

Stephen King |

On Writing
A Memoir of the Craft

What follows is an attempt to put down briefly and simply, how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, and how it's done. It's about the language.

This is a short book, because most books...are filled with bullshit.

I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing book like this would be a waste of time.

Imitation preceded creation.

When you write a story, you're telling yourself the store. When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are NOT the story.

Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you...But then it goes out. Once you get the story as right as you can-it belongs to anyone who wants to read it.

Good writing comes spontaneously, in an uprush of feeling that has to be caught at once.

Put your desk in the corner...remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. Life isn't a support system for art. It's the other way around.

Books are a uniquely portable magic.

You must not come lightly to the blank page.

It's best to have your tools with you. If you don't, you're apt to find something you didn't expect and get discouraged.

Instead of looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work.

The bread of writing is vocabulary.

Put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your toolbox, and don't make any conscious effort to improve it. You'll be doing that as you read.

The business of meaning is a very big deal.

"The word is only a representation of the meaning; even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning."

"One either absorbs the grammatical principles of one's native language in conversation and in reading or one does not."

Unless he is certain of doing well, the writer will probably do best to follow the rules. - Strunk

Avoid the passive tense.

Notice how much simpler thoughts are to understand when broken into two thoughts.

The adverb is not your friend.

With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn't expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across.

I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing.

You probably DO know what you're talking about, and can safely energize your prose with active verbs.

Good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation. Affectation itself is fearful behavior.

Jesus's > Jesus'

Paragraphs are almost as important for how they look as for what they say; they are maps of intent.

Topic sentence-followed-by-support-and-description insists that the writer organize his/her thoughts, and it also provides good insurance against wandering away from the topic...Writing is refined thinking.

When composing, it's best not to think too much about where paragraphs begin and end; the trick is to let nature take its course. If you don't like it later on, fix it then. That's what the rewrite is all about.

-Dialogue attribution is not necessary if we know who is speaking.

The object isn't grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story...to make him/her forget, whenever possible, that he/she is reading a story at all.

I would argue that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing -the place where coherence begins and would stand a chance of becoming more than mere words.

At its most basic we are only discussing a learned skill, but do we not agree that sometimes the most basic skills can create things far beyond our expectations? We are talking about tools and carpentry, about words and style...Remember that we are also talking about magic.

Understand that the hours we spend talking about writing is time we don't spend actually DOING it.

But if you don't want to work your ass off, you have no business trying to write well.

If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot, and write a lot.

There is a learning process going on. Every book you pick up has its own lesson or lessons, and quite often the bad books have more to teach than the good.

Being swept away by a combination of great story and great writing -of being flattened, in fact -is part of every writer's necessary information. You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you.

If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time(or the tools) to write...Reading is the creative center of every writer's life.

Talents renders the whole idea of rehearsal meaningless; when you find something at which you are talented, you do it(whatever IT is) until your fingers bleed or your eyes are ready to fall out of your head.

Read and write 4-6 hours every day.

Constant reading will pull you into a place, a mind-set, where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness. It also offers you a constantly growing knowledge of what has been done and what hasn't, what is trite and what is fresh, what words and what just lies there dying(or dead) on the page. The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with the pen.

Your schedule...exists in order to habituate yourself, to make yourself ready to dream just as you make yourself ready to sleep by going to bed each night, following a ritual as you go. In both writing and sleeping, we learn to be physically still at the same time we are encouraging our minds to unlock from the humdrum rational thinking of our daytime lives.

You need the room, you need the door, and you need the determination to shut the door. You need a concrete goal as well. The longer you keep to these basics, the easier the act of writing will become. Don't wait for the muse. Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you'll be each day.

The big question: What are you going to write about? And the equally big answer: Anything you damn well want. Anything at all...as long as you tell the truth.

What would be very wrong, I think, is to turn away from what you know and like(or love) in favor of things you believe will impress.. What's equally wrong is the deliberate turning toward money.

Buyers are not attracted by the literary merits of a novel; buyers want a good story to take with them, something that will first fascinate them then pull them in and keep them turning the pages. This happens, I think, when readers recognize the people in a book, their behaviors, their surroundings, and their talk. When the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life and

beliefs, he or she is apt to become more invested in the story. I'd argue that it's impossible to make this sort of connection in a premeditated way, by gauging the market..

Write what you like, then imbue it with life.

Make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work.

People love to read about work. God knows why but they do.

Remember, there's a difference between lecturing about what you know and using it to enrich the story.

Make a world impossible not to believe. Go, spy out the land, the enemy positions, and bring back a full report.. Tell the truth of what you know.

Have an openness and inability to do anything other than *get right to the point.*

What you know makes you unique in some way. Be brave. Map the territory, come back, and tell us all you know.

Stories and novels consist of three parts: NARRATIVE, which moves the story from point to point. DESCRIPTION, which creates a sensory reality, and DIALOGUE, which brings characters to life through their speech.

I distrust plot. Our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. My basic belief of making stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to

give them a place to grow. Lean heavily on intuition; watch what happens and then write it down.

The situation comes first. The characters -always flat and un-featured to begin with -come next. Once these things are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate. I often have an idea of what they outcome may be, but I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. I want them to do things THEIR way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it's something I never expected.

Why worry about the ending anyways? Why be such a control freak? Sooner or later every story comes out of *somewhere*.

I'd suggest that what works for me may work equally well for you.

Description is what makes the reader a sensory participant in the story. Good description is a learned skill, one of the prime reasons why you cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot.

Description begins with visualization of what it is you want the reader to experience. It ends with your translating what you see in your mind into words on the page. It's far from easy.

If you want to be a successful writer, you must be able to describe it, and in a way that will cause your reader to prickle with recognition.

Description begins in the writer's imagination but should finish in the readers'.

Good description usually consists of a few well-chosen details that will stand for everything else. In most cases, these details will be the first ones that come to mind. If you decide later on that you'd like to change, add, or delete, you can do so. But I think you will find that, in most cases, your first visualized details will be the truest and best.

Before beginning to write, I'll take a moment to call up an image of the place, drawing from my memory and filling my mind's eye, an eye whose vision grows sharper the more it's used. What I actually want to do is open all my senses. This memory search will be brief but intense, a kind of hypnotic recall. And, as with actual hypnosis, you'll find it easier to accomplish the more you attempt it.

It's not about the setting, it's about the story, and it's always about the story.

The use of the simile and other figurative language is one of the chief delights of fiction -reading it and writing it, as well. When it's on target, a simile delights us in much the same way meeting an old friend in a crowd of strangers does. By comparing two seemingly unrelated objects, we are sometimes able to see an old thing in a new and vivid way.

The key to good description begins with clear seeing and ends with clear writing; the kind of writing that employs fresh images and simple vocabulary.

Respect the power of compact, descriptive language.

Practice the art, always reminding yourself that your job is to say what you see, and then to get on with your story.

Never tell us a thing if you can show us instead. (Context clues)

Dialogue should be talk so real that part of what we feel is the guilty pleasure of anyone first tuning in and then eavesdropping on an interesting conversation.

There are lots of would-be censors out there, and although they may have different agendas, they all want basically the same thing: for you to see the world they see... or at least shut up about what you DO see that's different. They are agents of the status quo. Not necessarily bad guys, but dangerous if you happen to believe in intellectual freedom.

Some people don't want to hear the truth, of course, but that's not your problem.

It's almost important to remember that no one is "the bad guy." In real life we each of us regard ourselves as the protagonist; the camera is on US.

If I am able, even briefly, to give you a Wilkes'-Eye-View of the world, if I can make you understand madness, then perhaps I can make you sympathize or identify with the result? More frightening than ever because it's so close to real.

We've covered some basic aspects of good storytelling, all of which returns to the same core ideas: That practice is invaluable (and should feel good, really not like practice at all) and honesty is indispensable. Skills all boil down to seeing or hearing clearly and then transcribing with equal clarity.

It's all on the table, all up for grabs. Isn't that an intoxicating thought? I think it is. Try any goddamn thing you like, no matter how boringly normal or outrageous. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, toss it. Toss it even if you love it.

It seems to me that every book -at least every one worth reading -is about SOMETHING. Your job during or just after the first draft is to decide what something or somethings yours is about. Your job in the second draft -one of them anyway -is to make that something even more clear. This may necessitate some big changes and revisions. The benefits to you and your reader will be clearer focus and a more unified story. It hardly ever fails.

Deep interests: Why, if there is a God, do such terrible things happen? The thin line between reality and fantasy. The terrible attraction violence sometimes has for fundamentally good people. The fundamental difference between children and adults. The healing power of the imagination.

Once your basic story is on paper, you need to think about what it means and enrich your following drafts with your conclusions. To do less is to rob your work (and eventually your readers) of the vision that makes each tale you write uniquely your own.

Let me urge that you take your story through at least two drafts; the one you do with the study door closed and the one you do with it open.

With the door shut, downloading what's in my head directly to the page, I write as fast as I can and still remain comfortable.

There's plenty of opportunity for self-doubt. If I write rapidly, putting down my story exactly as it comes into my mind, I find that I can keep up with my original enthusiasm and at the same time outrun the self-doubt that's always waiting to settle in.

The first draft -the ALL STORY draft -should be written with no help(or interference) from anyone else. There may come a point when you want to show what you're doing, either because you're proud or doubtful about what you are doing; resist this impulse. Keep the pressure on; don't lower it by exposing what you've written to the doubt, the praise, or even the well-meaning questions of someone from the outside world. Let your hope of success(and your fear of failure) carry you on, difficult as that can be.

Let your book rest. When you come to the correct evening, take your manuscript out of the drawer. If it looks like an alien relic bought at a junkyard sale where you can hardly remember stopping, you're ready. Sit down with your door shut(you'll be opening it to the world soon enough), a pencil in your hand, and a legal pad by your side. Then read your manuscript over. Do it all in one sitting, if that's possible. Make all the notes you want, but concentrate on the mundane housekeeping jobs, like fixing misspellings and picking up inconsistencies. Only god gets it right the first time, and only a slob says, "Oh well, let it go, that's what copy editors are for." If you've never done it before, you'll find it strange reading your book over after a six week layoff, often an exhilarating experience. It's yours, you'll recognize it as yours, even be able to remember what tune was on the stereo when you wrote certain lines, and yet it will also be like reading the work of someone else, a soul-twin, perhaps. This is the way it should be, the reason you waited. With six weeks of recuperation time, you'll also be able to see any glaring holes. It's amazing how some of these things can elude the writer while occupied with the daily work of composition. You are FORBIDDEN to feel depressed about them or to beat up on yourself.

Is the story coherent? If it is, what will turn that coherence into a song?

What I want most of all is RESONANCE, something that will linger for a little while in constant reader's mind(and heart) after he or she has closed the book and put it up on the shelf.

Most of all, I'm looking for what I MEANT, because in the second draft I'll want to add elements that reinforce that meaning. I'll also want to delete stuff that goes in other directions.

All novels are really letters aimed at one person.

I think every novelist has a single ideal reader; that at various points during the composition, the writer is thinking, "I wonder what he/she will think when he/she reads THIS part?"

Call that one person you write for Ideal Reader. He or she is going to be in your writing room all the time; he or she will help you get outside yourself a little, to actually read your work in progress as an audience would while you're still working.

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Every story and novel is collapsible to some degree. If you can get out ten percent of it while retaining the basic story and flavor, you're not trying very hard. The effect of judicious cutting is immediate and often amazing. You'll feel it and you're Ideal Reader will too.

When challenged on something he likes -one of his darlings -the first two words out of his mouth are almost always, "yeah, but."

The most important things to remember about back story are that (A) everyone has a history, and (B) most of it isn't very interesting. Stick to the parts that are, and don't get carried away with the rest.

Creative flow is apt to be stopped at any moment. At times like that I'm sure all writers feel pretty much the same, no matter what their skill and success level: God if only I were in the right writing environment with the right understanding people, I just know I could be penning my masterpiece. Yet it is, after all, the dab of grit that seeps into an oyster's shell that makes the pearl, not pearl-making seminars with other oysters.

Creative energy is going in the wrong direction when you find yourself constantly questioning your prose and your purpose when what you should probably be doing is writing as fast as the gingerbread man runs, getting that first draft down on paper while it is still bright and clear in your mind.

You learn best by reading a lot and writing a lot, and the most valuable lessons of all are the ones you teach yourself.

Submitting stories without first reading the market is like playing darts in a dark room. You might hit the target every now and then, but you'd don't deserve to.

When I proposed the idea, I felt that I knew a great deal about the subject; my head all but burst with the different things I wanted to say, and perhaps I DO know a lot, but some of it turned out to be dull, and most of the rest, I've discovered, has more to do with INSTINCT than with anything resembling "higher thought." I found the act of articulating those instinctive truths painfully difficult.

There have been times when for me the act of writing has been a little act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair. Writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life.

You try to tell yourself that you've been lucky, most incredibly lucky, and usually that works because it's true. Sometimes it doesn't work, that's all. Then you cry.

There was no inspiration that first afternoon, only a kind of stubborn determination and the hope that things would get better if I kept at it.

The scariest moment is always just before you start. After that, things only get better.

In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well. It's about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy. Some of this book -perhaps too much -has been about how I learned to do it. Much of it has been about how you can do it better. The rest of it -and perhaps the best of it -is a permission slip: you can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, you will.

Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink.