**Develop Your Craft**

“The role of the writer is to make bullion cubes out of chicken soup.” – Author Susan Sontag

The second most important card in the royal flush is the king, and *content* is king. How readers respond to your work determines your success. The inseparable trinity of writing is:

* **Reading:** **Know what readers want and find models for your books and career.**
* **Writing: Make every word count and write books that sell each other.**
* **Sharing: Get feedback from a writer’s group and early readers.**

**\* \* \***

* **Reading: Know what readers want and find models for your books and career.**

“I learned to write by reading.” -- Stephen King

“We write by the light of every story we’ve ever read.”

--Young adult author Richard Peck

Novelist Ernest Gaines said: “You can only write as well as you read.” So read what you love to read and write what you love to read. Learn about how the authors built their careers. Their experiences will help you envision your goals, and the more clearly you can see them, the more likely it is that you will achieve them.

**An acquaintance once came up to me all excited and said: ”I just finished my first novel.”**

**“That’s great,” I said.**

**Then he asked: “What should I read next?”**

When you’re starting out, consider devoting half of the time you allot to writing to reading. As novelist Ernest Gaines said: “You can only write as well as you read.”

If you’re a novelist, read all the novels you can, especially those like yours. Become an expert on the kind of book you want to write. First read books for enjoyment. Then analyze what makes them effective. What works for you in the books you love will work for your readers.

Downloadable audio is the fastest growing segment of publishing. Like reading your work aloud, listening to books will give you insights into your writing.

**Author Daniel Boorstein said: “Reading is like the sex act—done privately, and often in bed.”**

**The British critic Nancy Banks-Smith said: “Agatha Christie has given more pleasure in bed than any other woman.”**

No wonder her books have sold 2 billion copies.

Reading is one of the joys of being a writer. I wish you a lifetime of joy reading and writing.

**Booklovers never go to bed alone.**

Now is also the best time ever to be a reader. You have access to more books than ever to enjoy, learn from, and be inspired by. Reading enables you to find models for your books and authors who can be models for your career:

\* You don’t have to figure out how to write a mystery. Take Sue Grafton’s advice: Read a hundred of them, and you’ll know what readers expect. You can establish criteria for style or voice, length, the first page, cover design, and perhaps for nonfiction, back matter, and how to give your book visual appeal.

\* You don’t have to figure out how to become a successful author. Do what successful authors do, especially those in your field.

Emulate the books you love and the authors you admire.

For the next thousand nights, before you go to bed every night, read one short story. That’ll take you ten minutes, 15 minutes. Okay, then read one poem a night from the vast history of poetry. Stay away from most modern poems. It’s crap. It’s not poetry! It’s not poetry. Now if you want to kid yourself and write lines that look like poems, go ahead and do it, but you’ll go nowhere. Read the great poets, go back and read Shakespeare, read Alexander Pope, read Robert Frost. But one poem a night, one short story a night, one essay a night, for the next 1,000 nights. From various fields: archaeology, zoology, biology, all the great philosophers of time, comparing them. Read the essays of Aldous Huxley, read Lauren Eisley, great anthropologist. . . I want you to read essays in every field. On politics, analyzing literature, pick your own. But that means that every night then, before you go to bed, you’re stuffing your head with one poem, one short story, one essay—at the end of a thousand nights, Jesus God, you’ll be full of stuff, won’t you? Ray B

Freelance editor Heather Lazare used to edit for Touchstone at Simon & Schuster. She said that if she wanted to buy a book, she had to tell her boss about two recent, successful books that proved the salability of the book she wanted to buy. Agents and editors will want to know the models for your book in your pitch and query letter.

**Giving Birth to the Same Baby Three Times**

**Someone called a baby “a big noise at one end with no sense of responsibility at the other.”**

Giving birth to a book requires quiet and responsibility. Your book is your baby. No one will know or care about it as much as you do. You bring your book to life three times:

\* When you have the idea for it

\* When you write it

\*When you bring it into the world on publication.

You need patience to give your baby all the nurturing it needs.

* **Writing: Make every word count and write books that sell each other.**

You’ve got to jump off the cliff all the time and build your wings on the way down.

“Say to yourself: I will never write one line that I have not first felt in my heart.”

--Professor Bhaer’s advice to Jo March in *Little Women* by Louis May Alcott

The second part of the trinity is writing. Writing begins with an idea.

**A** ***New Yorker* cartoon by Shannon Wheeler shows Moses walking down the mountain holding the Ten commandments, and one of his followers asks:**

**“Where do you get your ideas?”**

**When someone asked Stephen King where he got his ideas, he said: “Utica.”**

Life, people, the media, and current events are endless sources of ideas. There are more people, places, history, media, technologies, and natural phenomena to inspire you.

Ideas for books, characters, plots, promotion, subsidiary rights are potentially valuable assets. You may not use them for years, but make a note of them by hand or by dictating them into a device.

Waking up and falling asleep when you’re drifting off and your mind is suspended between being awake and asleep are prime times for receiving gifts of ideas. Pose a question to yourself while your mind is suspended between being awake and asleep, and you may arise with the answer you need. A short pencil is better than a long memory, and you won’t lose sleep trying to remember a gem.

**Another *New Yorker* cartoon shows two women nursing cocktails, and one says: “I’m marrying Marvin. I think there’s a book in it.”**

There are more subjects to write about than ever and more ways to write about them. A publisher will buy your idea in one of two forms: First novels and memoirs that should read like a novel usually have to be finished. The usual way to prove that you can develop story, setting, and characters for the length of a book is to do it. But publishers buy most nonfiction from proposals.

**Letting the Chips Fall Where They May**

“Don’t get it right. Get it written.” – James Thurber

You a *pantser* or a *plotter*? Elmore Leonard flew by the seat of his pants. He said: “I like to be surprised every day.” Are you a pantser who likes to discover what comes next as you write or a plotter who prefers the comfort of an outline?

**Ray Bradbury summed up writing in two verbs: “Throw up and clean up.”** Bradbury encouraged writers to jump off a cliff and make their parachute on the way down. You may find it easier to finish a draft, and then figure out what to do next.

Michelangelo believed that angels were inside the blocks of marble he attacked with hammer and chisel, waiting to be liberated. A book has two basic elements: an idea and the execution of it. Ideas are easy; execution is hard.

Your idea is a block of marble out of which that you are trying to create its ideal embodiment. You are in the service of your idea, your book, and your readers. So the challenge is to make the execution of your idea as strong as the idea itself.

Making bullion cubes out of chicken soup requires refining. Every word is either bringing your ideas to life or diminishing their impact. Keep hammering away at your idea and let the chips fall where they may. Make your words seem inevitable and disappear into the thought. As James Baldwin advised: “Write so well that no one notices that you’re writing.”

If you cut a word you need, it will bleed. Follow the ultimate rule in the essential *Elements of Style*: “Make every word count.” Tools like Scrivener, ProwriterPro, and Grammarly can help you.

Agents and editors weed through hundreds if not thousands of submissions a year, so they only read far enough to make a decision. The more compelling a story is, the more forgiving readers are about craft, and fans of literary work are more patient. But every word you write, starting with the first word of your query letter *must* motivate readers to read the next word.

The only criteria for every word you write: Do readers *need* or *want* to know this? As Kurt Vonnegut said: “Don’t put anything in your story that doesn’t reveal character or advance action.” Salable prose keeps readers turning the pages. *If you keep your readers turning the pages, you can write anything.*

Most nonfiction is a series of facts that are relatively easy to outline. Hemingway said: “Prose is architecture, not interior design.” The German poet Rainier Maria Rilke wrote: “Prose should be built like a cathedral.” When you set out to construct an enduring edifice of prose, you may find it easier to give yourself a solid foundation on which to build, then change it if you need to. John Grisham does 40-page outlines, Elizabeth George does 70-page outlines, Danielle Steel does 80-page outlines.

**The S Theory of Storytelling: How to Compel Readers to Turn the Page**

“The beginning is the most important part of the work.” –Plato

“The first page sells the book. The last page sells the next book.”

–Mystery writer Mickey Spillane

“For fiction consumers, the most influential factors are in-store display, word of mouth, and page one.” –Literary agent Donald Maass

“The author-editor [and agent] relationship begins on the first page. The first sentence.

The first paragraph.” –Literary agent Betsy Lerner in *What Editors Do*

“A novel begins when I can’t put it down.” –Literary agent Elizabeth Pomada

**Carrie Fisher said that the trouble with instant gratification is that it takes too long.** Writers have told me that they go into a bookstore, pick up a novel, and read the first line. If it doesn’t excite them, they put it back. If you’re writing to entertain, start on page one.

Agents, editors, and book buyers only read far enough to make a decision. If your primary goal is to entertain, start as late as possible in the scene and the story, establish the time and place, introduce the protagonist, and rivet readers with the inciting incident that drives the story and forces them to keep reading. Create enough tension, conflict, and curiosity on the first page, and your readers will keep reading.

**The S Theory of Storytelling**

**Style (or Voice)**

**Story**

**Setting**

**Someone**

**Something**

**Something said**

**or**

**Something else**

**on the first page of a novel or memoir must compel readers turn the page.**

Every word you write is an audition for the next word.

Every line you write must convince your readers to read the next line.

Every page you write must compel readers to keep reading.

The first page of a chapter sells the chapter; the last page sells the next chapter,

and must make readers eager to review your book

and tell everyone they know that they must read your book.

**Proposals: The Difference Between a Bathing Suit and a Birthday Suit**

**At the beginning of their careers, nonfiction writers are luckier than novelists. Nonfiction is easier to write, sell, promote, and resell in other ways. And the promise of a proposal may be more seductive than the reality it promises, like a body is more intriguing in a bathing suit than a birthday suit.**

**A complete manuscript is more of a take-it-or-leave-it decision. A proposal is a work in progress that gives editors the creative opportunity to come up with their vision of the best way to develop the book. However, if you can, it’s usually better to write your manuscript before doing your proposal. Here’s why:**

**\* You can get feedback from early readers and local book clubs.**

**\* You can ask for cover quotes and a foreword for nonfiction.**

**\* For nonfiction, you can pick the best sample chapter(s) to submit to agents and editors.**

**\*For nonfiction, you can try to interest businesses and nonprofits who may be interested in buying copies and promoting the book, because it furthers their agenda. They will usually want to see the published book before making a commitment. But even telling publishers you have interest will help sell the book.**

**\*You can test-market the book with potential book buyers, ask them to email you feedback and suggestions. This is especially helpful for how-to books. To prove your advice works without your help, you want readers to use your advice and email you the difference your book makes in their lives.**

**\* You can post positive quotes on your website, include or link to them in what you submit to agents and publishers, your publicity materials, and perhaps in your book. If you’re speaking about your book, your listeners will want to take your advice home with them.**

**Unless you want to self-publish, don’t sell books online. If you go through the publishing process, publishers will want you to sell enough copies to prove to prove there’s a big enough market for them to justify buying it.**

***How to Write a Book Proposal* has more reasons to write your manuscript before your proposal.**

**Five to Thrive**

Less than one percent of actors make a living from acting. Less than one percent of writers make a living just from writing books. You need to be a *content* *provider* whose work builds synergy because it has quality, continuity, and consistency. Blog posts, articles, reviews, social media posts, talks, classes, podcasts, and videos will all help you build your career.

Agent Donald Maass believes that it takes five books to build an audience. The fastest way to succeed is to write books that sell each other. If readers love one of your books, they’ll read the others. So look at your career not as one book but a lifetime of books, each better and more profitable than the previous one.

Find an idea that lends itself to a series or standalone books that you’re passionate about writing and promoting, you can use them to build your career. Publishers love series, but you can’t expect one to last a lifetime. If sales or your inspiration wanes, pivot and start a new series that will excite your fans.

Novelists are producing four or even twelve books a year. But for lasting, sustainable success, write as much as you can without sacrificing quality. Maximize your pleasure, income, visibility as you build your career and your brand. Make your ideas *scalable* from one from line to a manuscript, and your promotion scalable from a one-line pitch to a one-hour talk.

**Finding Your Work Style**

**\* “I only write when inspiration strikes. Fortunately, it strikes at nine every morning.” - William Faulkner**

**\* “Write a short story every week. It’s impossible to write 52 bad short stories in a row.” - Ray Bradbury**

**\* “All my major works have been written in prison. I would recommend prison not only to aspiring writers but to aspiring politicians too.” - Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian statesman**

**\* “If you wait for inspiration to write, you’re not a writer. You’re a waiter.”**

**- Self-publishing pioneer Dan Poynter**

Eighty-one percent of Americans believe they’re going to write a terrific novel, once they get the time. Few writers have time to write; the rest *make* time.

**“If a doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I’d type a little faster.”**

**--Isaac Asimov, who wrote and edited more than 500 novels and anthologies**

\* Kahlil Gibran wrote: “Your daily life is your temple and your religion.” To succeed, pay your dues to the muse by making writing a daily ritual.

\* Edmond Rostand wrote *Cyrano de Bergerac* in the bathtub, because it was the only way he could avoid visitors.

\* **D. H. Lawrence said: “I like to write when I feel spiteful. It is like having a good sneeze.”**

John Steinbeck needed 300 pencils to write *East of Eden*. What do you need to write? The only right way for you to write is in whatever way enables you to produce your best work. Stick to the work style the works best for you.

**From Inspiration to Carpentry**

**“To write is human, to edit is divine.” – Stephen King**

After writing comes *rewriting*.

**From *The* *Paris Review*:**

**“Interviewer: How much rewriting do you do?**

**Hemingway: ‘It depends. I rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.’**

**Interviewer: ‘Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?’**

**Hemingway: ‘Getting the words right.’”**

Hemingway advised writers to: “Write drunk, edit sober.” Allow the spirit of play to liberate your writing, knowing that craft will assert itself later. Bestselling author Mark Bowden said: “Pages turn swiftly when we’re reading action or dialogue, while exposition and description can slow things to a crawl. Serious writing demands description and exposition, but be sensitive to the demands they make.”

**Mystery writer Margery Allingham said: “I write every paragraph four times -- once to get my meaning down, once to put in anything I have left out, once to take out anything that seems unnecessary, and once to make the whole thing sound as if I had only just thought of it.**

**An old *New Yorker* cartoon shows two mice sitting on a typewriter in the middle of the night reading a manuscript, and one of them says: “We’d do him a big favor if we ate chapter four.”**

Avoid chapters you don’t need by revising your work until it’s 100 percent, as well written as you can make it.

**“If at first you don’t succeed, skydiving is not for you.” –Comedian Steven Wright**

Writing is brain surgery with words. Butunlike brain surgery, writing is a forgiving craft. Only your last draft counts. Four ways for you to see what you need to change:

\* Read it on your screen.

\\* Read it on paper.

\* Read it aloud, record it, and listen to it.

\* Give yourself as much time as you can between readings.

“One of the best ways to determine whether your prose is well-constructed is to read it aloud.”

*--* Benjamin Dreyer, *Dryer’s English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*

You’ll spots different things each way. Use all of them.

* **Sharing: Get feedback from your writer’s group and early readers.**

“I merely leap and pause.” – Ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky

After your creative leap, it’s time to pause and get feedback. The third part of the writing trinity is sharing. Writing is a solitary business, but it’s the only part of the process you have to do alone. You’re too close to your work to get it right by yourself, but you don’t

have to. Get all the help you need:

\* Join or start a writing group to give you feedback on your work as you write and when you’re done. You will learn a great deal from participating in a small, constructive, knowledgeable group of writers, online or off, who can and will give you the feedback you need. You’ll double the value of your group, if you also make it a book club.

\* Build a community of beta (test) readers, online or off, who will first tell you what’s good about your finished proposal and manuscript and then how to improve it. Include readers who represent the range in age and interests of the book buyers you want to buy your book.

When you send your work to early readers include this line: “Spare the reader not the writer.” Excite your beta readers, and they will buy your book, review it, and rave to their communities about it.

**Eyes on the Prize**

The more qualified readers you enlist, the better your work will be. Getting the reception you want from agents, editors, and readers is the prize. Having the right eyes critique your work is how you win it. Offering to critique others’ work will make it win-win as will acknowledging readers in your books.

**Stirring the Soup**

One reason the chicken-soup books have sold more than 500 million copies is that Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen shared the stories with a panel of forty readers who graded them on a scale of one to ten. They only used the nine and a halfs and tens.

Ask readers to grade your work and every moment of impact in it to prove your words have the impact you desire. Expect conflicting responses, and only follow advice that makes sense to you.

If you self-publish, you need professional developmental, line, and copy editors to make sure your manuscript is ready. If you want a Big-Apple publisher, you need a developmental editor who can bring an agent’s or a New York editor’s perspective to your book. Find a proofreader to go over your work and your query letter before submitting them.

**A Rite for Writing Right**

“Honest criticism is hard to take, particularly from a relative, a friend,

an acquaintance or a stranger.” --[Franklin P. Jones](https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/franklin-p-jones-quotes), humorist

When someone questions something you write, consider these possibilities:

\* You’re right and they’re wrong.

\* They’re right and you’re wrong.

\* You are both wrong, but something caught their eye and may stop other readers.

\* A better alternative than either of you thought of may be waiting for you to discover it.

Adapted from *Writing Success Guaranteed: How to Build a Career Doing What You Love* (in progress) by Michael Larsen, www.michaellarsenauthorcoaching.com, [larsenpoma@aol.com](mailto:larsenpoma@aol.com). Please write with questions.