

WORDSMITHY

HOT TIPS FOR THE WRITING LIFE



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INTRODUCTION

In the world of public speaking, it is a commonplace for young aspirants to the lectern to be told something like “tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.” This admirable advice, strong on repetition, is counsel I intend to follow here. Repetition is a sound pedagogical device, even for those who do not think of themselves as thick-skulled, in whose ranks we might have to include at least some aspiring writers.

In this introduction, I would like to give a summary overview of the seven main exhortations I would like to deliver. In the main body of this small book, I would like to expand on these seven points, extracting seven more points out of each of them. And then in the conclusion, I will harmoniously allude to the whole business once again. But the conclusion will be so graceful, you’ll scarcely notice it.

The Anglo-Saxons had a great word for the right word, the word that you need right now, when another one simply

would not do. That word is *wordriht*. Think of it as the *mot juste*, not that *they* would put it like that. Who could imagine Beowulf talking that way to Hrothmund, *n'est-ce pas?* No one really, although French did come into English via the Norman invasion, and Norman is short for Northman, a bunch of whom had at an early time in the proceedings come down into France from Beowulf's neck of the woods. Still . . . another bit of advice that I should have put in this book would be to "avoid tangents." Don't get distracted. Stay on point.

So in no particular order of importance, I would encourage those who want to learn the *wordriht* life to approximate something like the following:

1. Know something about the world, and by this I mean the world outside of books. This might require joining the Marines, or working on an oil rig or as a hashslinger at a truck stop in Kentucky. Know what things smell like out there. If everything you write smells like a library, then your prospective audience will be limited to those who like the smell of libraries.

2. Read. Read constantly. Read the kind of stuff you wish you could write. Read until your brain creaks. Tolkien said that his ideas sprang up from the leaf mold of his mind: your readings are the trees where your fallen leaves would come from. Mind mulch. Cognitive compost.

3. Read mechanical helps. By this I mean dictionaries, etymological histories, books of anecdotes, dictionaries of foreign phrases, books of quotations, books on how to write dialogue, and so on. The plot will usually fail to grip, so just read a page a day. If you think it makes you out to be too much of a word-dork, then don't tell anybody about it. Let's keep it between you and me.

A VERITABLE RUSSIAN DOLL

of Writing Tips

The first tip was to get out more.

Know something about the world, and by this I mean the world outside of books. This might require joining the Marines, or working on an oil rig or as a hashslinger at a truck stop in Kentucky. Know what things smell like out there. If everything you write smells like a library, then your prospective audience will be limited to those who like the smell of libraries.

A writer should have some kind of real life ballast. Here are seven tips that will help explain that first tip. And, weather permitting, we may do the same thing with the other six as well. Each of our first seven tips is a Russian doll, lined up on a mantelpiece for you, and when we take each one apart, we should find seven additional points inside each one. At least you should find them if we did this right.

1

Real life *duties* should be preferred over real life tourism.

Taking care of your preschoolers or being deployed with the Seventh Fleet is far to be preferred over purchasing a backpack and heading off to find America, or even worse, yourself.

Look at the world, and try not to look at yourself looking at the world. Your readers may well be interested in your description of the world—and they will learn plenty about you in the process—but they will not be all that interested in your descriptions of yourself directly, even though you may be using the outside world as the scenic backdrop for your junior high melodrama of a tortured and misunderstood soul.

When you discharge your duties in the real world you are learning the concept, and this helps you understand how to discharge your duties to your readers. In the task of writing and reading, the initiative in doing one's duty lies with you, the writer. You are the one who started the whole thing by writing whatever it was you wrote, and so the responsibility is yours. You started it. Your duty as a writer is the same as the respective duties of the plumber, the knee surgeon, the computer repairman, and the architect, which is to *make it work*. Moreover, your duty is to make it work for the customer, which in this case is the reader. Readers have responsibilities too, and that would be a fine topic for another book, but in the meantime your job is not to make them do *their* duty raw as they read your writing. Your job is to make it as pleasant as you can for them.

So when you are out and about during your stint in the Marine Corps, or wherever you are, you are learning two

READ

Until Your Brain Creaks

The second tip concerned the writer's reading habits.

Read. Read constantly. Read the kind of stuff you wish you could write. Read until your brain creaks. Tolkien said that his ideas sprang up from the leaf mold of his mind: your readings are the trees where your fallen leaves would come from.

So then, what about it? How should writers read?

1

The first thing is that writers should be voracious readers.

We live in a narcissistic age, which means that many want to have the praise that comes from *having* read, without the antecedent labor of actually reading. Wanting to write without reading is like wanting to grind flour without gathering wheat, like wanting to make boards without logging, and

like wanting to have a Mississippi Delta without any tributaries somewhere in Minnesota. Output requires intake, and literary output requires literary intake. We already noted this principle with regard to experiences of life, lived out as a wildcatter in the oil fields, or something. We now come to apply it to input through books.

You learn about life from other writers who have learned about life, but you, as a writer, are also learning something else. You are learning the craft. How did he *do* that? How did he create that effect?

As a writer who reads voraciously, you are like a chef who makes a point of eating in a lot of other restaurants. You should know what it is like to be on the receiving end. When you read widely, you are in a position to identify with the readers who will be picking up what you write. You know what irritates you, you know what makes you laugh, you know what makes you want to pick up this author's next book. You are simply gathering grist for the Golden Rule mill—do as you would be done by. Reading a great deal means that you are “done by” a lot, and you then have an experienced measurement with which to evaluate how you are doing by others.

TAKEAWAY POINT

Spend a lot of time reading. The impact of this reading is not something you need to catalog and track. Just let it happen.

RECOMMENDED READING

C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

WORD FUSSERS

and Who-whomers

In my recent seven-fold set of admonitions for writers, my third bit of advice was this:

Read mechanical helps. By this I mean dictionaries, etymological histories, books of anecdotes, dictionaries of foreign phrases, books of quotations, books on how to write dialogue, and so on. The plot will usually fail to grip, so just read a page a day. If you think it makes you out to be too much of a word-dork, then don't tell anybody about it.

Under this head, allow me to break it out into seven separate elements, but with a brief caution first.

Having eggs doesn't mean that you know how to make the omelet. But if you don't have the eggs, it doesn't matter if you *do* know how to make the omelet. Writing is like cooking, and words are your ingredients. In order to write well, you need to have those ingredients, and you need to know those

ingredients. And having them means collecting them, and it also means studying them once you have them.

That said, here we go.

❦ 1 ❦

Read boring books on writing mechanics. Include grammars, books on how to write dialogue, books on how not to write dialogue (“I dropped my toothpaste!” he said crestfallenly), and books about finding good agents and how to blow away those who read query letters. Writing is a vocation, and there is a body of professional literature out there—which is uneven in quality, just like every other kind of book. Read a lot of it anyway.

Somebody needs to tell you where to put the comma. If you read the dire warnings of prescriptivists with whom you do not agree (note my use of “with whom”), then that’s all right. You are a writer, and you work with words, and you don’t have to agree with everybody. It is still a benefit to know what people think. Oscar Wilde once defined a gentleman as one who never insulted somebody else *accidentally*. In a similar spirit, a competent writer wants to be the kind of person who is never guilty of a solecism accidentally. If you do it, do it with your eyes open.

Say what you will, there is a difference between someone who does not agree with the grammarian in tight shoes and the person who simply does not know what is going on. Master the rules before you assume that you have the right to break them. If you proceed directly to the slob option, then the problem is simply laziness. Take the question of the serial comma. In a list, do you put a comma in before the final and?

BORN FOR THE CLERIH EW

My fourth bit of advice for aspiring writers was:

Stretch before your routines. If you want to write Italian sonnets, try to write some short stories. If you want to write a few essays, write a novel, or maybe a novella if you are pressed for time. If you want to write haiku, then limber up with opinion pieces for *The Washington Post*.

As with the others, this point can also be separated into seven things to think about.

1

This helps to keep content vibrant. If someone specializes in only one form of writing, the chances are good that he will master that structure, and the content he produces to fit within that structure will become pretty predictable. After that has been happening for a while, a school of thought

will arise blaming the structure and demand freedom from such limitations and constrictions. But that is like noticing that your tap water smells like sulfur and therefore replacing your table pitcher.

When it comes to this, cross-pollination is good. Hybrids are good. Mutts are good. If, in order to be whatever it is you are writing, the structure has to be there, then the only thing that changes is the content. And when you have been to a number of other places, the content of your conversation is more interesting. Who would you rather listen to: someone who has been around the world three times on a oil freighter, or someone who never came out of his basement—even if he had really sweet bandwidth down there? In this case, the world and the exotic locations are the forms of writing that you need to visit, whether or not you intend to live there.

When you are experimenting with crossing over from one genre to another, the point is to focus on different forms. Because poetry is form intensive, it is a great place to start. If you try your hand at essays instead of your usual articles, you are not limbering up enough. But if you move from essays to sonnets, the challenge of fitting into a different form will be quite striking.

TAKEAWAY POINT

The limitations of form are verbal traction. Get some traction.

RECOMMENDED READING

Clement Wood, *Poets' Handbook* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Co., 1942).

Lewis Turco, *The New Book of Forms* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986).

THE MEMOIRS

of Old Walnut Heart

My fifth bit of advice for writers was:

Be at peace with being lousy for a while. Chesterton once said that anything worth doing was worth doing badly. He was right. Only an insufferable egoist expects to be brilliant first time out.

But let's unpack this a bit.

• 1 •

Concert pianists can do what they do because they practiced scales for years. So most of the music that comes from them over the course of their lives gets thrown away in the practice studio. The quality of what you keep will be directly proportional to how much you are willing to throw away. Drills, scales, and exercises should not be something you consider beneath you.

It makes sense to us to make a big deal out of it if we discovered a new sketch pad that Leonardo DaVinci hid in his basement, but it should also make sense to us that Leonardo did not make a big deal out of it. If we found the commonplace book belonging to the author of *Beowulf*, we would be excited to study it—finding out just why he decided to use *hwaet* in that particular place. But this is because we all know that *Beowulf* is an important poem, as tested by centuries, and somebody could probably get a PhD on *hwaet* placement out of it. We don't know that about our scraps and jottings, and if we save them all just in case, we are likely being delusional.

What you delete from your computer, what you take out of your prose, is as important as what you leave in. It is not a loss. When you take away that unnecessary adjective, the removal adds to the ambience surrounding that noun. When you write a page and delete the whole thing, there is a sense in which it is not deleted. The better writer who remained behind is still there. In this sense the analogy to a musician practicing scales is most apt. The point is not to create so many yards of music. The point is to create a particular kind of musician, one who, when called upon, can do what he is expected to do. Writers who throw their scraps away are leaving a better writer behind, and that was the point, wasn't it?

But in order to throw scraps away, you have to be able to recognize them. You have to think about language, what it can do, what it cannot do, and how a disciplined approach to language is a disciplined approach to being human. The apostle James tells us that a man who can control his tongue can control the rest of his body as well. This goes double for the man who is putting what the tongue does into a more permanent setting.

ANCIENT ROMAN TODDLERS

Back in my callow youth, just a few chapters ago, when I set out seven basic pointers for writers, the sixth one was

Learn other languages, preferably languages that are upstream from ours. This would include Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon. The brain is not a shoebox that “gets full,” but is rather a muscle that expands its capacity with increased use. The more you know, the more you *can* know. The more you can do with words, the more you can *do*. As it turns out.

And so here are some additional thoughts on that.

• 1 •

God approves of translation, and by this I am referring to the process of translation. Obviously, some translations are better than others, and some are atrocious. But God approves of the

attempt. The work itself is a good work. Good things come out of the process of moving house from one set of linguistic thought forms to another. Jesus taught His disciples in Aramaic, but God wanted the original that we have received to be a Greek translation of that teaching. The canonical text of the Lord's teaching is a *translation* and not what originally came from the Lord's mouth. This means that God approves of translations. We ought not to accept, therefore, the idea that something is always lost in translation. Sometimes, sure. But there are also many times when something is *gained* in translation.

For you as a writer, translating something you have written into another language can be a great way of sharpening your writing. This applies even if the translations you undertake are, like mine have been, pretty rudimentary. This need not be an occasion for putting on airs—I am just saying that it might benefit you to take one of your *the cat sat on the mat* sentences and put it into Hebrew.

TAKEAWAY POINT

A man with a watch knows what time it is. A man with two watches is not quite sure. A man with seven watches has the best idea.

RECOMMENDED READING

Alexander Humez and Nicholas Humez, *Latin for People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).

UNCOMMON COMMONPLACES

My last bit of advice on the *wordriht* life was:

Keep a commonplace book. Write down any notable phrases that occur to you or that you come across. If it is one that you have found in another writer, and it is striking, then quote it, as the fellow said, or modify it to make it yours. If Chandler said that a guy had a cleft chin you could hide a marble in, that should come in useful sometime. If Wodehouse said somebody had an accent you could turn handsprings on, then he might have been talking about Jennifer Nettles of Sugarland. Tinker with stuff. Get your fingerprints on it.

• 1 •

The writer's life is a scavenger's life. A little here and a little there, diligently pursued, and pretty soon you have a lot of material. When you come across a striking phrase (and if you

are reading properly this will happen a *lot*), make a note of it. Use it yourself in conversation. If there is no opportunity to use it in conversation, or in something you are writing, then you need not worry because you wrote it down in your commonplace book. You can always use it later.

As a rare concession to Stuff White People Like, I recommend getting the smaller pocket-sized moleskine notebook (moleskine.com). They are easy to keep, easy to find, and easy to write in. You are not compiling anything in logical order but are rather just putting them down in the order you come across them. Even if you don't wind up using most of what you record, it is still a helpful mental exercise to write down striking phrases that you find in other writers.

P. G. Wodehouse wrote nearly ninety books, and I am currently about halfway through them. I have read him assiduously over the years, but about five years ago I decided to read through the whole corpus. Overlook Press is issuing some fine hardback editions, and so I always have one Wodehouse handy. When I am about halfway through that one, I order the next one. As I read, I highlight words or phrases that strike me. When I am done with the book, I sit down with it and my commonplace book and jot down anything that I think I might find to be useful later on. Not surprisingly, much of my commonplace book comes from Wodehouse—here are sample entries from where I have it opened now: “flickered at the edges,” “mass of inert porridge,” “dusty high road,” “burning words of love into her alabaster ear,” “come off the boil a bit,” “cut and thrust,” and “badly dressed leper.” There is a lot to work with there.