



WORDSMITHY

Hot Tips for the Writing Life

by

DOUGLAS WILSON

Wordsmithy

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HOT TIPS FOR THE WRITING LIFE



Douglas Wilson

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For Toby Sumpter,
a good friend with good words.

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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.

Wordsmithy is for writers of every sort, whether experienced veterans, still just hoping, or somewhere in between. Through a series of out-of-the-ordinary lessons, each with its own takeaway points and recommended readings, Douglas Wilson provides indispensable guidance, showing how to develop the writer's craft and the kind of life from which good writing comes.

"Aspiring writers do not need another pandering, pat-on-the-back, feel-good writer's manual. They don't need any more cheap promises for zero-to-bestseller surefire success. What they need is something with no-nonsense substance, and Douglas Wilson offers it in *Wordsmithy*. Quick, punchy, and immensely wise, *Wordsmithy* is a cut-to-the-chase collection of important and sometimes unexpected tips for the writing life."

BRETT McCracken

AUTHOR, Hipster Christianity: When Church & Cool Collide

"This book just nails what it takes to be a writer. And it isn't just a matter of being a sensitive creative soul. A writer needs to live in the actual world, to "read the kind of stuff you wish you could write," and to love language. This book embodies what it preaches in its practicality, in how funny and fun to read it is, and in the way its words dance through the mind."

GENE EDWARD VEITH

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Douglas Wilson is pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, ID, editor of *Credenda/Agenda* magazine, former newspaper columnist, and author of over thirty books on a variety of subjects. He has written for *The Huffington Post*, *World, Books & Culture*, *Christianity Today*, and more. He blogs regularly at dougwils.com. Lord willing, and the creek don't rise, he intends to continue.

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