



“If you could only ask two questions...”

A Compendium of Top Advice from Contemporary Authors
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From the Desk of Mark Vanderpool

When it comes to finding good advice for the journey, an author-in-training is often confronted with the bland, the rehashed, the untested, and of course, the blatantly contradictory. Some will tell you that you must write every day, even when you don't feel like it; others will say that it's better to write only when you feel inspired. If you don't feel inspired, go clean out your garage.

Some will tell you to write only for yourself with no concept of audience; as though, at some mystical moment when the distant stars align, you'll know that your work is ready for the world, you'll pass it off to one or two editors or agents, the right one will bite, and the audience of your dreams will materialize.

Others will tell you that it almost never works that way. That it's better to focus on smaller goals, and to write with some concept of your ideal reader in mind from the very beginning, to write with some intuition of what that person loves and hates, and to write in a way that will entertain your reader while also respecting his or her intellect. And not some phony statistical average reader, not a mass audience, but your audience. The one that's right for you.

Wherever you may be in your confidence and development as an author, you've probably wished

you could consult the real experts, the people who've lived it, and ask them just the right questions to help you move forward in your own journey. As a way of welcoming you to LitReactor and rewarding you for joining our early notifications list, I've done something special for you. I decided that if I could boil down what I most wanted to ask of any successful author into only two questions, then I'd stand a good shot at getting a number of real pros to take the time to respond.

The combination of a brief and low-stress interview, handled in minutes by e-mail, and a good bank of contacts to draw from ... well, it paid off nicely. I hope you'll enjoy and benefit from the questions I came up with and from the high-quality answers that follow; likewise, I hope you'll stick around for all the great things we're bringing your way in the immediate future.

Very Best,

Mark Vanderpool
Director of Education
LitReactor.com

Chuck Palahniuk

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

One: the abused bit of writing advice. For me it's "Write what you know." This edict is especially crippling when it prompts people to write memoirs as their first book. Here they have a painful subject (because, who would write a happy, non-eventful autobiography?) that they're desperately attached to, and they have limited skills for executing. It's a perfect recipe for frustration and heartbreak. Instead of being an escape from, or a way to process their lives, these beginning writers become even more invested in their unhappy past. To sell it they

exaggerate it and are forced to perpetuate their pain. Even if their story reaches an audience, it fixes them in the public mind as "that damaged person" and can hinder a budding career. To me every book is a memoir; you can't write anything that's not a version of you, and your fiction is always more truthful than a diary could ever be. If you must, write your memoir and hide it away. Bring it to market only after you've written and sold a few novels. That way your work will identify you to readers first.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Two: to the writer with more desire than direction. I say, Write Short. David Sedaris told me that he has a "seven-page attention span." Beyond that length, he has trouble staying on task. To cope, limit yourself to fifteen minutes of writing every day or every other day. Or, limit yourself to a single page or a single sentence each time you

work. Even this small amount of effort will build your emotional investment in what you're writing. It will keep the story in your head from day to day, and you'll find yourself yearning to write. We always crave what's in short supply. If you have trouble writing even a sentence, don't flog yourself. Maybe writing isn't your passion.



Chuck Palahniuk is the bestselling author of *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), and *Choke* (2001), to name just a few of his early titles that became cult classics within a decade. His latest title, *Damned*, is set for release in October, 2011.

Official Website: www.chuckpalahniuk.net
Photo by Shawn Grant

Max Barry

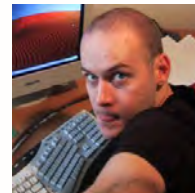
What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

I would group together every piece of advice that implies anything is more important than writing a good book. That's the secret to getting published, to being a happy writer, to building an audience, all of it. Yes, bad books get

published, but it's too easy to get distracted by marketing tricks and gimmicks. You don't want to get distracted. You want to write a good book.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Be unique. Don't write what you think other people will like. There's no reason for someone to read your words unless they're different.



Australian sensation **Max Barry** is the author of *Syrup* (1999), *Jennifer Government* (2003), *Company* (2006), and the newly released *Machine Man* (2011).

He blogs at www.maxbarry.com
Photo by Michael Heiko

Stephen Graham Jones

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

"Write for yourself," just because what writing is before it's everything else, before it's challenging the reader and changing the world and contributing to this and standing up against that, before writing can be or do any of those things, it's simply communication. It's you sitting down to talk somebody through a piece of paper. So, as communication, it needs to be clear, it needs to be intentional, doesn't need to be in any secret twinspeak you've got going on with the audience of you in your head, who's always going to see the brilliance in your words. This isn't to say your work won't be charged with those intimate systems of meaning you can't even really articulate -- a birdcage and an ashtray

trip different circuits for you than they do for me, especially in relation to each other -- and this isn't to say your work won't traverse only those emotional landscapes you've to some degree traversed. It's to say that your work has to be pointed outwards, not inwards. It's not for you, it's for them. All good art is. And, without that feedback loop only the market can really and finally provide, I don't know. Your fiction's safe, sure, but it's lonely. So, write for yourself, sure, but in the sense of satisfying your own tastes, living up to your own standards, beating at the walls of your chosen genre, all that. Not in the sense of you don't care if anybody else reads it. The work's not complete until they do.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Don't be smart. But it's so seductive, I know. With the way we can edit a piece for months, go back and say everything just right, it's so easy to sculpt a piece until it's just got a razor intelligence, until it's doing six things at once and no read's any more of a sure thing than the other, until you've referenced all your idols and made sly jokes about your favorite and unfavorite bands -- all tricks that are telling your reader the whole time that there's a serious intellect behind these words. Problem is, then the story's about you, and it's not happening on the page. And I see this happening so, so much lately -- people are getting trained and schooled to where their craft seriously shines, and then they go out and show that craft off in just dazzling ways. But it's never finally about the craft. I mean, craft's nice, it's

better there than not, but give me sincerity any day. Give me something you had to write, that you opened your own wrist for an inkwell to get down right. Tell a sincere story enough times, and your craft will finally rise to match it, I think. Be smart on the page all the time, though, and after a while you just hate everybody for not cueing into your brilliance. Trick is, they have. They just don't care. Brilliant people are all over the place. People with something to say, though? Not so much. As for how to have something to say, though? Live as many lives as you can as fast as you can. And pay attention, and forget to pay attention, lose yourself, so that you have to write your way back again and again.



Stephen Graham Jones digs zombies, werewolves and slasher flicks and teaches at the University of Colorado in Boulder. His books include *The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong* (2000), *All The Beautiful Sinners* (2003), *The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto* (2003), *Bleed Into Me: A Book of Stories* (2005), *Demon Theory* (2006), *The Long Trial of Nolan Dugatti* (2008), *Ledfeather* (2008), and *It Came From Del Rio* (2010).

More at www.demontheory.net
Photo by Larry D. Moore

Bret Easton Ellis

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

Write every day. Overrated.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Read. Read. Read.



Bret Easton Ellis is the author of *Less Than Zero* (1985), *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), *American Psycho* (1991), *The Informers* (1994), *Glamorama* (1998), *Lunar Park* (2005), and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010).

His official website is www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/eastonellis
Photo by Jeff Burton

Jack Ketchum

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

"Write what you know," hands down, because it doesn't define the word "know." A young writer could easily take it to mean "write from your own experience," what you observe or feel directly, without considering the fact that

we also "know" from books, television, movies, the computer, the theatre. I write all these things off on my taxes as "research", which indeed they are. They help me know my world.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Read everything. Try everything. Try writing poems, plays, short stories, articles, reportage, screenplays -- hell, even ad copy can broaden your chops. But don't you dare to try to write a book until you've done all or most of these things

and done them often. Carnegie Hall, right? Practice, practice, practice. Otherwise your book's gonna bore the hell out of us.



Jack Ketchum is a winner of the Bram Stoker Award and author of *The Girl Next Door*, *Joy Ride*, and *The Woman*. A film version of *The Woman* created by Jack Ketchum and Director Lucky McKee made its splash recently at Sundance and will appear in theaters in 30 states this September.

Jack's official site is www.JackKetchum.net
Photo by Steve Thornton, for www.theamericani.com

Craig Clevenger

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

The one that jumps immediately to mind is the bit from Strunk & White, "Omit needless words." I often see this taken to mean "use as few words as possible," which then gives rise to questions about a narrator's voice or the overall style of a story. For me, "needless" means anything that does not further contribute to the meaning of the sentence. If your narrator is from a certain region or time period (or both), his language may be marked by vernacular, or he

may otherwise be more formally eloquent than we are today. But those artifacts add meaning; your narrator's regional speech conveys information about him or her. And sometimes if your descriptions aren't clear, you may have to let your prose breathe a bit, and actually add more words to make your point. Use as few or many words as you have to, just make sure you need all of them.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Watch and listen; engage and participate in the world around you as much as you can. Fall in love, get your heart broken, work a job you hate, work a job you love, travel,

take risks. Empathy is the first tool you need to create realistic, compelling characters, and you can't learn empathy from books and movies.



Craig Clevenger is the author of *The Contortionist's Handbook* (2002) and *Dermaphoria* (2005). Craig is at work on an untitled third novel based on his short story, "*The Fade*."

Official site: www.craigclevenger.com
Photo by Timothy Faust

Amy Hempel

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

Newer writers often feel--and are encouraged in this feeling--that they should not write about something traumatic when it is too fresh, that they should wait until they have some "distance." I disagree with Wordsworth's famous notion of "emotion recollected in tranquility." There is a case to be made for writing from the white-hot center

of an experience. The feeling and adrenaline generated is galvanizing (if it doesn't paralyze you). It can certainly provide the urgency a reader wants to see on the page. I've done this several times, and I know any number of writers who have done this too--to excellent effect.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

My advice is to do volunteer work. Whether it is doing a shift on a crisis hotline, or construction work with Habitat for Humanity, or walking the dogs in an animal shelter--anything that is much-needed that you can do will give you, in addition to the gratifying knowledge that you are offering tangible help to someone who desperately needs

it, an insider's access to a whole new vocabulary, to people who cherish the same things you do, and a kind of confidence it's hard to come by otherwise. All of these carry over into your writing, whether you write about the service you perform or not.



Amy Hempel is the author of four collections of short stories - *Reasons to Live* (1985), *At The Gates of the Animal Kingdom* (1990), *Tumble Home* (1997) and *The Dog of the Marriage* (2005). *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel* (2006) binds those four works together. She was an editor on *Unleashed: Poems by Writers' Dogs* (1999), and her short stories have appeared in prestigious publications like *Elle*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, *Playboy* and *Vanity Fair*.

Steve Erickson

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

I would say almost any "common" piece of writing advice is likely to be false or misleading or easily misconstrued if it suggests that there's a common way to go about writing. All my life I've heard that you have to write a certain number of hours a day or a certain number of words, or you have to write standing up or in the morning or with your back to the window or sober or drunk or rewriting everything ten times or rewriting nothing. But the only real

rule is to write regularly, whatever that means to you according to whatever clock you live by, and there even are exceptions to that because sometimes you just have to get on about the business of living a life. I've never had a writing block in part because I've never chosen to call it that; rather I have days when I accept that I'm not meant to write that day.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

The most positive piece of advice I give to any writer (foolish enough to ask me for advice) is to not have an adversarial relationship with your own creativity. You and you are on the same side. The whole romantic Hemingwayesque idea

of going to the mountaintop and doing hand-to-hand combat with your muse is just going to have you blowing out your brains with a shotgun sooner or later. Soon the desire will find its own direction.



Steve Erickson is a novelist, essayist and film critic. The recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature and a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, his novels include *Days Between Stations* (1985), *Rubicon Beach* (1986), *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989), *Arc d'X* (1993), *Amnesiascope* (1996), *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999), *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005), *Zeroville* (2007), and *These Dreams of You* (2012).

His official website is www.steveerickson.org

Neil Gaiman

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

"Write what you know" when people use it to mean, do not imagine, do not dream, do not put yourself inside another's head, do not make magic, do not create art that is anything or in any way outside of what you have seen or done.

People know so much.

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

Read everything. And make lots of amazing mistakes.



Neil Gaiman's works include *Good Omens* (1990), *The Sandman: Book of Dreams* (1991), *Stardust* (1997), *American Gods* (2001), *Coraline* (2002), *Anansi Boys* (2005), and *The Graveyard Book* (2008).

Personal Website: www.neilgaiman.com
Photo by Kimberly Butler

Christopher Bram

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

I think any ironclad rule is wrong, simply because there are always exceptions. For example, we often hear "Show don't tell." However, although "showing" can be very effective dramatically, a little "telling" speeds the process, enabling

the writer to deliver important information quickly. There will still be unanswered questions the reader will have to answer for him- or herself. Besides, all good narrative writing is about "storytelling."

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

The most practical advice I can offer new writers is that they need to find two or three trustworthy friends to whom they can show their works-in-progress. These friends need to be able to give praise as well as criticism, and they should not get hung up on the small stuff. You won't find these readers

right away but by trial and error over the years. (And you will meet some real assholes along the way.) Too many readers can be a nuisance, overwhelming you with conflicting suggestions, but two or three is just right.



Christopher Bram is known for non-fiction and essays, as well as novels that include *Surprising Myself* (1987), *Hold Tight* (1988), *In Memory of Angel Clare* (1989), *Almost History* (1992), *Father of Frankenstein* (1995), *Gossip* (1997), *The Notorious Dr. August: His Real Life and Crimes* (2000), *Lives of the Circus Animals* (2003), and *Exiles in America* (2006). He teaches at New York University and for LitReactor.com.

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Photo by Draper Shreeve

Holiday Reinhorn

What is a common piece of writing advice that you find false, misleading, or easily misconstrued?

The term “Finding THE Voice” or “Discovering Your One True Voice As A Writer,” has always irked me.

When I was starting out, which really means, starting out every day with a blank page in front of my face, the very last thing I wanted to discover was my own voice. I knew it was already there because I heard it all day long in my ears.

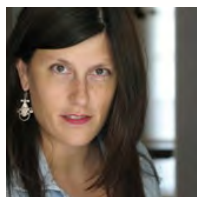
What I was searching for as an aspiring writing student, were things like craft exercises and tools and resources. I was also searching for the devotion it took to sit myself down in a chair once a day and keep doing it over and over and over again. I was searching for tangible things, practical things that I could locate, like car keys.

For me, voice was and still is, too mysterious to look for directly. It seems easier to just believe it will be there if I focus on telling the truth.

Another problem with the “voice concept” is I don’t think “voice” is what really makes a story work. I think characters and the havoc they wreak are what makes a story work.

I believe a voice is unique to each STORY, not to each writer. If we all had one note to play, would we really spend an entire lifetime sitting around playing it?

I like to think there are infinite numbers of voices within us and they all serve our stories. They are not something to worry about because they are already there. Story is what we are searching for and the journey never ends.



Holiday Reinhorn is the author of *BIG CATS: Stories*. (Free Press, 2005) Her work has appeared in *Tin House*, *Zoetrope*, *Ploughshares* and *Columbia*, among others. A former performance artist, she started writing fiction after being held at gunpoint while waiting tables at a seafood restaurant in New York City.

Beginning in October, 2011, she’s also on faculty for LitReactor.com. Come to our site to find out more.

Photo by Kristen Lara Getchell

If you could give only one positive piece of advice to a young writer with more desire than direction, what would it be?

First: Write what needs to be written in whatever style it needs to be written in. Let the story be your guide. Let it completely baffle and surprise you. Trust in it.

You’ll be given lots of advice early on about what you should write, in what form you should write it in, in what “voice” or tone or genre, etc. You’ll have people tell you what kind of writer you are or compare you to writers you love and especially to writers you don’t!

Some of the advice will be very good as well, but you need to develop a healthy philosophy about taking critique on your work. Be open to it, but not too open is what I’m saying. Take what you like and leave the rest.

Don’t let these responses stop you from writing either, God forbid, or doing the opposite of what readers are suggesting, especially if your instincts are telling you something powerful.

In the early days, I was always being told that I should be working on a novel rather than on a collection. By friends, editors, agents, advisors, teachers. The problem was that a novel was not what needed to be written at that point. I didn’t need to turn one of my stories into a novel. What I needed to do was finish the 13 stories I had.

It makes me feel good every time I look at the book’s cover to know that the voice inside me was stronger and truer than all the input I was getting.

Richard Hugo said: “an act of the imagination is an act of self-acceptance.”

That pretty much sums it up.

Second: I would say that if you have a desire to write, cherish that desire by creating a consistent, practical and sacred writing schedule for yourself and finding a community of trusted writers to share your work with. Desire will go nowhere without practice, vulnerability and the risk that comes with sharing.

Writers do work alone, but they don’t necessarily thrive alone. Reading is a huge part of a writers’ life usually, and it’s great to have a group to talk about what we are reading and about the technical choices we are making in our work at any given time.

All great works in artist’s lives come from some sort of infrastructure they created for themselves internally and externally. It may be conservatory schooling, workshops, classes or in just a small community of colleagues that meet somewhere once in a while.

When we share our intentions, have deadlines, vocalize our dreams and ambitions and have trustworthy readers to show up to, we can, as Samuel Beckett said: “Fail better.” And better and better and better. . . .

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