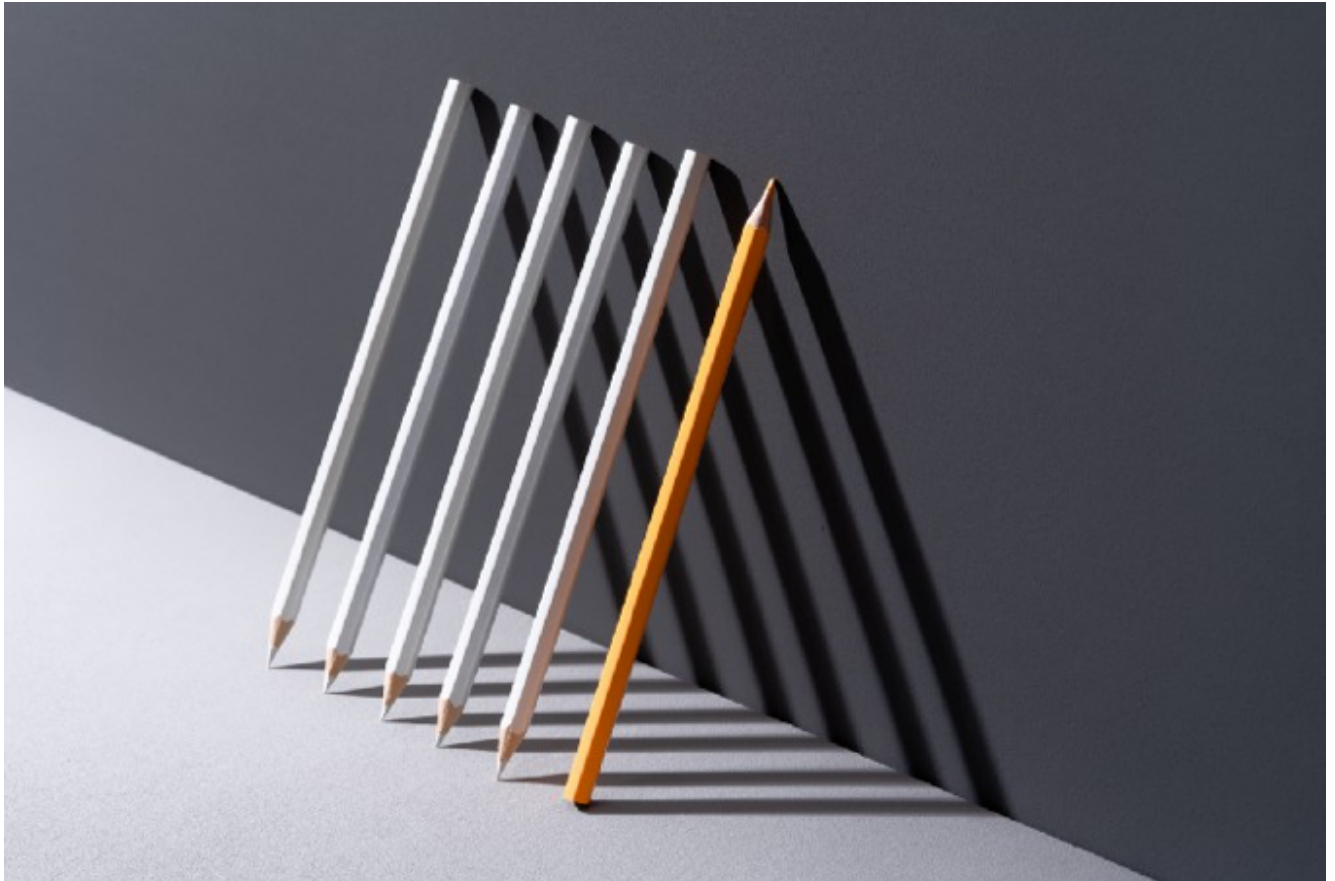


The Most Useful Writing Advice I've Ever Been Given

No, it's not 'show, don't tell'



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I've been studying writing for 20 years now. I'm at the point where I've now taught more workshops than I've been a student in, and yet I still feel like I'm constantly on the search for new gems of knowledge about writing to both share with my students, and use in my own practice.

I'm also intrigued by what I remember teachers and writers telling me, and how hungrily I consumed what they had to say. I think this is partly because we see the talented writers that are our mentors as touching some magic that we, too,

want to touch. This is, I think, why so many writers are asked questions like: "What is your process? What time of day do you write?" I think the subtext of all of these questions is, "How do you access the magic, the muse?" And, privately: "*Would that work for me?*"

On Writing Without Solitude

Or: Is it possible to be a real writer when you have small children?

Here are some things that teachers I was lucky enough to have taught me:

"Just because it happened to you doesn't make it interesting." I often repeat this line to students. From a writer who writes a lot of thinly veiled fiction based on her real life, this piece of advice is key for anyone writing nonfiction to understand. The personal is only interesting if it reaches into the universal.

"Don't go to weddings." This is a real thing a quite famous writer told our graduate workshop. Her point was this: Don't miss class. Above all, prioritize your writing and your work here. While we all thought it was rather eccentric at the time, and I personally think you should go to every wedding possible because they are so fun, I do see her point. What I think she was trying to tell us is it's time for you to start taking yourself seriously as a writer, and to treat writing as your job.

“Research, research, research (for inspiration as much as anything else).” I’d always thought of research as an academic, or even scientific, endeavor rather than a creative one. Boy, was I wrong. Fiction writers, poets, and, of course, nonfiction writers can benefit immensely from research. And research can be traveling, walking through your setting to take in the sensory details, or it can be reading old folk tales. I’d always thought, “Okay yeah, you research to make your work more realistic — but you do it to make it more *real*?” You do it because your work deserves that kind of investment on your part, but you also do it for inspiration. The details in Hans Christian Andersen (the codfish as paper in “The Snow Queen”!), the actual turns of phrase an old fisherman uses, the smell of the desert in spring — these are the goldmines of good writing. And you won’t find them unless you look.

If you are bored, it’s not because you wrote it, it’s because it’s boring. Margot Livesey actually said, “If you are bored, it’s not because you’ve read that section so many times, it’s because it’s boring.” And it’s really true, and countless times it’s saved me from being boring.

“Take out one dull line and add one stunning detail on every page.” This is from my exquisite writing mentor, Melanie Rae Thon, and is one of the many gems she has given me over the years. It is exquisite advice, and shows the dedication and diligence Thon gives to her own work. It is a really concrete action writers can take to drastically improve their writing. When I take this practice to my own

work, it reminds me of adding a coat of oil to dull wood. It just immediately shines it up. It's also wonderful to ask others to give their writing that kind of attention, and makes writers feel more proud of their work.

"Draw Antonio, draw Antonio, draw and do not waste time." In her book, *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard writes that these are Michelangelo's words to his apprentice and it's such an eloquent, history-laden phrase — such a perfect balance between poetry and timelessness — that I've tended to use it as a mantra over the years. Whispering it to myself when I'm tired and frustrated. I feel it connects me with artists over time and it reminds me:

Hey, just keep doing what you are doing. That's really the only way to get better at it.