

How to Write Good

by Michael O'Donoghue

"If I could not earn a penny from my writing, I would earn my livelihood at something else and continue to write at night."

Irving Wallace

"Financial success is not the only reward of good writing.
It brings to the writer rich inner satisfaction as well."

Eliot Foster, Director of Admissions, Famous Writers School

Introduction

A long time ago, when I was just starting out, I had the good fortune to meet the great Willa Cather. With all the audacity of youth, I asked her what advice she would give the would-be-writer and she replied:

"My advice to the would-be-writer is that he start slowly, writing short undemanding things, things such as telegrams, flip-books, crank letters, signature scarves, spot quizzes, capsule summaries, fortune cookies and errata. Then, when he feels he's ready, move up to the more challenging items such as mandates, objective correlatives, passion plays, pointless diatribes, minor classics, manifestos, mezzotints, oxymora, exposes, broadsides, and papal bulls.

And above all, never forget that the pen is mightier than the plow-share. By this I mean that writing, all in all, is a hell of a lot more fun than farming. For one thing, writers seldom, if ever, have to get up at five o'clock in the morning and shovel manure. As far as I'm concerned, that gives them the edge right there."

She went on to tell me many things, both wonderful and wise, probing the secrets of her craft, showing how to weave a net of words and capture the fleeting stuff of life. Unfortunately, I've forgotten every bit of it.

I do recall, however, her answer when I asked "If you could only give me one rule to follow, what would it be?" She paused, looked down for a moment and finally said, "Never wear brown shoes with a blue suit."

There's very little I could add to that except to say "Go to it and good luck!"

Lesson 1 - The Grabber

The "grabber" is the initial sentence of a novel or short story designed to jolt the reader out of his complacency and arouse his curiosity, forcing him to press onward. For example:

"It's no good, Alex," she rejoined, "Even if I did love you, my father would never let me marry an alligator."

The reader is immediately bombarded with questions, questions such as "Why won't her father let her marry an alligator?" "How come she doesn't love him?" and "Can she learn to love him in time?" The reader's interest has been "grabbed"!

Just so there'll be no misunderstanding about grabbers, I've listed a few more below:

"I'm afraid you're too late," sneered Zoltan. "The fireplace has already flown south for the winter!"

Sylvia lay sick among the silverware...

Chinese vegetables mean more to me than you do, my dear," Charles remarked to his wife, adding injury to insult by lodging a grapefruit knife in her neck.

"I have in my hands," Professor Willobee exclaimed, clutching a sheaf of papers in his trembling fingers and pacing in circles about the carpet while I stood at the window, barely able to make out the Capitol dome through the thick, churning fog that rolled in off the Potomac, wondering to myself what matter could possibly be so urgent as to bring the distinguished historian bursting into my State Department office at the unseemly hour, "definitive proof that Abraham Lincoln was a homo!"

These are just a handful of the possible grabbers. Needless to say, there are thousands of others, but if you fail to think of them, feel free to use any or all of these.

Lesson 2-The Ending

All too often, the budding author finds that his tale has run its course and yet he sees no way to satisfactorily end it, or, in literary parlance, "wrap it up." Observe how easily I resolve this problem:

Suddenly, everyone was run over by a truck.
-the end-

If the story happens to be set in England, use the same ending, slightly modified:

Suddenly, everyone was run over by a lorry.
-the end-

If set in France:

Soudainement, tout le monde etait ecrassé par un camion.
-finis-

You'll be surprised at how many different settings and situations this ending applies to. For instance, if you were writing a story about ants, it would end "Suddenly, everyone was run over by a centipede." In fact, this is the only ending you ever need use.*

*Warning - if you are writing a story about trucks, do not have the trucks run over by a truck. Have the trucks run over by a *mammoth* truck.

Lesson 3-Choosing A Title

A friend of mine recently had a bunch of articles rejected by the *Reader's Digest* and, unable to understand why, he turned to me for advice. I spotted the problem at a glance. His titles were all wrong. By calling his pieces such things as "Unwed Mothers - A Head Start on Life," "Cancer - The Incurable Disease," "A Leading Psychologist Explains Why There Should Be More Violence on Television," "Dognappers I Have Known and Loved," "My Baby Was Born Dead and I Couldn't Care Less" and "Pleasantville - Last of the Wide-Open Towns," he had seriously misjudged his market. To steer him straight, I drew up this list of all-purpose surefire titles:

_____ at the Crossroads
The Case for _____
The Role of _____
Coping with Changing _____
A Realistic Look at _____
The _____ Experience
Bridging the _____ Gap
A _____ for All Seasons

Simply fill in the blanks with the topic of your choice and, if that doesn't work you can always resort to the one title that never fails:

South America, the Sleeping Giant on our Doorstep

Lesson 4-Exposition

Perhaps the most difficult technique for the fledgling writer to master is proper treatment of exposition. Yet watch the sly, subtle way I "set the scene" of my smash play, *The Last to Know*, with a minimum of words and effort.

(The curtain opens on a tastefully appointed dining room, the table ringed by men in tuxedos and women in costly gowns. There is a knock at the door.)

LORD Oh, come in, Lydia. Allow me to introduce my dinner guests
OVERBROOKE: to you. This is Cheryl Heatherton, the madcap soybean heiress whose zany antics actually mask a heart broken by her inability to meaningfully communicate with her father, E. J. Heatherton, seated to her left, who is too caught up in the heady world of high finance to sit down and have a quiet chat with his own daughter, unwanted to begin with, disposing of his paternal obligations by giving her everything, everything but love, that is.
Next to them sits Geoffrey Drake, a seemingly successful merchant banker trapped in an unfortunate marriage with a

woman half his age, who wistfully looks back upon his days as the raffish Group Captain of an R.A.F. bomber squadron that flew eighty-one missions over Berlin, his tortured psyche refusing to admit, despite frequent nightmares in which, dripping with sweat, he wakes screaming, "Pull it up! Pull it up, I say! I can't hold her any longer! We're losing altitude! We're going down! Jerry at three o'clock Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggh!", that his cowardice and his cowardice alone was responsible for the loss of his crew and "Digger," the little Manchester terrier who was their mascot. The empty chair to his right was vacated just five minutes ago by Geoffrey's stunning wife, twenty-three-year-old, golden-tressed Edwina Drake, who, claiming a severe migraine, begged to be excused that she might return home and rest, whereas, in reality, she is, at this moment, speeding to the arms of another man, convinced that if she can steal a little happiness now, it doesn't matter who she hurts later on. The elderly servant preparing the Caviar en Socle is Andrew who's been with my family for over forty years although he hasn't received a salary for the last two, even going on so far as to loan me his life's savings to cover my spiraling gambling debts but it's only a matter of time before I am exposed as a penniless fraud and high society turns its back on me.

The dark woman opposite me is Yvonne de Zenobia, the fading Mexican film star, who speaks of her last movie as though it was shot only yesterday, unwilling to face the fact that she hasn't been before the cameras in nearly fifteen years; unwilling to confess that her life has been little more than a tarnished dream.

As for her companion, Desmond Trelawney, he is an unmitigated scoundrel about whom the less said, the better. And, of course, you know your father, the ruthless war profiteer, and your hopelessly alcoholic mother, who never quite escaped her checkered past, realizing, all too late, that despite her jewels and limousines, she was still just a taxi-dancer who belonged to any man for a drink and a few cigarettes.

Please take a seat. We were just talking about you.

This example demonstrates everything you'll ever need to know about exposition. Study it carefully.

Lesson 5 - Finding the Raw Material

As any professional writer will tell you, the richest source of material is one's relatives, one's neighbors and, more often than not, total strangers. A day doesn't go by without at least one person, upon learning that I'm a professional writer, offering me some terrific idea for a story. And I'm sure it will come as no shock when I say that most of the ideas are pretty damn good!

Only last week, a pipe-fitter of my acquaintance came up with a surprise ending guaranteed to unnerve the most jaded reader. What you do is tell this really weird story that keeps on getting weirder and weirder until, just when the reader is muttering, "How in the heck is he going to get himself out of this one? He's really painted himself into a corner!" you spring the "mind-blower": "But then he woke up. It had all been a dream!" (which I, professional writer that I am, honed down to: "But then the alarm clock rang. It had all been a dream!"). And this came from a common, run-of-the-mill pipe-fitter! For free!

Cabdrivers, another great wealth of material, will often remark, "Boy, lemme tell ya! Some of the characters I get in this cab would fill a book! Real kooks, ya know what I mean?" And then, without my having to coax even the slightest, they tell me about them, and they would fill a book. Perhaps two or three books. In addition, if you're at all interested in social science, cabdrivers are able to provide countless examples of the failures of the welfare state.

To illustrate just how valid these unsolicited suggestions can be, I shall print a few lines from a newly completed play inspired by my aunt, who had the idea as far back as when she was attending grade school. It's called *If an Old House Could Talk, What Tales It Would Tell*:

THE FLOOR: Do you remember the time the middle-aged lady who always wore the stiletto heels tripped over an extension cord while running to answer the phone and spilled the Ovaltine all over me and they spent the next 20 minutes mopping it up?

THE WALL: No.

Of course, I can't print too much here because I don't want to spoil the ending (although I will give you a hint: It involves a truck...). I just wanted to show you how much the world would have missed had I rejected my aunt's suggestion out of hand simply because she is not a professional writer like myself.

Lesson 6 - Quoting Other Authors

If placed in a situation where you must quote another author, always write "[sic]" after any word that may be misspelled or looks the least bit questionable in any way. If there are no misspellings or curious words, toss in a few "[sic]"s just to break up the flow. By

doing this, you will appear to be knowledgeable and "on your toes," while the one quoted will seem suspect and vaguely discredited. Two examples will suffice:

"O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship [sic], lend a myth to God"
- Hart Crane

"Beauty is but a flowre [sic],
Which wrinckles [sic] will devoure [sic]
Brightnesse [sic] falls from the ayre [sic]
Queenes [sic] have died yong [sic] and faire [sic]
Dust hath closde [sic] *Helens* [sic] eye [sic]
I am sick [sic], I must dye [sic]: Lord, have mercy on us."
- Thomas Nashe

Note how only one small "[sic]" makes Crane's entire stanza trivial and worthless, which, in his case, takes less doing than Nashe, on the other hand, has been rendered virtually unreadable. Anyone having to choose between you and Nashe would pick you every time! And, when it's all said and done, isn't that the name of the game?

Lesson 7-Making The Reader Feel Inadequate

Without question, the surest way to make a reader feel inadequate is through casual erudition, and there is no better way to achieve casual erudition than by putting the punchline of an anecdote in a little foreign language. Here's a sample:

One crisp October morning, while taking my usual stroll down the Kurfurstenstrasse, I spied my old friend Casimir Malevitch, the renowned Suprematist painter, sitting on a bench. Noting that he had a banana in his ear, I said to him, "Excuse me, Casimir, but I believe you have a banana in your ear."

"What?" he asked.

Moving closer and speaking quite distinctly, I repeated my previous observation, saying, "I said, 'You have a banana in your ear!'"

"What's that you say?" came the reply.

By now I was a trifle piqued at this awkward situation and, seeking to make myself plain, once and for all, I fairly screamed, "I SAID THAT YOU HAVE A BANANA IN YOUR EAR, YOU DOLT!!!"

Imagine my chagrin when Casimir looked at me blankly and quipped,

“১৯০২ বেড়েই চলো এবং পররাজ্য
প্রোসডেন্ট রুজ (১৯০৭) কংগ, বাতে.”

Oh, what a laugh we had over that one.

With one stroke, the reader has been made to feel not only that his education was second-rate, but that you are getting far more out of life than he. This is precisely why this device is best used in memoirs, whose sole purpose is to make the reader feel that you have lived life to the fullest, while his existence, in comparison, has been meaningless and shabby....

Lesson 8-Covering The News

Have you ever wondered how reporters are able to turn out a dozen or so news articles day after day, year after year, and still keep their copy so fresh, so vital, so alive? It's because they know The Ten Magic Phrases of Journalism, key constructions with which one can express *every known human emotion!* As one might suppose, The Phrases, discovered only after centuries of trial and error, are a closely guarded secret, available to no one but accredited members of the press. However, at the risk of being cashiered from the Newspaper Guild, I am now going to reveal them to you:

The Ten Magic Phrases of Journalism

- "violence flared"
- "limped into port"
- "according to informed sources"
- "wholesale destruction"
- "no immediate comment"
- "student unrest"
- "riot-torn"
- "flatly denied"
- "gutted by fire"
- "roving bands of Negro youths"

Let's try putting The Phrases to work in a sample news story:

NEWARK, NJ, Aug. 22 (UPI) - *Violence flared* yesterday when *roving bands of negro youths* broke windows and looted shops in *riot-torn* Newark. Mayor Kenneth Gibson had *no immediate comment* but, *according to informed sources*, he *flatly denied* saying that *student unrest* was behind the *wholesale destruction* that resulted in scores of buildings being *gutted by fire*, and added, "If this city were a Liberian freighter,* we just may have *limped into port.*"

*Whenever needed, "Norwegian Tanker" can always be substituted for "Liberian freighter." Consider them interchangeable.

Proof positive that The Ten Magic Phrases of Journalism can express every known human emotion and then some!

Lesson 9-Tricks Of The Trade

Just as homemakers have their hints (e.g. a ball of cotton, dipped in vanilla extract and placed in the refrigerator, will absorb food odors), writers have their own bag of tricks, a bag of tricks, I might hasten to point out, you won't learn at any Bread Loaf Conference. Most writers, ivory tower idealists that they are, prefer to play up the mystique of their "art" (visitations from the Muse, *l'écriture automatique*, talking in tongues, et cetera, et cetera), and sweep the hard-nosed practicalities under the rug. Keeping in mind, however,

that a good workman doesn't curse his tools, I am now going to make public these long suppressed tricks of the trade.

Suppose you've written a dreadful chapter (we'll dub it Chapter Six for our purposes here), utterly without merit, tedious and boring beyond belief, and you just can't find the energy to re-write it. Since it's obvious that the reader, once he realizes how dull and shoddy Chapter Six really is, will refuse to read any further, you must provide some strong ulterior motive for completing the chapter. I've always found lust effective:

Artfully concealed within the next chapter is the astounding secret of an ancient Bhutanese love cult that will increase your sexual satisfaction by at least 60% and *possibly more--*

(Print Chapter Six.)

Pretty wild, huh? Bet you can hardly wait to try it! And don't show your appreciation by reading Chapter Seven!*

*This insures that the reader reads Chapter Six not once but several times. Possibly, he may even read Chapter Seven.

Fear also works:

Dear Reader,

This message is printed on *Chinese poison paper* which is made from deadly herbs that are instantly absorbed by the fingertips so it won't do any good to wash your hands because you will die a horrible and lingering death in about an hour unless you take the special antidote which is revealed in *Chapter Six* and you'll be saved.

Sincerely,

(Your name)

Or even:

Dear Reader,

You are obviously one of those rare people who are immune to Chinese paper so this message is printed on *Bavarian poison paper* which is about a thousand times more powerful and even if you're wearing gloves you're dead for sure unless you read *Chapter Six* very carefully and find the special antidote.

Sincerely,

(Your name)

Appealing to vanity, greed, sloth and whatever, you can keep this up, chapter by chapter, until they finish the book. In fact, the number of appeals is limited only by human frailty itself..

LESSON 10 - MORE WRITING HINTS

There are many more writing hints I could share with you, but suddenly I am run over by a truck.

-the end-