

How to Become a Better Writer

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



Conceptually, becoming a better writer is a fairly simple idea when one considers that the word "better" is the next step up from "good." The challenge, then, is to be a good writer to begin with and to recognize and hone the qualities that make a writer good.

So the question is, what makes a good writer? Certainly, talent is an indispensable ingredient in any writer's bag of tricks. Talent, like pornography, is difficult to quantify; however, we know good writing when we see it. It is where inspiration meets craftsmanship and experience.

Use it or lose it, but remember the reader always

But writing talent can rust and atrophy through idleness to a point where only continued writing can lubricate it back to life. Likewise, talent is useless without the self-discipline and mastery of the fundamentals of the writer's craft.

One school of thought holds that writers simply need to write, and that simple act of writing is something akin to a cathartic epiphany. Never mind the boundaries and restrictions of punctuation, grammar, and the heck with the reader.

What the foregoing tragically overlooks, however, is what good writing is all about: the reader. If the writer believes that the most important reader is the one who writes and

that it is sufficient to please oneself, chances are the writer will never improve. Attending to convention and due consideration of the reader are what good writing is all about.

The writer's compromise

The good writer knows that writing is a compromise between individuality and conformity. Individuality is where the writer's talent comes through; conformity is the means the writer brings the reader to a full understanding of what the writer is trying to convey.

What are the elements of that compromise? Must the art of writing (the writer's individuality) be frustrated by the craftsmanship (the need to conform)? Not really. Read on...

The writer's craft

A good writer, like an artist, must master the tools of the craft. In writing, those tools are spelling, grammar, punctuation, parallelism, etc. Just as the artist understands how to mix paints, maintain paint brushes and achieve harmony and perspective, the good writer can mix a metaphor and achieve intelligent perspective in writing with the aid of craftsmanship.

The writer who strives for clarity and precision and superimposes imagination and writing skill has not compromised individuality. The writer has taken good writing (talent) and made it better through craftsmanship.

The planning process trumps writer's block

Another important element of writing mastery is the planning process. Frank Lloyd Wright never created an architectural masterpiece without detailed plans, and neither should a good writer. Likewise, Ernest Hemingway never wrote a novel without a plan. Whatever the writer's planning process (brainstorming, outlining), the good writer knows where the writing is going.

So-called writer's block occurs mostly when the writer loses the direction and short circuits inspiration. Students and beginning writers usually discover the foregoing through the frustrating and time-wasting experience of the so-called "false start." This is where the writer jumps right into the project with no idea where the writing is going, hoping that inspiration will fill in the gaps. The inexperienced writer usually mistakes this frustration for writer's block.

Becoming a better writer through personal growth

So how does a good writer become better? The first step is to recognize that our writing can improve in the same way we as individuals can mature and improve. This involves

a recognition of the process of maturation and its role in deepening our perspective and observation. This brings with it a better understanding and perspective of the world we write about.

In search of that deepening perspective, we need to remember that improvement accompanies honest self-criticism and looking at what we write from the impartial perspective of the reader. In the totally democratic process of readers' exercising their prerogative to enjoy or ignore what we write, we come to the truth of the matter: Writing that is not read is a useless exercise of self-indulgence and delusion.

Having the right stuff

So the good writer has the right ingredients of talent and skills combined with an ability to organize and plan. The good writer recognizes the necessity of reasonable conformity, because the reader must understand and grasp what is written.

In the final analysis, then, we become good writers through an appropriate blending of craftsmanship, talent, elusive inspiration, and unrelenting regard for the reader. We become better writers when we remember to be critical and recognize that if we are not, the reader will be.