =

To write the best story you can, take out all the good lines.

- attributed to Ernest Hemingway by David  
Mamet, (*PR* Interview)

= = = ==

=x=x=

unattributed:

Don't be stopped by obstacles you haven't reached yet. If the way is barred somewhere ahead, don't stop; proceed steadily forward. When you get where it was, the obstacle may have already disappeared.

It's easier to get forgiveness than permission.

Success waits on the other side of failure.

You have to come in second and third many times in order to come in first just once.

The less I discuss a work-in-progress, the better it progresses.

Eventually I stopped grieving over what wasn't published. And finally I'm very glad it wasn't.

Success is remembered and failure is forgotten.

The year Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs, who held the record for strikeouts?

(Answer: Babe Ruth.)

=



I watch the dog with his chew-toy, and I think he's probably experiencing pretty much what I go through at my desk writing books -- that he pursues the same kind of solitary fascination, experiences the same urgency, the same frustration and triumph, the same self-satisfaction and the same abasement. And my novel is no greater an accomplishment than his chewed-up toy pheasant. But also no less.

=

When you write something powerful, don't distrust it simply because it was easy or seems obvious. Maybe a lot of people could have thought of it. But not many could have granted themselves the authority to claim it.

=

Having had the experience of seeing myself misrepresented in print, and having had the insight that it's not myself, after all, being represented -- just somebody's idea of me -- I take a new view of the people who feel violated when I steal their lives to make fiction. Aren't they like primitives who think their souls will be stolen by a photographer's camera? I can respect their pain and fear their wrath, but I understand it's all baseless.

=

To a brave man, good and bad luck are like his right and left hands. He uses both.

*Saint Catherine of Sienna*

For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin - real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, or a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life.

*Alfred D. Souza*

You come to see . . . that suffering is required; and you no more want to avoid it than you want to avoid putting your next foot on the ground when you are walking. In the spiritual path, joy and suffering follow one another like two feet, and you come to a point of not minding which "foot" is on the ground. You realize, on the contrary, that it is extremely uncomfortable hopping all the time on the joy foot.

*John G. Bennett*

One is always seeking the touchstone that will dissolve one's deficiencies as a person and as a craftsman. And one is always bumping up against the fact that there is none except hard work, concentration, and continued application.

*Paul William Gallico*

Q: We write essays and stories all the time in school. It doesn't seem like a very difficult thing to do. Is it?

A: Not at all. All you need is a perfect ear, absolute pitch, the devotion to your work that a priest of God has for his, the guts of a burglar, no conscience except to writing, and you're in. It's easy. Never give it a thought.

Ernest Hemingway

=

It's like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.

*E. L. Doctorow*

=

It is not hard work which is dreary; it is superficial work.

*Edith Hamilton*

=

Speech and silence. We feel safer with a madman who talks than with one who cannot open his mouth.

**E. M. Cioran**

=

It is not possible to make discoveries under the pressure to please, to gain audiences, and to make money. It is necessary to close off the impulse to “make it” in order to open oneself.

Joseph Chaikin *The Presence of the Actor* (“Notes to Actors – 1965”)

=

**I have no taste for either poverty or honest labor, so writing is the only recourse left for me.**

**For every moment of triumph, for every instance of beauty, many souls must be trampled.**

**Hunter S. Thompson**

=

**A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.**

**Thomas Mann**

**What am I in the eyes of most people? A good-for-nothing, an eccentric and disagreeable man, somebody who has no position in society and never will have. Very well, even if that were true, I should want to show by my work what there is in the heart of such an eccentric man, of such a nobody.**

**Vincent van Gogh**

**The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude.**

**Friedrich Nietzsche**

**There is a microscopically thin line between being brilliantly creative and acting like the most gigantic idiot on earth.**

**Cynthia Heimel**

**The antidote to envy is one's own work. Not the thinking about it. Not the assessing of it. But the doing of it. . . only the work itself. It drives the spooks away.**

**Bonita Freedman**

**It could be that there's only one word and it's all we need. It's here in this pencil. Every pencil in the world is like this.**

**W.S. Merwin**

Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around the lake.

Wallace Stevens

We all live in suspense, from day to day, from hour to hour; in other words, we are the hero of our own story.

Mary McCarthy

XX

Fernando Pessoa (*A Factless Autobiography*):

I write my literature as I write my ledger entries – carefully and indifferently.

-

Does dreaming of princesses serve a better purpose than dreaming of the front door to the office?

-

Perhaps my destiny is to remain forever a bookkeeper, with poetry or literature as a butterfly that alights on my head, making me look ridiculous to the extent it looks beautiful.

-

Not pleasure, not glory, not power. . . Freedom, only freedom.

-

XX

I'm trying again. A man has to begin over and over – to try to think and feel only in a very limited field, the house on the street, the man at the corner drugstore.

Sherwood Anderson, from a letter, quoted by Raymond Carver (epigraph for “Harley’s Swans”)

But still this feeling of shame and loss.

Raymond Carver (“Harley’s Swans”)

=

First I wrote mainly to be loved.

Lately I've written mainly to have you envy my gift.

If they told me I was going to die, the feeling wouldn't be, “Oh, no, I've got so much left to say!” The feeling would be, “Oh, no! -- so much of what I've said is false.”

=

=

The world is very dusty, uncle. Let us work.

Donald Justice, “There is a gold light in certain paintings”

=

When I first heard Strayhorn's “Lush Life,” in a recording by Ricki Lee Jones, it arrived in me as a finished work – it was done, there was nothing I could do to change it – but it defeated all my expectations, it was a little frustrating, and I listened to it many times anyway, at first, just trying to get it to sound different. That's the first stage when something new comes at me. The final stage is surrendering, admitting that I can't change it and can't ignore it, and instead letting it change me.

=

Let the things that happen onstage be just as complex and yet just as simple as they are in life. For instance, people are having a meal at table, just having a

meal, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives are being smashed up.

--Chekhov [quoted by R Brustein, intro to *The Major Plays*)

[And yet I misread this at first glance to say “. . . but at the same time their happiness is being created, *and* their lives are being smashed up.”]

=

If the desire to write  
Is not accompanied by actual writing,  
Then the desire is not to write.

Hugh Prather (*Notes to Myself*)

=

I wonder if the neighbors can hear me crying. I wonder if they know how happy I am. It's hard to write. It's desperately difficult, it's paddling a canoe across the river at the brink of Niagara Falls. The coldly steaming thunder of death, the great tide, and your small arms, and still you have to remember how to spell “Niagara.” Niagara of tears. Niagara of infinitesimal beautiful gifts.

=

=

If you think you are capable of living without writing, do not write.

-- attributed to Rilke by Garcia Marquez in *Living to Tell the Tale*.

=

. . . the single greatest drawing ever made. Look at the speed, the way he wields that reed pen, drawing very fast, with gestures that are masterly, not virtuoso, not calling attention to themselves but rather to the very tender subject.

-- David Hockney (in a catalog for his show)  
on Rembrandt's sketch “A Child Being  
Taught to Walk”

=

Van Gogh said, after seeing Rembrandt's “Jewish Bride”:  
“I would give ten years of my life to sit in front of this  
painting for another fortnight, with nothing but a dry crust  
of bread to eat.”

=

Rodin, through incessant work, was always in touch with the unconscious sources of his creative power. Rilke, subject to spells of inspiration interrupted by arid periods when he was burdened with the uneasiness of living. . . learned [from Rodin] the value of this “always working” and tried hard to attain it himself. . . he never did. . .

JB Greene & MDH Norton, intro to *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1892-1910*

. . . – the Great Book that says we existed.

Fernando Pessoa , *The Book of Disquiet*

=

In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

Prov 10:19

“Michelangelo was wont to say,” recounted Giovanni Gelli, “that only those figures were good from which one had removed the effortful labor, that is, produced with such skill that they appeared the result of nature rather than art.”

– Jackie Wullschlager, Financial Times article on Michelangelo’s sketches March 24 06 –

(Maybe that’s what attracts me to primitive artists – they seem to do away with the middleman and simply act from their nature, which is to inhabit, receive, transmit, these symbols)

“On the other hand, in the same article, Wullshlager says of on sketch: Adam’s stretching motion is so persuasive because of the naturalness of the observation, but in fact it depends on an entirely contrived dislocation of the upper body.

“An unrivalled skill at **blurring boundaries between artifice and the realities of the human frame**, and at **placing his subjects in theatrically enthralling compositions**, creates the heightened expressiveness that makes the show such a rich emotional experience.”

“In the extremes of Christian iconography. . . Michelangelo found a visual language for human hope, desire, and despair. We have long lost that language. . .” - ibid

=

First thought best thought.

Jack Kerouac

=

[Pianist Keith Jarrett's philosophy:] "I have to not play what's in my ears, if there's something in my ears," he has said. "I have to find a way for my hands to start the concert without me." He looks not for the first thought, but for something before thought.

FT article on Meil Mallarkey and the Comedy Store's improv comedy by David Honiggman, March 35/26 06:

[Improv comedy players] don't censor themselves, and they don't block other players' offers.

"When I hear free improvisers talk," says Mallarkey, "they're speaking my language: silences, gaps, incorporating mistakes." . . . When it is done well improv looks like nothing. The hardest element of preparation is clearing one's mind.

"It's skating along in a Zen trance," says Mallarkey." Afterwards, you don't remember anything."

=

And it was then, about that time, that I began to find life unsatisfactory as an explanation of itself and was forced to adopt the method of the artist of not explaining but putting the blocks together in some other way that seems more significant to him. Which is a rather fancy way of saying I started writing. . . Tennessee Williams, "A Violin Case and a Coffin" (short story)

=

If I'm really after failure, then let me be informed: I can have all the failure I want if I'm willing to live with a little success.

=

All dull doubt and tomfoolery – goodbye!  
(Jack Kerouac – *On The Road*)

=

Dreams may also have supplied inspiration. When asked how he came up with some of his ideas, McKillop is reputed to have said, "Well, you just eat a big mess of fatback and go to bed and go to sleep and dream how to do it."

(Jack L. Lindsay, *Edgar Alexander McKillop* [a N.Carolina wood carver ca. 1930's])



=

=

There are the things I receive – voices, mostly – and the things I’m called on to imagine – the scenes and contexts for the dialogs. The older I get, the longer I live, the more time the realities are given to grind away my childhood -- then the harder it is to sit down and imagine; and more and more it feels like work.

=

Nobody wants you to put your hand in a sacred entrail.

Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*

=

Without hesitation, without inner debate, I entered into the inheritance of every modern Russian writer intent on the truth: I must write simply to ensure that it was not all forgotten, that posterity might someday come to know of it. Publication in my own lifetime I must shut out of my mind, out of my dreams.

I put away my idle dream. And in its place there was only the surety that my work would not be in vain, that it would someday smite the heads I had in my sights and that those who received its invisible emanations would understand. I no more rebelled against lifelong silence than against the lifelong impossibility of freeing my feet from the pull of gravity. As I finished one piece after another, at first in the camps, then in exile, then after rehabilitation, first verses, then plays, and later prose works too, I had only one desire: to keep all these things out of sight and myself with them.

In the camp this meant committing my verse – many thousands of lines – to memory. To help me with this I improvised decimal counting beads and, in transit prisons, broke up matchsticks and used the fragments as tallies. As I approached the end of my sentence I grew more confident of my powers of memory, and began writing down and memorizing prose – dialogue at first, but then, bit by bit, whole densely written passages. My memory found room for them! It worked. But more and more of my time – in the end as much as one week every month – went into the regular repetition of all I had memorized.

from *The Oak and the Calf*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Only paradise or the sea could make me give up music.

Music is everything.

God himself is nothing more than an acoustic hallucination.

-- E.M. Cioran (Tears & Saints)

=

Reviewers: If I compose something over a period of years, and they take it in over a period of hours and respond to it in a matter of minutes, they're going to sound pretty stupid.

They're just naturally going to sound to me like thoughtless idiots. But not to the people who read the reviews, because they haven't read the book yet.

=

They accomplish the impossible, and I want more. I want the impossibly impossible.

=

=

The exquisite velvety "Study (Imaginary Portrait of Pope Pius XII)", depicting a menacing figure rising from the grey shadows of a luscious curtained ground, still bears the marks of the slashes with which the artist tried to destroy it as [his patron] Robert Sainsbury fought off the knife, and managed to take the canvas home as a cornerstone of his collection.

Jacki Wullshlager, article on Francis Bacon

=

One has got to remember as a painter that there is a great beauty in the color of meat.

Francis Bacon

=

The conscious problems with which one is concerned in the actual writing are more those of a quasi-musical nature, in the

arrangement of metric and pattern, than of a conscious exposition of ideas.

T. S. Eliot

=

But what is art, really, but a good instinct for staying alive in your own alley?

Hunter S. Thompson

Letter to Paul Simonin, Nov 25, 1964, San Francisco

-

Don't loaf and invite inspiration. Light out after it with a club.

Jack London

(Quoted by Douglas Brinkley's editors note to 1<sup>st</sup> vol of H.S. Thompson's letters)

=

The best thing about being semi-famous is that I'm semi-obscure.

=

Groveling is wrong for the soul, like grappling with whores in a drugstore.

Hunter S. Thompson (2004)

====

Ernest Hemingway:

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened.

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn.

All my life I've looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time.

For a long time now I have tried simply to write the best I can. Sometimes I have good luck and write better than I can.

Forget your personal tragedy. We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get the damned hurt, use it-don't cheat with it.

I don't like to write like God. It is only because you never do it, though, that the critics think you can't do it.

I learned never to empty the well of my writing, but always to stop when there was still something there in the deep part of the well, and let it refill at night from the springs that fed it.

I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.

When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.

It's none of their business that you have to learn how to write. Let them think you were born that way.

My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way.

Never confuse movement with action.

Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over.

That terrible mood of depression of whether it's any good or not is what is known as The Artist's Reward.

The good parts of a book may be only something a writer is lucky enough to overhear or it may be the wreck of his whole damn life and one is as good as the other.

The shortest answer is doing the thing.

When I have an idea, I turn down the flame, as if it were a little alcohol stove, as low as it will go. Then it explodes and that is my idea.

=

Play it fucking *loud*.

- Bob Dylan to the band just before doing "Like a Rolling Stone" at Albert Hall while everybody was booing his change to rocknroll. . .

=

Ask yourself frequently, "Am I having fun?"

The answer needn't always be yes. But if it's always no, it's time for a new project or a new career.

How to evaluate criticism

Show your piece to a number of people - ten, let us say. Listen carefully to what they tell you. Smile and nod a lot. Then review what was said very carefully. If your critics are all telling you the same thing about some facet of your story - a plot twist

that doesn't work, a character who rings false, stilted narrative, or half a dozen other possibilities - change that facet. It doesn't matter if you really liked that twist of that character; if a lot of people are telling you something is wrong with your piece, it is. If seven or eight of them are hitting on that same thing, I'd still suggest changing it. But if everyone - or even most everyone - is criticizing something different, you can safely disregard what all of them say

Further, almost every aspiring writer knows when he is getting warmer - you start getting little jotted notes on your rejection slips, or personal letters . . . maybe a commiserating phone call. It's lonely out there in the cold, but there are encouraging voices ... unless there is nothing in your words which warrants encouragement. I think you owe it to yourself to skip as much of the self-illusion as possible. If your eyes are open, you'll know which way to go ... or when to turn back.  
-- Stephen King ("Everything You need to know about writing successfully. . . in ten minutes")

=

**To clarify the action in a scene, make believe you are a camera filming the action shot by shot.**

**Stein's formula,  $1+1=1/2$ , designed to remind writers that conveying the same matter more than once in different words diminishes the effect of what is said. If the same matter is said in two different ways, either alone has a stronger effect.**

**When revising, substitute precise words and phrases for top-of-the-head words that flow into first drafts.**

**Sol Stein (editor)**

=

Anton Chekhov on Writing:

When you describe the miserable and unfortunate, and want to make the reader feel pity, try to be somewhat colder — that seems to give a kind of background to another's grief, against which it stands out more clearly. Whereas in your story the characters cry and you sigh. Yes, be more cold. ... The more objective you are, the stronger will be the impression you make. — To Lydia Avilova, March 19, 1892 & April 29, 1892

I will begin with what in my opinion is your lack of restraint. You are like a spectator in a theatre who expresses his enthusiasm so unrestrainedly that he prevents himself and others from hearing. That lack of restraint is particularly noticeable in the descriptions of nature with which you interrupt dialogues; when one reads them, these descriptions, one wishes they were more compact, shorter, say two or three lines. — To Maxim Gorky, December 3, 1898

Another piece of advice: when you read proof cross out as many adjectives and adverbs as you can. You have so many modifiers that the reader has trouble understanding and gets worn out. It is comprehensible when I write: "The man sat on the grass," because it is clear and does not detain one's attention. On the other hand, it is difficult to figure out and hard on the brain if I write: "The tall, narrow-chested man of medium height and with a red beard sat down on the green grass that had already been trampled down by the pedestrians, sat down silently, looking around timidly and fearfully." The brain can't grasp all that at once, and art must be grasped at once, instantaneously. And then one other thing. You are lyrical by nature, the timber of your soul is soft. If you were a composer you would avoid writing marches. It is unnatural for your talent to curse, shout, taunt, denounce with rage. Therefore, you'll understand if I advise you, in proofreading, to eliminate the "sons of bitches," "curs," and "flea-bitten mutts" that appear here and there on the pages of *Life*. — To Maxim Gorky, September 3, 1899

Critics are like horse-flies which hinder the horses in their ploughing

of the soil. The muscles of the horse are as taut as fiddle-strings, and suddenly a horse-fly alights on its croup, buzzing and stinging. The horse's skin quivers, it waves its tail. What is the fly buzzing about? It probably doesn't know itself. It simply has a restless nature and wants to make itself felt — "I'm alive, too, you know!" it seems to say. "Look, I know how to buzz, there's nothing I can't buzz about!" I've been reading reviews of my stories for twenty-five years, and can't remember a single useful point in any of them, or the slightest good advice. The only reviewer who ever made an impression on me was Skabichevsky, who prophesied that I would die drunk in the bottom of a ditch. — Quoted by Maxim Gorky in "Anton Chekhov," *On Literature*

If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.

... only he is an emancipated thinker who is not afraid to write foolish things.

But if you had asked him what his work was, he would look candidly and openly at you with his large bright eyes through his gold pincenez, and would answer in a soft, velvety, lipping baritone: "My work is literature." — "Excellent People"

I think descriptions of nature should be very short and always be *à propos*. Commonplaces like "The setting sun, sinking into the waves of the darkening sea, cast its purple gold rays, etc," "Swallows, flitting over the surface of the water, twittered gaily" — eliminate such commonplaces. You have to choose small details in describing nature, grouping them in such a way that if you close your eyes after reading it you can picture the whole thing. For example, you'll get a picture of a moonlit night if you write that on the dam of the mill a piece of broken bottle flashed like a bright star and the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled by like a ball, etc. ... In the realm of psychology you also need details. God preserve you from commonplaces. Best of all, shun all descriptions of the characters' spiritual state. You must try to have that state emerge clearly from their actions. Don't try for too many characters. The center of gravity should reside in two: he and she. — To AP Chekhov, May 10, 1886

A writer is not a confectioner, a cosmetic dealer, or an entertainer. He is a man who has signed a contract with his conscience and his sense of duty.



I long to embrace, to include in my own short life, all that is accessible to man. I long to speak, to read, to wield a hammer in a great factory, to keep watch at sea, to plow. I want to be walking along the Nevsky Prospect, or in the open fields, or on the ocean — wherever my imagination ranges. — Anton Chekhov

When you fashion a story you necessarily concern yourself with its limits: out of a slew of main and secondary characters you choose only one — the wife or the husband — place him against the background and describe him alone and therefore also emphasize him, while you scatter the others in the background like small change, and you get something like the night sky: a single large moon and a slew of very small stars. But the moon doesn't turn out right because you can see it only when the other stars are visible too, but the stars aren't set off. So I turn out a sort of patchwork quilt rather than literature. What can I do? I simply don't know. I will simply depend on all-healing time. — To Alexei Suvorin, October 27, 1888

You are right in demanding that an artist approach his work consciously, but you are confusing two concepts: *the solution of a problem and the correct formulation of a problem*. Only the second is required of the artist. — To Alexei Suvorin, October 27, 1888

It is time for writers to admit that nothing in this world makes sense.

Only fools and charlatans think they know and understand everything. The stupider they are, the wider they conceive their horizons to be. And if an artist decides to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees — this in itself constitutes a considerable clarity in the realm of thought, and a great step forward. — To Alexei Suvorin, May 30, 1888

I write the beginning calmly and don't hold myself back, but by the middle I start feeling uneasy and apprehensive that the story will come out too long. I have to keep in mind that the *Northern Herald* is low in funds and that I am one of its more expensive contributors. That's why my beginning always seems as promising as if I'd started a novel, the middle is crumpled together and timid, and the end is all fireworks, like the end of a brief sketch. Whether you like it or not, the first thing you have to worry about when you're working up a story is its framework. From your mass of heroes and semi-heroes, you choose one individual, a wife or a husband, place him against the background, and portray only that person and emphasize only him. The others you

scatter in the background like so much small change. The result is something like the firmament: one large moon surrounded by a mass of tiny stars. But the moon doesn't work, because it can only be understood once the other stars are understandable, and the stars are not sufficiently delineated. So instead of literature I get a patchwork quilt. What can I do? I don't know. I have no idea. I'll just have to trust to all-healing time. — To Alexei Suvorin, October 22, 1888

One must be a god to be able to tell successes from failures without making a mistake.

My business is to be talented, that is, to be capable of selecting the important moments from the trivial ones. ... It's about time for writers — particularly those who are genuine artists — to recognize that in this world you cannot figure out everything. Just have a writer who the crowds trust be courageous enough and declare that he does not understand everything, and that lone will represent a major contribution to the way people think, a long leap forward.

I still lack a political, religious and philosophical world view — I change it every month — and so I'll have to limit myself to descriptions of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak. — To Dmitry Grigorovich, October 9, 1888

The people I am afraid of are the ones who look for tendentiousness between the lines and are determined to see me as either liberal or conservative. I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else, and I regret God has not given me the strength to be one. — To Alexei Pleshcheyev, October 4, 1888

One has to write what one sees, what one feels, truthfully, sincerely. I am often asked what it was that I was wanting to say in this or that story. To these questions I never have any answer. There is nothing I want to say. My concern is to write, not to teach! And I can write about anything you like. ... Tell me to write about this bottle, and I will give you a story entitled "The Bottle." Living truthful images generate thought, but thought cannot create an image.

In my opinion it is not the writer's job to solve such problems as God, pessimism, etc; his job is merely to record who, under what conditions, said or thought what about God or pessimism. The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness. I heard two Russians in a muddled conversation about pessimism, a conversation that solved nothing; all I am bound to

do is reproduce that conversation exactly as I heard it. Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language. — To Alexei Suvorin, May 30, 1888

The suicide of a seventeen-year-old boy is a very promising and tempting theme, but a frightening one to undertake. An issue so painful to us all calls for a painfully forceful response, and do we young writers have the inner resources for it? No. When you guarantee the success of this theme, you are judging by your own standards. But then, in addition to talent, the men of your generation had erudition, schooling, iron and phosphorus, while contemporary talents have nothing of the sort. Frankly speaking, there is reason to rejoice that they keep away from serious problems. Let them have a go at your seventeen-year-old, and I am certain that X, completely unaware of what he is doing, will slander him and pile lie upon blasphemy with the purest of intentions; Y will give him a shot of pallid and petty tendentiousness; while Z will explain away the suicide as a psychosis. Your boy is of a good, pure nature. He seeks after God. He is loving, sensitive and deeply hurt. To handle a figure like that, an author has to be capable of suffering, while all our contemporary authors can do is whine and snivel. — To Dmitry Grigorovich, January 12, 1888

Critical articles, even the unjust, abusive kind, are usually met with a silent bow. Such is literary etiquette. Answering back goes against custom, and anyone who indulges in it is justly accused of excessive vanity. ... The fate of literature (both major and minor) would be a pitiful one if it were at the mercy of personal opinions. Point number one. And number two, there is no police force in existence that can consider itself competent in matters of literature. I agree that we can't do without the muzzle or the stick, because sharpers ooze their way into literature just as anywhere else. But no matter how hard you try, you won't come up with a better police force for literature than criticism and the author's own conscience. People have been at it since the beginning of creation, but they've invented nothing better. — To Maria Kiselyova, January 14, 1887

"Do you know," Ivan Bunin recalls Anton Chekhov saying to him in 1899, near the end of his too-short life, "for how many years I shall be read? Seven." "Why seven?" Bunin asked. "Well," Chekhov answered, "seven and a half then." — quoted by Donald Fanger, *New York Times*, March 14, 1999

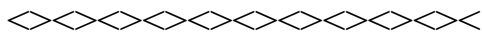
Your statement that the world is "teeming with villains and villainesses" is true. Human nature is imperfect, so it would be odd to perceive none but the righteous. Requiring literature to dig up a "pearl" from the pack of villains is tantamount to negating literature altogether. Literature is accepted as an art because it depicts life as it actually is. Its aim is the truth, unconditional and honest. Limiting its functions to as narrow a field as extracting "pearls" would be as deadly for art as requiring Levitan to draw a tree without any dirty bark or yellowed leaves. A "pearl" is a fine thing, I agree. But the writer is not a pastry chef, he is not a cosmetician and not an entertainer. He is a man bound by contract to his sense of duty and to his conscience. Once he undertakes this task, it is too late for excuses, and no matter how horrified, he must do battle with his squeamishness and sully his imagination with the grime of life. He is just like any ordinary reporter. What would you say if a newspaper reporter as a result of squeamishness or a desire to please his readers were to limit his descriptions to honest city fathers, high-minded ladies, and virtuous railroadmen?

To a chemist there is nothing impure on earth. The writer should be just as objective as the chemist; he should liberate himself from everyday subjectivity and acknowledge that manure piles play a highly respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions are every bit as much a part of life as good ones. — To Maria Kiselyova, January 14, 1887

=

Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.

**T.S. Eliot**



**Stephen King – “On Writing” excerpts**

### **1. The basics: forget plot, but remember the importance of 'situation'**

I won't try to convince you that I've never plotted any more than I'd try to convince you that I've never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust

plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question:

What if vampires invaded a small New England village? (Salem's Lot).

What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (Cujo).

These were situations which occurred to me - while showering, while driving, while taking my daily walk - and which I eventually turned into books. In no case were they plotted, not even to the extent of a single note jotted on a single piece of scrap paper.

## **2. Similes and metaphors - the rights, the wrongs**

When a simile or metaphor doesn't work, the results are sometimes funny and sometimes embarrassing. Recently, I read this sentence in a forthcoming novel I prefer not to name: 'He sat stolidly beside the corpse, waiting for the medical examiner as patiently as a man waiting for a turkey sandwich.' If there is a clarifying connection here, I wasn't able to make it.

My all-time favourite similes come from the hard-

boiled-detective fiction of the 40s and 50s, and the literary descendants of the dime-dreadful writers. These favourites include 'It was darker than a carload of assholes' (George V Higgins) and 'I lit a cigarette [that] tasted like a plumber's handkerchief' (Raymond Chandler).

### **3. Dialogue: talk is 'sneaky'**

It's dialogue that gives your cast their voices, and is crucial in defining their characters - only what people do tells us more about what they're like, and talk is sneaky: what people say often conveys their character to others in ways of which they - the speakers - are completely unaware.

Well-crafted dialogue will indicate if a character is smart or dumb, honest or dishonest, amusing or an old sobersides. Good dialogue, such as that written by George V Higgins, Peter Straub or Graham Greene, is a delight to read; bad dialogue is deadly.

### **4. Characters: nobody is the 'bad-guy'**

The job boils down to two things: paying attention to how the real people around you behave and then telling the truth about what you see. It's also important to remember that no one is 'the bad guy' or 'the best friend' or 'the whore with a heart of gold' in real life; in real life we each of us regard ourselves as the main character, the protagonist, the big cheese; the camera is on us, baby. If you can bring this attitude into your fiction, you may not find it easier to create brilliant

characters, but it will be harder for you to create the sort of one-dimensional dopes that populate so much pop fiction.

### **5. Pace: fast is not always best**

Pace is the speed at which your narrative unfolds. There is a kind of unspoken (hence undefended and unexamined) belief in publishing circles that the most commercially successful stories and novels are fast-paced. Like so many unexamined beliefs in the publishing business, this idea is largely bullshit... which is why, when books like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* suddenly break out of the pack and climb the bestseller lists, publishers and editors are astonished. I suspect that most of them ascribe these books' unexpected success to unpredictable and deplorable lapses into good taste on the part of the reading public.

I believe each story should be allowed to unfold at its own pace, and that pace is not always double time. Nevertheless, you need to beware - if you slow the pace down too much, even the most patient reader is apt to grow restive.

### **6. Do the research, but don't overdo it for the reader**

You may be entranced with what you're learning about flesh-eating bacteria, the sewer system of New York, or the IQ potential of Collie pups, but your readers are probably going to care a lot more about your characters and your story.

Exceptions to the rule? Sure, aren't there always? There have been very successful writers - Arthur Hailey and James Michener are the first ones that come to my mind - whose novels rely heavily on fact and research. Other popular writers, such as Tom Clancy and Patricia Cornwell, are more story-oriented, but still deliver large dollops of factual information along with the melodrama. I sometimes think that these writers appeal to a large segment of the reading population who feel that fiction is somehow immoral, a low taste which can only be justified by saying, 'Well, ahem, yes, I do read [fill in author's name here], but only on airplanes and in hotel rooms that don't have CNN; also, I learned a great deal about [fill in appropriate subject here].'

## **Others from Stephen King**

### **1. Get to the point.**

Don't waste your reader's time with too much back-story, long intros or longer anecdotes about your life. Reduce the noise. Reduce the babbling. In *On Writing* King gets to his points quickly. Get to your point quickly too before your reader loses patience and moves on.

### **2. Write a draft. Then let it rest.**

King recommends that you crank out a first draft and then put it in your drawer to let it rest. Now, how long you let your text rest may vary. King puts his manuscripts away for several months before rereading and start the editing



process.

I often let a post rest for a day or two before I start editing (as I'm sure many other bloggers do from time to time too).

This enables you to get out of the mindset you had when you wrote the draft and get a more detached and clear perspective on the text. It then becomes easier to edit, add and cut in a sometimes kinda ruthless way. The result is most often a better text.

### **3. Cut down your text.**

When you revisit your text it's time to kill your darlings and remove all the superfluous words and sentences. Removing will declutter your text and often get your message through with more clarity and a bigger emotional punch.

Don't remove too much text though or you may achieve the opposite effects instead. King got the advice to cut down his texts by 10 percent from an old rejection-letter and has followed this advice for decades. While editing my blog I've found that 10 percent seems to be a pretty good figure not just for mammoth-sized books.

### **4. Be relatable and honest.**

King has an honest voice in his fiction and in his memoir. He tells it like it is and makes us relate to him and his characters. Since King's fiction often is of an odd kind with strange plots that seldom happen to normal people I think one of his strengths as a writer is being able to write relatable content anyway.

One of the keys to doing that is to have an honest voice and honest characters with both bad and good sides to them. People we can relate to with all of their faults, passions, fears, weaknesses and good moments. King's characters seem human. That creates a strong connection to the reader who starts caring about the characters.

Another key to being honest and relatable is keeping a conversational style. Keeping it simple and using language that isn't unnecessarily complicated. Using the words that first come to mind.

### **5. Don't care too much what others may think.**

King admits to being needy about the emotional feedback he gets when he lets his wife read a new story for the first time. He gets a kick out of hearing her laugh so she cries or just cry because something in manuscript really touched her. But he has also gotten tons of mail over the years from people who confuse his sometimes nasty characters with the writer. Or just thinks he should wind up in hell. And King hasn't always been a favourite among literary critics either.

But from what I gather he just sits down at his desk and keeps writing every morning anyway. If you listen too much to your critics you won't get much done. Your writing will probably become worse and less fun. And criticism is often [not even about you anyway](#) .

### **6. Read a lot.**

When you read you always pick up things. Sometimes it might be reminders about what you know you should be doing while you write. Sometimes it's some cool idea or just the world and atmosphere the writer is painting.

Sometimes it's something totally new that makes your jaw drop. That one is my favourite. And sometimes you learn what you should avoid doing. There are almost always lessons you can learn.

If you want to be a better writer you need to read a lot to get fresh input, broaden your horizons and deepen your knowledge. And to evolve you need to mix yourself up with new influences and see what happens.

How do you find time to read more? You can cut down on other evening activities like watching TV—shows you don't care for that much anyway. Or, as King suggests, you can bring a book to waiting rooms, treadmills or toilets. I like to plug in an audiobook while I'm on the bus or walking somewhere.

## **7. Write a lot.**

I've saved the most important tip for last. To become a better writer you probably – and not so surprisingly – need to write more.

Many of the best in different fields – [Bruce Springsteen](#) , Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods – have gone beyond normal limits of practice. And so they reap extraordinary results.

But what do you do when you don't feel like writing? Waiting for inspiration can become a long wait.

One good way to get around this is to find an effective solution to [reduce procrastination](#) . You may have to try a few before you find one that works for you. Another way is well, [just to do it](#) . And if you just get going your emotions

changes a lot of the time and any initial resistance becomes fun and enthusiasm instead

**Another - Avoid the passive voice.**

**MORE FROM STEPHEN KING:**

**Be talented**

This, of course, is the killer. What is talent? I can hear someone shouting, and here we are, ready to get into a discussion right up there with "what is the meaning of life?" for weighty pronouncements and total uselessness. For the purposes of the beginning writer, talent may as well be defined as eventual success - publication and money. If you wrote something for which someone sent you a check, if you cashed the check and it didn't bounce, and if you then paid the light bill with the money, I consider you talented.

Now some of you are really hollering. Some of you are calling me one crass money-fixated creep. And some of you are calling me bad names. Are you calling Harold Robbins talented? someone in one of the Great English Departments of America is screeching. V.C. Andrews? Theodore Dreiser? Or what about you, you dyslexic moron?

Nonsense. Worse than nonsense, off the subject. We're not talking about good or bad here. I'm interested in telling you how to get your stuff published, not in critical judgments of who's good or bad. As a rule the critical judgments come after the

check's been spent, anyway. I have my own opinions, but most times I keep them to myself. People who are published steadily and are paid for what they are writing may be either saints or trollops, but they are clearly reaching a great many someones who want what they have. Ergo, they are communicating. Ergo, they are talented. The biggest part of writing successfully is being talented, and in the context of marketing, the only bad writer is one who doesn't get paid. If you're not talented, you won't succeed. And if you're not succeeding, you should know when to quit.

When is that? I don't know. It's different for each writer. Not after six rejection slips, certainly, nor after sixty. But after six hundred? Maybe. After six thousand? My friend, after six thousand pinks, it's time you tried painting or computer programming.

Further, almost every aspiring writer knows when he is getting warmer - you start getting little jotted notes on your rejection slips, or personal letters . . . maybe a commiserating phone call. It's lonely out there in the cold, but there are encouraging voices ... unless there is nothing in your words which warrants encouragement. I think you owe it to yourself to skip as much of the self-illusion as possible. If your eyes are open, you'll know which way to go ... or when to turn back.

Be neat

Type. Double-space. Use a nice heavy white paper,

never that erasable onion-skin stuff. If you've marked up your manuscript a lot, do another draft.

Be self-critical

If you haven't marked up your manuscript a lot, you did a lazy job. Only God gets things right the first time. Don't be a slob.

Remove every extraneous word

You want to get up on a soapbox and preach? Fine. Get one and try your local park. You want to write for money? Get to the point. And if you remove all the excess garbage and discover you can't find the point, tear up what you wrote and start all over again . . . or try something new.

Never look at a reference book while doing a first draft

You want to write a story? Fine. Put away your dictionary, your encyclopedias, your World Almanac, and your thesaurus. Better yet, throw your thesaurus into the wastebasket. The only things creepier than a thesaurus are those little paperbacks college students too lazy to read the assigned novels buy around exam time. Any word you have to hunt for in a thesaurus is the wrong word. There are no exceptions to this rule. You think you might have misspelled a word? O.K., so here is your choice: either look it up in the dictionary, thereby making sure you have it right - and breaking your train of

thought and the writer's trance in the bargain - or just spell it phonetically and correct it later. Why not? Did you think it was going to go somewhere? And if you need to know the largest city in Brazil and you find you don't have it in your head, why not write in Miami, or Cleveland? You can check it ... but later. When you sit down to write, write. Don't do anything else except go to the bathroom, and only do that if it absolutely cannot be put off.

### Know the markets

Only a dimwit would send a story about giant vampire bats surrounding a high school to McCall's. Only a dimwit would send a tender story about a mother and daughter making up their differences on Christmas Eve to Playboy ... but people do it all the time. I'm not exaggerating; I have seen such stories in the slush piles of the actual magazines. If you write a good story, why send it out in an ignorant fashion? Would you send your kid out in a snowstorm dressed in Bermuda shorts and a tank top? If you like science fiction, read the magazines. If you want to write confession stories, read the magazines. And so on. It isn't just a matter of knowing what's right for the present story; you can begin to catch on, after awhile, to overall rhythms, editorial likes and dislikes, a magazine's entire slant. Sometimes your reading can influence the next story, and create a sale.

### Write to entertain

Does this mean you can't write "serious fiction"? It does not. Somewhere along the line pernicious critics have invested the American reading and writing public with the idea that entertaining fiction and serious ideas do not overlap. This would have surprised Charles Dickens, not to mention Jane Austen, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Bernard Malamud, and hundreds of others. But your serious ideas must always serve your story, not the other way around. I repeat: if you want to preach, get a soapbox.

Ask yourself frequently, "Am I having fun?"

The answer needn't always be yes. But if it's always no, it's time for a new project or a new career.

How to evaluate criticism

Show your piece to a number of people - ten, let us say. Listen carefully to what they tell you. Smile and nod a lot. Then review what was said very carefully. If your critics are all telling you the same thing about some facet of your story - a plot twist that doesn't work, a character who rings false, stilted narrative, or half a dozen other possibilities - change that facet. It doesn't matter if you really liked that twist of that character; if a lot of people are telling you something is wrong with your piece, it is. If seven or eight of them are hitting on that same thing, I'd still suggest changing it. But if everyone - or even most everyone - is criticizing something different, you can safely disregard what all of them say.





## Publishing , Writing Advice :

While I was finishing *Specials* my fictional brain started to break, so I decided to take some time off from narrative. Fortunately, a collection of letters written by the great hard-boiled writer Raymond Chandler leapt from the depths of my Sydney storage unit and into my hands.

Chandler's technique for writing letters was to stay up at night drinking and talking into a tape recorder (a wire recorder in those days, actually). The next day his secretary would type up his rantings and send them in the mail. This led to many a drunken tongue-lashing, and a fair amount of solid writing advice, being preserved for posterity.

As I re-read the letters, I realized that I've stolen a lot of Chandler's writing techniques over the years, especially his "four-hour rule" (see below), which I've expounded to many a writing class. So I figured it was time to 'fess up and show all of you the source material.

So here is the unalloyed Raymond Chandler on the subject of writing:

**1.** Letter to Frederick Lewis Allen, editor of Harper's Magazine

7 May 1948

*My theory was that [the readers] just thought they cared about . . . the action; that really, although they didn't know it, they cared very little about the action.*

*The things that they really cared about, and that I cared about, were the creation of emotion through dialogue and description; the things they remembered, that haunted them, were not for example that a man got killed, but that in the moment of death he was trying to pick a paper clip up off the polished surface of a desk, and it kept slipping away from him, so that there was a look of strain of his face and his mouth was half opened in a kind of tormented grin, and the last thing in the world he thought about was death. He didn't even hear death knock at the door. That damn paper clip kept slipping away from his fingers and he just wouldn't push it to the edge of the desk and catch it as it fell.*

That paper clip image is very goosepimple-making, a classic noir example of the crumpled little guy facing oblivion. Of course, we all know that a guy trying to pick up a paper clip on a hoverboard would be cooler. And like, especially if the paper clip exploded . . .

This next motivational technique is one I always tell aspiring writers to try:

**2. Letter to Alex Barris, an interview by mail**

18 March 1949

*The important thing is that there should be a space of time, say four hours a day at least, when a professional writer doesn't do anything else but write. He doesn't have to write, and if he doesn't feel like it, he shouldn't try. He can look out of the window or stand on his head or writhe on the floor. But he is not to do any other positive thing, not read, write letters, glance at magazines, or write checks. Write or nothing. It's the*

*same principle as keeping order in a school. If you make the pupils behave, they will learn something just to keep from being bored. I find it works. Two very simple rules, a. you don't have to write. B. you can't do anything else. The rest comes of itself.*

Put those two rules on your refrigerator and you'll have a novel within a year. Or at least someone else who uses your refrigerator will.

The letter below reminds me of something Kingsley Amis said: "Sometimes the hardest part of writing is getting the characters out of the pub and into the cab." Writers don't just get stuck at the earth-shattering, life-changing decisions that our characters make; the little details of reality management are actually quite tricky and frustrating. Never assume you're a crap writer just because you can't get someone across a room—it happens to all of us.

**3.** Letter to Paul Brooks, a publisher working on a Chandler collection

19 July 1949

*When I started out to write fiction I had the great disadvantage of having absolutely no talent for it. I couldn't get the characters in and out of rooms. They lost their hats and so did I. If more than two people were on scene I couldn't keep one of them alive. Give me two people snorting at each other across a desk and I am happy. A crowded canvas just bewilders me.*

This letter to Alfred Hitchcock contains fantastic advice for writers as well as film-makers. Just

substitute the words “wicked-cool sentence” or “scintillating simile” for “camera shot.”

#### **4. 6 December 1950**

*As a friend and well-wisher, I urge you just once in your long and distinguished career . . . to get a sound and sinewy story into the script and sacrifice no part of its soundness for an interesting camera shot. Sacrifice a camera shot if necessary. There will always be another camera shot just as good. There is never another motivation just as good.*

Beyond his anti-Agatha Christie snark, there is an excellent point below about the difference between novels and short stories. A lot of writers who excel at the story level don't think to “turn the corner” when attempting the longer form.

#### **5. Letter to Dorothy Gardner, secretary of the Mystery Writers Association January 1956**

*The trouble with most English mystery writers, however well known in their world, is that they can't turn a corner. About halfway through a book they start fooling with alibis, analyzing bits and pieces of evidence and so on. The story dies on them. Any book which is any good has to turn the corner. You get to the point where everything implicit in the original situation has been developed or explored, and then a new element has to be introduced which is not implied from the beginning but which is seen to be part of the situation when it shows up.*

Speaking of snark . . . bet you didn't know that



are good, not any more people really like them than they did when only the few knew they were good.

- Gertrude Stein *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

-

I interviewed Elmore [Leonard] at a Tucson book festival in 2010. Just before going onstage we thumbed through a program listing all the esteemed authors, of which he was easily the best-known and, he told me, the one who had won no prestigious fellowships and few awards. "Most of these writers don't write for a living," he said. "They write for tenure. Or for the *New York Times*. Or to get invited to conferences like this. When you write to make the rent or send your kids to school, you learn how to write without a lot of nonsense."

- NPR's Scott Simon

=

Why did I not launch into sheer nonsense immediately? Because, like others, I was afraid of it.

Henry Miller, *Sexus*, (quoted in *Henry Miller on Writing*)

=

Treat your dismissal as you would an atmospheric phenomenon.

- From Chekhov's notebooks

=

I know this, with a sure and certain knowledge: a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

Albert Camus

=

The most striking characteristic of Po Chu-i's poetry is its verbal simplicity. There is a story that he was in the habit of reading his

poems to an old peasant woman and altering any expressions which she did not understand.

Arthur Waley - *Translations from the Chinese*

The greatest thing a human being ever does is to see something and tell what he sees in a plain way.

John Ruskin

=

The treatise was limpid, universal; it seemed not to have been written by a concrete person, but by any man or, perhaps, by all men.

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Theologians" (in *Labyrinths*)

--

No iron can enter the human heart, like a period placed at just the right moment.

Isaac Babel

=

Detailed descriptions do not convey distinct images, rather they make us lose all perspective.

Any attempt at detailed description gives rise to the feeling that only a fraction of all that could be said has in fact been told. A detailed description lures us into the infinite and shows us the elusive depth of things. Mere naming, on the other hand, automatically transforms things into simple, motionless images. . . The world is captured in the word. . . The brief labels isolate things by giving them sharp outlines.

*The European Folk Tale; Form and Nature; Max Luthi*

=

Race-car drivers strive always to be driving just one hair short of a massive wreck. That's the way I want to write.

=

Luis the Smiling Bear's Lessons

Keep It Simple

Follow the Grain

Complete It – Don't Finish It



=x=x=x=x=

Jules Renard (1864-1910) Journals:

1887

The true artist will write in, as it were, small leaps, on a hundred subjects that surge unawares into his mind. In this way, nothing is forced. Everything has an unwilled, natural charm. One does not provoke: one waits.

A scrupulous inexactness.

In the goodness of things, the sea-shell is related to the stone.

“ . . . In the goodness of things. . . ”

1889

I attend the bedding down of the thrushes, the retiring of the woodcocks, the going to sleep of the woods. All this makes me stupid. Fortunately, two pages of Taine pull me out of the mud, and I am in full fantasy, above the world, furiously pursuing the study of myself, of its decomposition, of our annihilation.

=x=x=x=x=x=

I never practice; I always play.

Wanda Landowska[ ( 1879 – 1959) Polish harpsichordist]

=

Wm Golding, *Free Fall*:

My darkness reaches out and fumbles at a typewriter with its tongs.  
Your darkness reaches out with your tongs and grasps a book.  
There are twenty modes of change, filter and translation between us.  
What an extravagant coincidence it would be if the exact quality, the

translucent sweetness of her cheek, the very living curve of bone between the eyebrow and hair should survive the passage! How can you share the quality of my terror in the blacked-out cell when I can only remember it and not re-create it for myself?

=

**Stay with the work  
Stay on the page.**

**Stay away from reviews**

**Don't be committed to any particular "voice" – Marvin Bell**

Don't look back. – Bob Dylan

=

Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. — 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit

that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.

-- Emerson "Self-Reliance"

=

Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. – Song of Myself, Whitman

=

One cannot hide his identity under cover of the third person, nor establish his identity solely through the use of the first-person singular.

-- Henry Miller

**Make a fool of yourself**

=

Short then is the time which every man lives, and small the nook of earth where he lives; and short too the longest posthumous fame, and even this only continued by a succession of poor human beings, who will very soon die, and who know not even themselves, much less him who died long ago.

Marcus Aurelius

Hippocrates after curing many diseases himself fell sick and died. The Chaldaei foretold the deaths of many, and then fate caught them too. Alexander, and Pompeius, and Caius Caesar. . . Heraclitus, after so many speculations on the conflagration of the universe, was filled with water internally and died smeared all over with mud. And lice destroyed Democritus; and other lice killed Socrates. What means all this? Thou hast embarked, thou has made the voyage, thou art come to shore; get out.

-Marcus Aurelius

**Seek unemployment.**

To get two hours of work done requires eight free hours. To get eight hours of work done requires one week entirely free.

Anything goes: any form, any genre, any impulse, any experiment, any word – big words, slang words, old words, foreign words, weird words, offensive words, dirty words – any punctuation (including colons semi- and full, parentheses, exclamation points, and dashes) -- any reference tool or book, any schedule.

=

Write the article first, then do the research.

- Vance Bourjaily

Stephen King: Never look at a reference book while doing a first draft.

=

The moment a man begins to talk about technique that's proof that he is fresh out of ideas.

Raymond Chandler

When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split.

Raymond Chandler

When in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.

Raymond Chandler

=

Seek unemployment. Live apart. Work where the words go: the words go on the page.

**Remember: no obligation but to the people the characters speak for, and none to those people except to tell the truth.**

Write naked. Write with blood. Write from exile.

=

The true painter learns from things, not from other painters.

The true philosopher learns from his mind, not from doctrine.

The true poet learns from the parade of images,  
not from writers of the past.

-- Yuan Huang-tao (1568-1610, late Ming dynasty)  
(a writer of the past)

=

What you can do or think you can do, begin it.  
For boldness has Magic, Power, and Genius in it.

Goethe

=

"The work of the master reeks not of the sweat of the brow  
-- suggests no effort and is finished from the beginning."

**James McNeill Whistler**

=

For a moment the feeling crept over me that my work, my vision, is  
going to destroy me, and for a fleeting moment I let myself take a  
long, hard look at myself, something I would not otherwise do – out of  
instinct, on principle, out of self-preservation – look at myself with  
objective curiosity to see whether my vision has not destroyed me  
already. I found it comforting to note that I was still breathing.

- Werner Herzog, *Conquest of the Useless* (journal during the  
making of *Fitzcarraldo*)

Herzog:

- *Iquitos, 25 Sept, 1980*
- . . . so that puts and end to another wild goose chase. I'm still prepared  
to set out on any other that might present itself.
- Werner Herzog –
- To fail to embrace my dreams now would be a disgrace so great that sin  
itself could not find a name for it.

=