

Writing as a Lifestyle and a Discipline

Version 1.2

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People occasionally ask me about how to write, since I've done a lot of it. I used to point to various things by other writers, but I'm getting the question enough that it seems worth it to set down a few thoughts.

Learn the craft.

People want to think of writing as an art, and it is. But like any other art form, it's a craft first. You may have an amazing artistic vision, but if you can't choreograph someone else's thoughts and emotional responses in such a way that you re-create your vision *inside another person*, then no one else will see what you see. In order for your art to succeed *as art*, you have to be good at the craft, the mechanics. A sculptor has to understand the physics of materials. A painter has to understand the properties of different pigments and paints. A dancer has to have a deep understanding of the moving body. A writer has to understand words -- spoken and written -- and how they work together. That is not a small task, and getting good at it means accepting the disciplines of the craft into your life.

Writers write.

Writers are not a special kind of human being; they are people who set aside time and write. Often. Assume that you'll need to write every day; most writers do. There are exceptions, but don't count on being one of them. Getting good at a craft takes daily practice.

Harvest ideas.

It's far too much to ask that inspiration will magically intersect with your writing time. Inspiration strikes everywhere. When you have an idea, write it down. When your writing time comes around, get out your notepad and read through the previous day's notes. No notes from the previous day? You're not paying attention. Pay attention tomorrow.

Speaking of that, carry a notepad and pen everywhere. I mean everywhere. It sits on your nightstand when you go to bed. It goes in a pocket when you go out. If you don't have waterproof paper and a space pen in the shower, then be prepared to run naked and dripping for your notepad halfway through your shower, for fear of losing the idea by the time you're done showering. (Happens to me a couple times a month -- can't bring myself to pay for waterproof paper.)

If you're paying any kind of attention at all, you'll have vastly more ideas than you could ever write, which means that it's hardly a tragedy if you lose one here and there. On the other hand, I find that some of my best ideas seem to land at times when it's very inconvenient to write them down. Cultivate the discipline of writing them down anyway.

Writers read.

You can't write if you don't read, and the best writers read very widely. There is nothing stupider than trying to read only what will be useful to you -- you're not *old* enough to know what will be

useful, and by the time you are, it will be too late to catch up. Read everything, and add it all to the leaf-mould of your mind, in C. S. Lewis' memorable phrase. Fiction, biographies, histories, inspiration, philosophy, children's books, how-to books (even on skills you have no intention of applying), graphic novels, poetry (both slam and literary), inquiries into the average airspeed of an unladen swallow -- read it all. Not just books, either -- a steady diet of magazines will rot your soul, but you should read an issue of Cosmo cover to cover -- and Popular Science, Maxim, Vogue, Guns & Ammo, In-Fisherman, World, Boy's Life, Highlights, Vanity Fair, Economist, Yoga Journal, Black Belt, The New Yorker, Scientific American, People...you get the idea. Beware of forcing yourself to read things that are "good" for you. You can do a small amount of that, but too much of it will kill your reading life quickly. Read things that interest you. Read things that are fun.

Be curious.

Cultivate an interest in a wide array of things. Do different jobs. Take different volunteer opportunities. Intern or volunteer someplace you'd never work. Get way outside of your comfort zone; that's where you learn. Force yourself to learn one thing from every person you have a conversation with. Dig deeper. Learn more.

Lots of folks say that writers should have a wide experience of life, and foolish college students take that to mean they should backpack around Europe for a summer on their newly acquired credit cards. No. You need wide experience *as a producer*, not a consumer; as a resident, not a tourist. Like Dylan said in another context, "Ya gotta serve somebody."

Writers finish.

A stack of unfinished work won't help you get better. Finish something. Ship it. Write something else. You'll get more experience shipping ten finished-but-imperfect pieces than you will perfecting that one piece that you never seem to quite get ready to publish. Blogging is a great platform for this, because it doesn't depend on anybody else but you.

Write fast first.

Good things aren't written, they're rewritten. You can't rewrite what you didn't write to start with -- so write fast first. You can edit it later. Editing as you write will kill you.

(Some rare folks are exceptions to this rule, but again, chances are you aren't one of them. So it's at least worth trying for a while.)

Do NaNoWriMo at least once.

NaNoWriMo stands for National Novel Writing Month, the brainchild of a brilliant fellow named Chris Baty. The challenge is to write the first draft of a 50,000-word novel in the month of November, which comes to 1,667 words a day, every day. The challenge comes with a lot of support: online forums, local writing groups, idea generators, writing dares, and more -- see nanowrimo.org for details. (My favorite dare was "Work the line, 'And then me leg fell off!' into your next scene.") You'll learn to write fast or you'll die in week two. It's a good experience, even if you never publish the novel.

You don't know if it's any good when you're writing it.

You might think it's genius; you might think it's purée of horse manure. Doesn't matter; there is zero correlation between your impression of the work and its actual quality. In the white heat of the moment, you're just too close to it to tell. Keep writing.

Let it cool.

How long it needs to cool depends on what you wrote. If it's a letter to the city council that you dashed off in a couple hours, then overnight is probably fine -- or maybe you can even write it first thing in the morning, set it aside, and then look it over after lunch. If it's a magazine article that you spent a week on, you might want to let it rest for a few days (deadlines permitting, which they often don't, and that explains a lot about the quality of magazine writing.) If it's a novel you spent a year on, you might need to let it sit for a month. The point is to get enough distance from it that you can have a modicum of objectivity when you start to edit.

Don't over-edit.

If you let it cool off for an appropriate period, then make two or three passes through it and ship it. Start something else. The next one will be better, or the one after that. In the time it would take you to make this one perfect -- ha! -- you could write ten things of similar length, learning many more lessons along the way.

Build yourself as a writer.

Nothing builds you like a stack of finished work. Finish things. Have I emphasized this enough? Choose projects that will challenge you. It's fine to take low-hanging fruit sometimes, but make sure you take on projects that feel too big for you. Then finish them.

Being a writer does not excuse you from business.

Even if you work for someone else, you have to find that person and market your services. More likely, you will serve a variety of people for a variety of purposes. That means you'll have to manage your production (copy editing, layout, cover design), logistics (printing, taking orders, shipping), and most of all, marketing. You can outsource some of these skills, but you still have to manage the relationships with your suppliers. If you're going the traditional publishing route, your relationship with the publisher calls for intensive management. As with any other job, writing comes with two parts. The first part is the payload, the skills that the job is ostensibly about. The other part is the business of delivering the payload to the people who need it, such that people in your community will give you money to do your thing. In other words, you have to get your talent out into the marketplace rather than burying it in the backyard. Don't be *that* servant.

The nice thing about writing is that it scales well. If you make shirts, you can only sell one shirt for every shirt you make. If you write novels, you can write one and sell it a hundred thousand times. If you can find the hundred thousand people who need it. How do you plan to find them?

Take care of yourself.

Much study is wearisome to the flesh. So is writing. Get up and do some basic maintenance of your physical structure. Jerry Pournelle recommends the Five Tibetans (taught to him by Steven Barnes, and therein lies a funny story for another time). That would be a bare minimum. I recommend Scott Sonnon's Intu-Flow and/or FlowFit as starting points. But the real advice here is: find something compelling enough that it will get you out of your chair regularly, and do that. What it is matters far less than that you do something.

Resources

General

Wilson, Douglas. *Wordsmithy*. Excellent advice from someone who literally writes more than most people can read. Useful for anyone, but especially good for young writers.

Ross-Larson, Bruce. *Effective Writing*. Actually a series of three books under one cover: Stunning Sentences, Powerful Paragraphs, and Riveting Reports. Gives clear, readily applicable advice. Start from the third book and work backwards.

Inspiration

Lamott, Ann. *Bird by Bird*. Irreverent. Funny. Takes the difficulties seriously.

Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. Just good. I re-read it every couple years.

Baty, Chris. *No Plot? No Problem!* The guidebook for NaNoWriMo. Very useful for getting your inner editor out of the way so you can just write.

Pressfield, Steven. *Turning Pro*. Addresses some of the basic differences between operating at a hobbyist level, where it's all about having a good time, and at a professional level, where it's all about service to others. Applicable to far more than writing.

Indie Publishing

Mad Genius Club (blog) madgeniusclub.com

The Passive Voice (blog) thepassivevoice.com

Essays

Marshall, Paul. "The Age of the Essay" Paul Marshall is an accomplished essayist. If you're going to write essays, read a lot of his. This one is a good take on the craft of essay-writing.

Cognard-Black, Jennifer. *Becoming a Great Essayist*. (Teaching Company course) Covers the territory thoroughly and well.

Storytelling

Card, Orson Scott. *Characters and Viewpoint*. Card is a thoughtful storyteller. He's written about writing in a number of places, but this book is one good starting point.

Barnes, Steven. "Sociobiology and World-Building, or Why I Hate Those F*cking Zebras." (lecture delivered to the Writing Excuses Cruise, 2016). A bestselling author reflects on how to craft a comprehensive storytelling approach that wakes people up to new realities beyond their present understanding of the world. In this lecture, Barnes distills ideas he's been developing and testing for decades down into a single lecture. It's exceptional.

Harvey, Hannah B. *The Art of Storytelling: From Parents to Professionals*. A course from The Teaching Company, by a professional storyteller. Covers the craft comprehensively, from finding sources through developing the story and delivering it well.

Persuasion

Spence, Gerry. *How to Argue and Win Every Time*. One of America's greatest living trial attorneys, talking about the art of persuasion. Well worth your time.

Adams, Scott. (Blog posts on Dilbert.com) Adams blogs extensively about the craft of persuasion. I find his insights counterintuitive and often helpful.

Language and Attitude

King, Stephen. *On Writing*. A book specifically addressed to the language and voice of popular-level writing -- a subject King knows just a bit about.

Lanham, Richard. *Style: An Anti-Textbook*. Hilarious, and deadly accurate. One of the best books on prose style out there, and specifically on the difference between bureaucratic/academic style and *good* writing.

Pressfield, Steven. *Nobody Wants To Read Your Sh*t*. Hard-hitting and potent instructions about delivering value in your writing that is at least equal to the time spent reading it -- and conveying to your reader that it will be worth his time.

Wilson, Douglas. *A Serrated Edge*. A hilarious and telling defense of the sharper side of writing: sarcasm, satire, and outright mockery. Most useful read in tandem with John Frame's review, and Wilson's rejoinder.

About the Author

Tim Nichols has served as a pastor, youth worker, house painter, seminary professor, bus driver, and in a variety of other nonprofit and bivocational gigs. Today, he lives in Englewood with his wife, Kimberly, and divides his time between serving as pastor of Centerpoint Church Englewood, writer with Headwaters Christian Resources, and massage therapist and martial arts instructor at Sanctuary Wellness & Soul Care. He has published three books and coauthored seven more (and a bunch more that only sort of count), along with numerous articles, blog posts, and the occasional poem.