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PAUL GRAHAM

WRITING, BRIEFLY

March 2005

(In the process of answering an email, I accidentally wrote a tiny essay about writing. I usually spend weeks on an essay. This one took 67 minutes—23 of writing, and 44 of rewriting.)

I think it's far more important to write well than most people realize. Writing doesn't just communicate ideas; it generates them. If you're bad at writing and don't like to do it, you'll miss out on most of the ideas writing would have generated.

As for how to write well, here's the short version: Write a bad version 1 as fast as you can; rewrite it over and over; cut out everything unnecessary; write in a conversational tone; develop a nose for bad writing, so you can see and fix it in yours; imitate writers you like; if you can't get started, tell someone what you plan to write about, then write down what you said; expect 80% of the ideas in an essay to happen after you start writing it, and 50% of those you start with to be wrong; be confident enough to cut; have friends you trust read your stuff and tell you which bits are confusing or drag; don't (always) make detailed outlines; mull ideas over for a few days before writing; carry a small notebook or scrap paper with you; start writing when you think of the first sentence; if a deadline forces you to start before that, just say the most important sentence first; write about stuff you like; don't try to sound impressive; don't hesitate to change the topic on the fly; use footnotes to contain digressions; use anaphora to knit sentences together; read your essays out loud to see (a) where you stumble over awkward phrases and (b) which bits are boring (the paragraphs you dread reading); try to tell the reader something new and useful; work in fairly big quanta of time; when you restart, begin by rereading what you have so far; when you finish, leave yourself something easy to start with; accumulate notes for topics you plan to cover at the bottom of the file; don't feel obliged to cover any of them; write for a reader who won't read the essay as carefully as you do, just as pop songs are designed to sound ok on crappy car radios; if you say anything mistaken, fix it immediately; ask friends which sentence you'll regret most; go back and tone down harsh remarks; publish stuff online, because an audience makes you write more, and thus generate more ideas; print out drafts instead of just looking at them on the screen; use simple, germanic words; learn to distinguish surprises from digressions; learn to recognize the approach of an ending, and when one appears, grab it.

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