

Law & Storytelling

Tips From Authors & Writers

Richard Dooling

Contents

Writing and Storytelling Tips	1
Elmore Leonard	1
The Economist	1
The Elements of Style	2
Stephen King	2
George Orwell, <i>Politics & The English Language</i>	2
BILLY WILDER'S advice to screenwriters	3
Zadie Smith's Rules of Writing	3
Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing	4

Writing and Storytelling Tips

It never hurts to recall the advice imparted by the great authors and filmmakers who came before us.

Please consider the following notable collection of rules and writing tips:

Elmore Leonard

- [Elmore Leonard's rules for writers.](#)

The Economist

- [The Economist's Style Guide](#), which leads off with [George Orwell's Rules](#) from his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*.

The Elements of Style

- [The Elements of Style: Free 1918 Version](#) has many revisions, most recently [The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition 4th Edition](#) (1999).

Stephen King

Stephen King prefers to spend his days writing and reading, but sometimes you can get him to talk about storytelling: * [36 KILLER WRITING TIPS FROM STEPHEN KING](#) * [Stephen King On How To Write](#)

George Orwell, *Politics & The English Language*

Orwell, the author of *1984* and *Animal Farm* and many others, advised as follows: A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

1. What am I trying to say?
2. What words will express it?
3. What image or idiom will make it clearer?
4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

1. Could I put it more shortly?
2. Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

One can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

From Orwell's essay [Politics and the English Language](#).

BILLY WILDER'S advice to screenwriters

A writer/director and master of storytelling with a camera. *Some Like It Hot*, *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Blvd*, *The Apartment*, and many others. Classics.

1. The audience is fickle.
2. Grab 'em by the throat and never let 'em go.
3. Develop a clean line of action for your leading character.
4. Know where you're going.
5. The more subtle and elegant you are in hiding your plot points, the better you are as a writer.
6. If you have a problem with the third act, the real problem is in the first act.
7. A tip from [Lubitsch](#):: Let the audience add up two plus two. They'll love you forever.
8. In doing voice-overs, be careful not to describe what the audience already sees. Add to what they're seeing.
9. The event that occurs at the second act curtain triggers the end of the movie.
10. The third act must build, build, build in tempo and action until the last event, and then—that's it. Don't hang around.

From Cameron Crowe's [Conversations With Billy Wilder Advice For Screenwriters](#)

An actor entering through the door, you've got nothing. But if he enters through the window, you've got a situation.

–Billy Wilder

Zadie Smith's Rules of Writing

[Zadie Smith's 10 Rules of Writing.](#)

1. When still a child, make sure you read a lot of books. Spend more time doing this than anything else.
2. When an adult, try to read your own work as a stranger would read it, or even better, as an enemy would.
3. Don't romanticise your 'vocation.' You can either write good sentences or you can't. There is no 'writer's lifestyle.' All that matters is what you leave on the page.
4. Avoid your weaknesses. But do this without telling yourself that the things you can't do aren't worth doing. Don't mask self-doubt with contempt.
5. Leave a decent space of time between writing something and editing it.
6. Avoid cliques, gangs, groups. The presence of a crowd won't make your writing any better than it is.
7. Work on a computer that is disconnected from the Internet.

8. Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.
9. Don't confuse honours with achievement.
10. Tell the truth through whichever veil comes to hand — but tell it. Resign yourself to the lifelong sadness that comes from never being satisfied.

[Zadie Smith's 10 Rules of Writing.](#)

Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing

[Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing.](#)

1. Write
2. Put one word after another. Find the right word, put it down.
3. Finish what you're writing. Whatever you have to do to finish it, finish it.
4. Put it aside. Read it pretending you've never read it before. Show it to friends whose opinion you respect and who like the kind of thing that this is.
5. Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.
6. Fix it. Remember that, sooner or later, before it ever reaches perfection, you will have to let it go and move on and start to write the next thing. Perfection is like chasing the horizon. Keep moving.
7. Laugh at your own jokes.
8. The main rule of writing is that if you do it with enough assurance and confidence, you're allowed to do whatever you like. (That may be a rule for life as well as for writing. But it's definitely true for writing.) So write your story as it needs to be written. Write it honestly, and tell it as best you can. I'm not sure that there are any other rules. Not ones that matter.

[Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing.](#)

From Cameron Crowe's [Conversations With Billy Wilder Advice For Screenwriters](#)

- Another famous [Billy Wilder interview with James Linville in The Paris Review: The Art of Screenwriting No. 1.](#)