

Tips for Writing and for Life

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In this special Writer's Digest expanded edition of MFA Insider, a distinguished writer and longtime professor shares a wealth of advice he's been compiling for (and from) his students for decades.

I began the tip sheet you are about to read some 20 years ago, I guess. It was designed for undergraduates, but it soon became clear that our graduate students needed it no less and probably more. It's by no means static. I put something good (as you'll read later—see the blueberries in the red bandana) or more often bad (the “truck the color of happiness” will do) from my students in the growing file every year or so. In some cases, the tips have had a disastrous effect. One student, a fellow who entered the program having already published in excellent venues, claimed to be so paralyzed by what he read in these pages that he could barely write at all during his year with us, then fell mute and eventually became a school teacher. Handle with care! More often, I admit, I hear from students about 18 months after they graduate. Their little postcards say, “Oh, now I get it! No ellipses. No hidden thoughts.” I hope you fall into that category. Send your cards to Boston University. And if you become in any way inspired, follow them up with your applications.

You may think, owing to certain tonal qualities, that my tongue is oft in my cheek or that I strew the occasional grain of salt. You would be wrong. I mean every word.

Here are some tips for writing and for life. Spell *all right* as I have here (not *alright*). Keep commas and periods inside quotation marks, semicolons and colons outside; learn the proper usage for each. Don't pronounce the final e in *forte* (it's from the French, not the Italian, and if you think I'm wrong I'm willing to bet your tuition), and get out of the habit of using the phrase “like I said.” Leave that kind of locution—along with “we played real aggressive”—to third basemen. Don't say *disinterested* unless you mean *impartial*; say *indifferent* instead. Also, *centered around* should always be replaced by *centered on*. For that matter, use *on* in almost every instance in which you are tempted to say *upon*.

Punctuate broken dialogue as follows: “*Say, Jimmy,*” said Sue, “*let's go to the fruit store and buy some plums.*” Or: “*Listen here, Jimmy,*” said Sue. “*We're going to the fruit store for some plums.*” When the first clause is essentially complete, use a period after the narrative tag. Do not say, “*Hello, Jimmy, let's go to the fruit store for some ripe plums and green apples and pears, and then we can eat them,*” said Sue. In other words, when you break dialogue for the narrative tag, insert that tag after the first clause—never after multiple clauses or, heaven forbid, sentences. One last word on dialogue: Don't write, “*Hi, Jimmy,*” she smiled or, “*Hiya, Sue,*” he winked. Such avoidance of the word *said* is the mark of the amateur.

Avoid ellipses, those three dreamy dots at the end of unfinished thoughts; either finish the thought or interrupt it with a dash. As for echoes (the same distinctive or even relatively common word or sound in adjoining sentences, paragraphs, and real purists would even say pages)—watch them like hawks, swoop and eliminate. Here, for your pleasure, is the worst echo ever to appear in a published book: “As we all stood around inside Bucky's dome, the two of them walked out of the dark of Sokolniki Park and straight into Bucky's dome.”

Do not say such things as “He got out of bed, pulled on his pants,” or “She inhaled her cigarette, ground it out.” Such constructions, leaving out the *and* or the *then*, are not only pretentious, they imply a list that does not exist, and so disconcert the reader. In narrative prose, as opposed to indented dialogue, write, on average, two-and-a-half paragraphs per page (but do not make them as long as this one), never six or seven or 10. These simple rules, and a few others like them—for example, not chewing gum in class or in public, and tearing your bread in two before applying the butter—will make you seem sophisticated and glamorous and are by themselves worth the cost of your tuition.

As for those stories you're going to hand in—while not doing too much violence to your natural style, try to use as few adjectives and especially adverbs as possible. Be simple and direct, not convoluted and fancy. To paraphrase George Orwell, don't use a pound word when a shilling word will do. Here are some other wise words from H.G. Wells on the same subject: "I write as straight as I can, just as I walk as straight as I can, because that is the best way to get there." And from Ezra Pound: "AFTER you have abs. mastered simple (even to platichood) style you can start convolutin'." And the single wisest thing ever said about creative writing was this, from Elsa Lasker-Schüler: "A real poet does not say *azure*. A real poet says *blue*." Of course Vladimir Nabokov practiced the opposite, and the greatest writer of the last century, Marcel Proust, never walked a straight line in his life. Genius is not only a special case, it is almost always a disastrous influence upon others. I am not saying that one ought not to take risks; there is a sense of daring in every fine story, but the risk is in the depth of psychological truth or the boldness of conception (Aristotle's example of both is that tale in which a detective discovers the murderer of his father is himself) and not in empty experiments with technique or form.

Along these same lines, avoid large abstract nouns, particularly those ending in "ness" (recently a student wrote, "The truck was the color of happiness") or those that have the added freight of emotion. Toni Morrison should have known better than to end one of her novels, all of them overwritten in the first place, with the word *sorrow* ("circles of sorrow" yet). In the spring of 2005 a student wrote:

She has taken the red handkerchief out of her hair. Her unruly locks are shiny and have been blown big by the wind. She is holding the bandana with all four corners in one hand, like a pouch, and the middle is weighted down with blueberries.

And, while eating wild honeycomb, she speaks of feeling "hexagons in my mouth" and "a piece of wing on my tongue." Alas, in the *same* story, the student speaks of "catching the colors of sunset" and, even worse, something "glimmering in the moonlight." Do you see the difference? The red bandana, the sagging blueberries are true poetry; the vague colors of sunset, the sentimental moonlight are only poetic.

Here is good advice from John Updike (whose own writing was grander when he was able to suppress his admiration for Nabokov): Life is lived in the middle—I am paraphrasing a PBS interview I heard on my car radio—not at the extremes, and literature should be written toward the middle as well. In other words, try to avoid stories about old people on the verge of death or mad people or children. (I might add that clowns, dwarves, mimes and people wearing masks should be abjured as well. Nor am I a fan of wind chimes.) If you do write about these kinds of extremes, justify doing so by the empathy and the freshness of insight you bring to the subject.

Do not write satire. Only a few geniuses, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope in our language, have mastered the genre in a way that has lasted. More important, it is particularly unbecoming for a young person to look down his nose at his characters—too easy, too slack, a stance that has almost certainly not been earned through one's experience of life. To put this another way, it is difficult for a young person to love even those aspects of his characters he ought to despise, and without such fundamental affection the enterprise is doomed. Moreover, it is almost impossible to have a television set on in a story, especially as counterpoint to the action, without producing a satirical effect. Please turn off all electronic devices.

A question often asked: Do I need to have an ending in mind before I begin? The answer is easy: yes and no. One must have in mind between 68 and 73 percent of the ending. Any more than that percentage and the writer will be in a straightjacket, unable to respond to twists, surprises and fits of sudden inspiration, or even changes of mind; any less and the project will meander and find itself in danger of sinking into the swamp of indecision. Here's something I should have said earlier: Don't vary your level of diction unless you want to draw attention to the speaker and his vagaries (a graduate

student, I am sorry to say, wrote of a character's "feeling dysthymic" and then went on to call him "that guy" in the next sentence; his instructor was most unhappy).

It is important to avoid insofar as possible writing from subjective points of view—that is, writing about people's feelings, their thoughts, and above all about their memories and dreams. (To put it another way, do not write like Virginia Woolf.) Readers tend to lose about 15 percent of their attentiveness when you do, so you have to write 30 percent more vividly and convincingly to stay ahead of the game. Every feeling must be earned; if it's not, we shall turn from your work because of its sentimentality. The same holds true in spades for writing about photographs or in flashbacks. *The only thing that really interests us about other people is what they say and what they do.* After you've told us what they look like and who they are and what the weather is like on the morning they start off on their adventure, you should stick pretty much to the two aforementioned characteristics. That way you'll never go very far wrong.

Another way of putting the above is that one should move outside the mind of a single character. Try to establish *relationships*. One of the most thoughtful of our recent graduates summed the issue up this way: "Two, not one."

Don't write with themes foremost in mind. *Huck Finn* is not "about" the loss of innocence in America, or racial relations or sexual ambiguities; it is about a black man and a white boy going down a river on a raft.

I was wrong, *this* is the finest thing ever said to those wishing to write: "Not to know a hind has no horns is not so serious as to paint it inartistically." Just take a look at the horns—and the eyes and the snouts—on Picasso's bulls. God, and art, may be in the details, but the soul of the drama, as Aristotle, who wrote those words, knew, is in the plot, the action, the agon—that is, in the intensity of the conflict and of the conviction that you bring to what you do. M. Somerset Maugham once remarked that the greatest of writers (he was thinking of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Gustav Flaubert) were not, at least to his way of mind, the greatest stylists. What they did have, to everybody's way of mind, was the deepest insight into life. But Maugham importantly added that it is still best to write with style and polish, if you can.

Aristotle, one last time: "But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars"—hence, perhaps, some intuition of the hand of the gods in making all things one. Nonetheless, limit your similes to two a page, tops, and *make them count*; that is, be sure they nail down the point you are after, and do so with the swift, short, hard stroke of a hammer on a tack. Do not extend them, e.g., "He nailed down his point like a hammer on a tack, striking the blow with such force that even the most ignorant listener, etc., etc." Make your point and hurry on.

Something else that can't be taught, that had better be in your bones, is an ear for rhythms. Here is a sentence from a book by Willa Cather that I finished today: "It was one more instance of the extraordinary personal devotion that Father Joseph had so often aroused and retained so long, in red men and yellow men and white." If you think that there is any case whatsoever for using the word *men* after the word *white*, you really ought to think about becoming an accountant or a chef.

On political correctness: No one likes to think of himself as mean-spirited, but a few of you will be, and a large number of great writers have been. You have to go where your cast of mind, your sense of style, and above all the logic of your story take you. If you are going to be looking over your shoulder because you fear you might hurt someone's feelings, you should think seriously, after accountancy, of becoming—well, let's say a violinist.

Now if truth be told, I violate a good many of these rules (for example, I'm always saying, "Do not look into your own heart and write; look into someone else's"—this from a man who recently wrote an autobiographical novel). So may you. But you ought at least to be aware that you are doing so and be able to justify each such decision. It's possible to take everything I've said both with a grain of salt and not lightly. That's the kind of balancing act all good writing consists of. (Note how I've just begun one sentence with a conjunction and used a preposition to end another, and thrown in parentheses to boot—none of them good ideas.) I wish you luck upon the high wire.