

Aaron Sorkin's Top 13 Writing Tips

The best tips from his MasterClass

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"You can't handle the truth!"

"If you guys were the inventors of Facebook, you'd have invented Facebook."

“Musicians play their instruments. I play the orchestra.”

All of these lines came from the pen of Aaron Sorkin, one of the most famous screenwriters of our time. Sorkin wrote the film scripts for *A Few Good Men*, *The Social Network*, *Steve Jobs*, *Moneyball*, and *The American President* as well as the tv series *The Newsroom*, *Sports Night*, and *The West Wing*.

I recently watched Sorkin’s [MasterClass](#) on screenwriting. His class is about screenwriting in particular, but many of his tips are applicable to fiction and nonfiction writing as well.

If you haven’t yet spent the \$180/year for a MasterClass subscription, you can find Sorkin’s 13 best tips here:

1. Create a strong intention and obstacle

“What I need before I can do anything is an intention and obstacle. Somebody wants something.

Something’s standing in their way of getting it...

They’ve got to really want it bad, and whatever is standing in their way has gotta be formidable.” -Aaron Sorkin

Sorkin returns to this idea throughout the entire MasterClass. He says that all good stories are driven by intention and obstacle. Those two components give your

audience a reason to care about the story. They're what separate an edge-of-the-seat thrill ride from one of your grandpa's long yarns.

Sorkin offers this example: let's say you want to write about a recent cross-country road trip you took with some friends. You don't have a story unless you develop an intention and obstacle: *who wants what and what's standing in their way?*

For instance, does someone need to get somewhere by a certain date (like Doug in *The Hangover*) or return something to someone (like Harry and Lloyd in *Dumb & Dumber*)? "Once you have that intention and obstacle, now, like a clothesline, you can start hanging those cool stories from the real trip across the country," says Sorkin.

Your readers want conflict. It's your job to give it to them. Turn up the stakes.

2. Don't write characters like real people

"Believe it or not, the properties of characters and the properties of people have very little to do with each other. I know it seems like the goal should be to have a character be as human as possible...that's not the goal — or at least not my goal." -Aaron Sorkin

Sorkin is known for writing witty dialogue — characters

bantering back and forth with impressive one-liners. But people don't really talk like that, and Sorkin knows that.

He believes that a writer's job is to create a story that is enjoyable for the audience, and standard dialogue you'd overhear at a Starbucks often doesn't fit the bill. That's why Sorkin advises writers to go against the common advice to write "realistic characters."

Create compelling characters. When faced with the decision of whether to make a character more interesting or more believable, opt for the former.

3. Find the more important truth

"If you're a writer, you have an inner moral compass (if you're writing nonfiction). And you have to judge for yourself what's the more important truth because you're going to be lying almost constantly during this. You have to. People don't speak in dialogue. People's lives don't play out in a series of scenes that form a narrative...You have to decide: is this lie that I'm telling unfair somehow to this person? Am I doing damage to the concept of truth in general?" -Aaron Sorkin

Any form of communication (writing, public speaking, etc.) forces tradeoff decisions between accuracy and simplicity. The only way to be 100 percent accurate is to provide an overabundance of information. If you want to convey an idea simply, you must sacrifice accuracy for

understanding. The question is: how much accuracy should you sacrifice?

Maybe you want to write about the lessons you learned in your first job. If you want to cram that into a three-minute Medium article, you'll need to find the innermost core of your story and sacrifice a ton of details. However, if you're going to write a 50,000-word book on the same topic, you can offer much more explanation.

Prune as many of the excess details as possible.

Sometimes this means giving the explanation that is 90 percent correct in half the amount of words. Simplify complexity while remaining true to your story and your characters.

[Is It Okay to Stretch the Truth as a Writer?](#)

[Follow your conscience and stay true to the story arc](#)

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4. Give your villains a fair shake

"If I'm writing a character who maybe has the qualities of an anti-hero who isn't so easy to like, I can't judge them. I have to write them as if they're making their case to God why they should be allowed into heaven..."

"I have to find what it is about them that's like me and write from that point of view." -Aaron Sorkin

No one is entirely good or entirely evil. Strong writing paints in shades of gray rather than black and white. Think about characters like Severus Snape in the *Harry Potter* series, Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, or Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network*. Readers and viewers can easily identify the positive *and* negative traits of those fictional and nonfictional characters.

Your job as a writer is to give everyone a fair shake. Learn what drives each character. Characters with strong intentions who face large obstacles often resort to immoral means to get their way, which makes those characters even more interesting.

5. Conduct exploratory research

"You'll find at the end of all of it that 90 percent of the research didn't make it into the movie, but you needed to do it anyway." -Aaron Sorkin

Almost every form of writing requires research. If you're writing a novel set in London, you may need to research street names and the best bars for picking up a date. For nonfiction, you may need to research the details of someone's life or the historical background for a military battle.

Sorkin distinguishes two forms of research:

1. Nuts and bolts — Tiny factual details that anyone can look up
2. Exploratory info — Studying the world that surrounds your story

He says nuts and bolts research can be outsourced (*Wouldn't it be awesome to have a research assistant?*), but you must conduct exploratory research on your own because you don't know what you're looking for until you find it.

Hemingway believed that a writer's knowledge of a topic would shine beyond the words they put on the page. Prove him right. Immerse yourself in the world of whatever story you're writing. Read articles, books, and academic papers about it. Become a true expert on your topic.

6. Show yourself grace during the pre-work phase

"From the moment I say I'm starting until the moment I deliver it is usually about 18–24 months on a screenplay. But most of that time is spent trying to think of it and being depressed." -Aaron Sorkin

Sorkin spends about one year in pre-work before he begins writing a screenplay. He spends that time reading

about his topic, interviewing people, and conducting exploratory research. He calls it his “bulking up” phase.

“One of the mentally challenging parts of being a [screenwriter] is that most days you don’t write,” says Sorkin. During his pre-work, Sorkin spends a lot of time banging his head against the wall because he’s still trying to figure out what angle to take for the story.

Regardless of what you’re writing, you need to learn to show yourself grace. Many days will be a struggle. If that’s true for an icon like Sorkin, it will undoubtedly be true for you and me. Be patient. Keep chipping away.



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7. Lean on the good days

“When people ask me if I ever experience writer’s block, I just have to laugh because that is my default position. I’m in a constant state of writer’s block. What I run into from time to time is not having writer’s block, and those are great days. If you can put together a few of those days, then you can do this.” -Aaron Sorkin

During the MasterClass, Sorkin admits that he’s been stuck on page 15 of his current writing project for about five weeks. FIVE WEEKS. Holy shit, that is a long time!

Writing sometimes feels like trying to climb a mountain during a rainstorm. You make a little bit of progress, then the path washes out and you can’t find a foothold. But if you stick with it, you’ll eventually find your footing again.

“Writing, like playing the violin, you get better with practice,” says Sorkin. “The more you do it, the better you’re gonna get, and the more you do it, the more comfortable you’re going to become with your own voice and your own style, and those are the things that you can only learn on your own.”

8. Read with an inquisitive eye

“When you’re a writer — especially when you’re starting out, but I think it’s a good rule for the life of your career — you need to be a diagnostician. When you see something and it doesn’t work, instead of just

being snarky about it, and instead of just joking with your friends about how bad this thing was that you just saw, figure out why it's bad...Your goal should be to diagnose it: why didn't it work?" -Aaron Sorkin

One of the basest human tendencies is to put others down to make yourself feel better. Like a schoolyard bully pushing someone down to stroke his own ego, it can be easy to criticize others' work and use it to falsely inflate your sense of self-importance.

Rather than using poorly written stories as an ego boost, use them for education. Learn from others' mistakes. Take note of when you click away from Medium stories: what made you leave that story? What happened right before you lost attention? How can you avoid that mistake in your own work?

9. Get comfortable with discomfort

"[Writing plays] is the thing that I'm most comfortable doing...I still feel like an outsider in movies and television." -Aaron Sorkin

This was one of the most surprising lines in Sorkin's MasterClass. Even though Sorkin has won two Golden Globes, an Academy Award, and five Emmy Awards, he doesn't feel comfortable writing movies and tv shows. He sees himself as a playwright who has been shoved into a screenwriter's role, but that discomfort keeps him from

growing stagnant.

Discomfort breeds ingenuity. It forces experimentation and growth. Try new things in your writing. Tackle subjects you've never written about before, write from a different point of view, or experiment with a new form to flex underdeveloped literary muscles (memoir, humor, poetry, etc.).



Image for post

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10. Balance giving too much or too little info

"If you put confusion into the mix — even the tiniest bit of confusion — an audience is gonna be apprehensive...but unfortunately, the antidote for confusion can be dangerous too because the worst crime you can commit is telling the audience something they already know." -Aaron Sorkin

Once you've learned something, it's easy to forget what it was like to *not know that information*. Authors Chip and Dan Heath call that the "curse of knowledge."

Every writer must learn to overcome the curse of knowledge in their work. If you've spent months researching a topic, you cannot forget that most of your readers will be unfamiliar with concepts that now make perfect sense to you.

Learn to explain things at your readers' level of understanding. Don't treat your readers like they're unintelligent, but respect your own knowledge on a topic and recognize that you will need to walk a fine line between giving too much context or too little.

11. Pay attention to the rhythm of your words

"When I'm writing, what the words sound like is as important to me as what the words mean. It's a lot about rhythm." -Aaron Sorkin

Writing is about much more than grammar, punctuation, and [syntax](#). Strong writing relies heavily on [diction](#) (choice of words).

To excel at diction requires not only choosing an *accurate* word but also one that sounds like music to your readers. You want your words to sing like Celine Dion — not speak in monotone like [Ben Stein](#).

12. Edit mercilessly

“The really tough test is if the thing works without [a section of the story], it shouldn’t be there. If you can cut it, then you should cut it.” -Aaron Sorkin

During the editing process, Sorkin often cuts many of his favorite jokes, scenes, and bits of dialogue. Why? Because they don’t serve the story.

Sorkin said the storyline for *The West Wing* came from some of the cuts he had to make when writing *The American President*. He had good material, but it didn’t fit into the story he was writing at the time, so he stripped those parts out of his movie.

Don’t fall so in love with your own work that you refuse to acknowledge which parts that are no longer serving the story. Cut anything that doesn’t belong.

13. Take risks

“There are a zillion different ways to prepare beef: you can have filet mignon or beef wellington or flank steak, anything. But if you were to prepare beef the way the fewest people find objectionable, it would be a McDonald’s hamburger every single time. I love McDonald’s hamburgers. I eat way too many of them, but if I were a chef, I wouldn’t want to make one for a living. So don’t make McDonald’s hamburgers [as a writer].” -Aaron Sorkin

As a writer, your goal isn’t to please the greatest number of people. It isn’t to earn the most money from the Medium Partner Program or sell the most novels. It’s to write the content that you were put on this planet to write.

That content will likely be different, risky, and not universally appealing. And that’s the point. You’re writing what you want to write, not what the highest number of people want to read. It’s easy to lose sight of this, but it’s imperative that you strut your own stuff rather than try to make your content palatable for everyone. You’ll never please everyone. Don’t try to.

[Joyce Carol Oates’s Top 13 Writing Tips](#)

[The best lessons from her MasterClass on writing](#)

Whether you're writing a 110-page script for a Hollywood blockbuster, an 80,000-word novel, or a 2,500-word Medium story, all writing is about engaging, inspiring, or educating others. These 13 tips from superstar screenwriter Aaron Sorkin will propel your writing — regardless of what type of story you write next.

If you enjoyed these tips, check out Sorkin's full MasterClass and the rest of the [ProTips series](#).

Happy writing!

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