

Law & Storytelling

Tips From Authors & Writers

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Writing and Storytelling Tips

Great authors and storytellers sometimes offer good advice about how to cultivate our own good reading, writing, and storytelling.

Please consider the following notable collection of rules and writing tips. I have copied some into the body of the document and provided links to others.

Many come from Jon Winokur's justly famous site [Advice To Writers](#), a precious resource in itself.

The Economist

The Economist's Style Guide [George Orwell's Rules](#) from his famous essay *Politics and the English Language* (tips below).

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).

George Saunders: What Writers Really Do

[George Saunders: what writers really do when they write](#): A series of instincts, thousands of tiny adjustments, hundreds of drafts ... What is the mysterious process writers go through to get an idea on to the page?

These 4 videos are superb:

- [George Saunders - On Story](#)
- [George Saunders: On the Relationship Between Reader and Writer](#)
- [George Saunders: In Defense of Darkness](#)
- [George Saunders: On the Tricks of the Writing Process](#)

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](#) * Stephen King's [On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft](#), also highly recommended.

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. (Action-idea? rd)
4. Know where you're going. (Definitely in screenplays, and probably also in short stories. In longer fiction the author has more room leave options open and "let things happen." rd)
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

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

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 romanticize 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 honors 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.

From [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.

Flannery O'Connor's Ten Writing Tips

1. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that does not require his attention.
2. Art never responds to the wish to make it democratic; it is not for everybody; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it.
3. If there is no possibility for change in a character, we have no interest in him.
4. Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It's not a grand enough job for you.
5. The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where the human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal through the senses with abstractions.
6. The fiction writer has to engage in a continual examination of conscience. He has to be aware of the freak in himself.
7. The writer is only free when he can tell the reader to go jump in the lake. You want, of course, to get what you have to show across to him, but whether he likes it or not is no concern of the writer.
8. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there.
9. The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location.

10. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.

Flannery O'Connor's Ten Writing Tips

Jonathan Franzen's 10 Rules for Writers

1. The reader is a friend, not an adversary, not a spectator.
2. Fiction that isn't an author's personal adventure into the frightening or the unknown isn't worth writing for anything but money.
3. Never use the word "then" as a conjunction—we have "and" for this purpose. Substituting "then" is the lazy or tone-deaf writer's non-solution to the problem of too many "ands" on the page.
4. Write in the third person unless a really distinctive first-person voice offers itself irresistibly.
5. When information becomes free and universally accessible, voluminous research for a novel is devalued along with it.
6. The most purely autobiographical fiction requires pure invention. Nobody ever wrote a more auto biographical story than "The Metamorphosis".
7. You see more sitting still than chasing after.
8. It's doubtful that anyone with an internet connection at his workplace is writing good fiction.
9. Interesting verbs are seldom very interesting.
10. You have to love before you can be relentless.

From [Jonathan Franzen's 10 Rules for Writers](#)

Elmore Leonard

1. Never open a book with weather. If it's only to create atmosphere, and not a character's reaction to the weather, you don't want to go on too long. The reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people. There are exceptions. If you happen to be Barry Lopez, who has more ways than an Eskimo to describe ice and snow in his book *Arctic Dreams*, you can do all the weather reporting you want.
2. Avoid prologues: they can be annoying, especially a prologue following an introduction that comes after a foreword. But these are ordinarily found in non-fiction. A prologue in a novel is backstory, and you can drop it in anywhere you want. There is a prologue in John Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday*, but it's OK because a character in the book makes the point of what my rules are all about. He says: "I like a lot of talk in a book and I don't like to have

nobody tell me what the guy that's talking looks like. I want to figure out what he looks like from the way he talks."

3. Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue. The line of dialogue belongs to the character; the verb is the writer sticking his nose in. But "said" is far less intrusive than "grumbled", "gasped", "cautioned", "lied". I once noticed Mary McCarthy ending a line of dialogue with "she asseverated" and had to stop reading and go to the dictionary.
4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said" . . . he admonished gravely. To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange. I have a character in one of my books tell how she used to write historical romances "full of rape and adverbs".
5. Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose. If you have the knack of playing with exclamers the way Tom Wolfe does, you can throw them in by the handful.
6. Never use the words "suddenly" or "all hell broke loose". This rule doesn't require an explanation. I have noticed that writers who use "suddenly" tend to exercise less control in the application of exclamation points.
7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly. Once you start spelling words in dialogue phonetically and loading the page with apostrophes, you won't be able to stop. Notice the way Annie Proulx captures the flavour of Wyoming voices in her book of short stories *Close Range*.
8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters, which Steinbeck covered. In Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants", what do the "American and the girl with him" look like? "She had taken off her hat and put it on the table." That's the only reference to a physical description in the story.
9. Don't go into great detail describing places and things, unless you're Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language. You don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.
10. Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip. Think of what you skip reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them.

My most important rule is one that sums up the 10: if it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

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

How To Write, by Colson Whitehead

[How To Write, by Colson Whitehead.](#)

Kurt Vonnegut - 8 Tips On Writing A Good Short Story

[Kurt Vonnegut's 8 Tips on How to Write a Good Short Story](#)

- Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
- Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
- Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
- Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
- Start as close to the end as possible.
- Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
- Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
- Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

Steven Pinker

1. Reverse-engineer what you read. If it feels like good writing, what makes it good? If it's awful, why?
2. Prose is a window onto the world. Let your readers see what you are seeing by using visual, concrete language.
3. Don't go meta. Minimize concepts about concepts, like “approach, assumption, concept, condition, context, framework, issue, level, model, perspective, process, range, role, strategy, tendency,” and “variable.”
4. Let verbs be verbs. “Appear,” not “make an appearance.”
5. Beware of the Curse of Knowledge: when you know something, it's hard to imagine what it's like not to know it. Minimize acronyms & technical terms.

Use “for example” liberally. Show a draft around, & prepare to learn that what’s obvious to you may not be obvious to anyone else

6. Omit needless words (Will Strunk was right about this).
7. Avoid clichés like the plague (thanks, William Safire).
8. Old information at the beginning of the sentence, new information at the end.
9. Save the heaviest for last: a complex phrase should go at the end of the sentence.
10. Prose must cohere: readers must know how each sentence is related to the preceding one. If it’s not obvious, use “that is, for example, in general, on the other hand, nevertheless, as a result, because, nonetheless,” or “despite.”
11. Revise several times with the single goal of improving the prose.
12. Read it aloud.
13. Find the best word, which is not always the fanciest word. Consult a dictionary with usage notes, and a thesaurus.

From Steven Pinker’s *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century Reprint Edition* (Penguin 2015).