

How To Write Stuff Real Good

Never trust a writing "expert"



Photo by on

I had the great misfortune recently to see an enormous volume of bad writing advice passed around in public by bored writers. Trust me, I've given plenty of silly, misguided, naive or just plain ridiculous writing advice in my day. After all, I used to be a high school English teacher, back when I had no business teaching anybody anything at all. I was 23, and I really think one ought to be legally prohibited from teaching adolescents until one is 30 and can say ridiculous things like "in *my* day" whilst gazing into the middle distance and stroking an imaginary

wizard's beard.

I like to think I've also given some good writing advice, but it's only good advice if it is actively solicited, authentically stated, and — perhaps most importantly — effective for the recipient, right? I'm still not sure.

Now, let's distinguish "writing advice" from a few other things. When I taught my students the basic rules of grammar — rules I shall happily violate within this very essay — I was not giving *advice*. I was conveying the conventional, accepted norms of written language in a very particular time, place, and society. Some people would expect them to obey those rules at all times. Some people would not care.

In our classroom, I explained that we learned these rules for purely utilitarian reasons — to get jobs, to write entrance essays for college, to impress whoever the hell cared about it so long as we needed to impress them. But we also learned the rules because it's fun to break rules for creative purposes. One can't reinvent the wheel if one does not understand the wheel and its function.

When I edit another writer's piece as part of a work assignment, I may give advice, but I may also give *notes*. Notes are suggestions — or sometimes directives — on how to improve a piece in order to satisfy the specific writing assignment. It's the difference between "All writers should start work at 6 a.m. every day" and "I think

the story would be better served if we learn Caleb's name in the first paragraph."

I am used to receiving notes from editors for my essay and book work, and from producers for my script work. Often editors or producers will say "this is just a suggestion" in order to distinguish this type of note from something more important, something that they feel really needs to be changed so that the work can improve. Sometimes they really mean it is just a suggestion. Other times, it's a directive disguised as a suggestion. Confused yet? Writing is a wild profession!

There is great value in learning from seasoned writers, folks who've won awards or acclaim or legions of fans, or decidedly un-famous humans who simply do work you think is excellent. I enjoy Master Class. It's one of the best gifts anybody ever gave me. Judy Blume's Master Class is a damn delight. Shonda's is fun, too. I plan to watch Neil Gaiman's as well. What a joy, to get to learn from those whose work I so admire.

And wow, do I love learning about how different artists work. Mason Currey has written a couple of books about the daily rituals of artists. He has done all this research on how creative people have figured out their own daily routine, and he doesn't argue in favor of one versus the other — he just presents it all to you, for your entertainment or edification.

I have learned so much about how legendary writers did their thing. Some slept until noon and wrote all day and night. Others woke precisely at 4:55 a.m. and sat down to bang out a novel before commencing a day of farmwork. Elizabeth Bishop did a bunch of uppers! Maybe that's how she wrote that one poem that makes me cry, the one about the fish! Who can say? She told Robert Frost, that cranky motherfucker, that he should try it. Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one with legal meth! I find the thought of Robert Frost on uppers to be absolutely hilarious and am deeply sad that I will never see this occur.

I'm sober and can't do uppers, except cold brew coffee, my sweet baby from Heavenhell. How I love her.

Anyway, it's great to learn from those who share what works for them. But when somebody declares himself a "writing expert" (which I've never heard *any* of my favorite writers do) I roll my eyes and walk straight in the other direction. Did I just walk into a wall? That's cool, it sounds like a far more delightful activity than hearing somebody tell me how the creative process *must* work in order for me to create *real art*.

A good indication that they suck is this: do they use an extended war metaphor to describe the process of sitting at a desk and typing their thoughts into a computer? This is the type of person who rants at you about biohacking and listens to Joe Rogan's podcast while experiencing

explosive diarrhea from butter coffee. Get the fuck away from me! Go tell your wife about the war in your butt. I am *bored*. (Also, a lot of these people have a spouse earning the steady money or taking care of the kids for them while they pontificate about art-as-military-strategy.)

I've written some stuff I think is good, some stuff I think is mediocre, and some stuff I think is outright crap. My opinions on my own work change over time, but I don't usually re-read a book after it is published. Maybe one day I'll get to that. But you know how some folks detest the sound of their own voice? Or how some actors say they can't watch themselves onscreen? That's sort of how I feel about my books. They are written in a particular mood, in a particular time in my life, and I cannot separate any of it out.

Plus, I know what I said. I forget some of it over time, but I know what I tried to do in the book. I want to hear what others have to say! This is why I love to read, and why I enjoy editing others' work.

I'm no expert. I've learned what works for me, and I enjoy sharing that with others. So with that in mind, [HERE](#) is the best non-expert writing advice I can give...myself. Maybe it'll work for you! Maybe it won't. That's the nature of the writing advice beast.

So pretend I'm just saying this to myself, okay? Pretend you see me telling myself in a mirror, and you feel bad for

me because that shit is embarrassing and awkward, but maybe you will like one or two things here...

Take care of your mental, physical, and emotional health first and foremost. It's not worth breaking your back, your mind, or your heart to write something great. I often encourage first-time authors to get a therapist if they can, especially if they are writing a memoir.

Writers live many times. We live through the event. We re-live the event when we write about the event. And we re-live the event again and again when we re-read what we've written about it. I suppose that's why I don't often enjoy re-reading my books — for me, they are laden with the memories of the writing process, the publication process, and what came after.

There are good memories, like when my mom got a baker in Jersey to make a cake that looked like my memoir [*Agorafabulous!: Dispatches From My Bedroom*](#), plus one that looked like *The Joy of Sex* as a joke. My novel [*D.C. Trip*](#) required a surprising amount of research about the Chili's in my hometown in New Jersey. There are tough memories, too. I drank a lot to let off steam in between writing sessions for my first novel, [*Great*](#). I wrote [*Real Artists Have Day Jobs*](#) while going through a tough breakup. Of course, there are also things in the writing I now regard as clunky, poorly paced, or ignorant.

I am very glad to have books in the world, and I hope to

write many more in future. But for me they are full of ghosts, and not all the ghosts are friendly.

No one really wants to read a memoir by a person who has enjoyed a completely pleasant life. We want to read about the happy things, sure, but we want the pain and the horror and the tumult, too. A memoirist in particular may put herself at great risk for depression or for the reactivation of trauma in the body, which is why I, in my non-expert way, recommend a shrink or some form of effective counselor.

Also, drink enough clean water if you're fortunate enough to have access to it. Get up to pee sometimes.

And keep writing, so long as it's not fucking up your life. If it's fucking up your life, stop and do something else.

Writing is hard and boring and stressful. It may not be for you. That's okay. It doesn't mean you are weak. You can be very good at something and walk away from it because it's not good for you. Maybe you need to be a mediocre painter instead of a kickass writer. Maybe your true bliss is in some kind of clog dancing that a very specific sub-group of hill people do. Go have fun! Life is short, but it's also long, and there's no honor in hurting yourself to prove an artistic point.

That's all I got. Go forth and write, if you feel like it. If you feel you need support on that journey, find an encouraging, thoughtful teacher whose style meshes

with yours. Ignore the harsh advice from others, unless you like being stepped on — in which case, enjoy!

I'm going to paint something absolutely terrible now. It's going to be ugly and I'm going to love it. Take good care.