

# There Are Only Two Ways to Become a Better Writer

All the rest is “content creation,” and no, they are not the same

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If you're at all like me, you've probably grown tired of writing advice from people who are not writers, or at least not really.

Oh, I mean, sure, they *write stuff down*.

Captions on Instagram also amount to “writing stuff down.”

So does pounding out 280-character tweets (I do this one a lot).

Also, scribbling grocery lists on Post-it-Notes.

But none of those are writing, and when we do them, we are not *being* writers. That would remain true, by the way, even if we self-published our Post-it-Notes, put the collection on Amazon as an e-book, and managed to convince enough people to purchase it to make us a lot of money.

Or offered an online course to help others learn how to publish *their* Post-it-Notes to Amazon and make a lot of money. Which someone would *totally* do, although that person would damned sure not be a writer, whatever else they might be.

When it comes to those who promise to provide you the secret to great writing, most of their advice isn't about writing at all.

When someone tells you the key to better writing is making headlines no more than seven words (and not too cerebral), "for prime SEO," and breaking paragraphs into tiny nuggets, their advice may be correct, but it's not about writing.

Because they are not writers. They are *content creators*.

And if you don't know the difference, I might as well soak my computer in sulfuric acid because [umair haque](#) is right,

the apocalypse *is* here, and I should probably log off and find someplace to hide before the zombies find me.

Really? "*Prime SEO?*"

Writers don't even know what the fuck that means. Like, seriously, I had to look it up. And, as prose, the full term is even more horrifyingly dead than the initials — "search engine optimization?"

Writers do not use phrases like that. People for whom the written word is a hustle do.

No offense to content creators. Actually, who am I kidding? Be offended. I don't care. But creating content isn't about the words, except as a tool for views, claps, and shares.

It's not that those things aren't important. *Of course*, writers want people to see our work, and yes, in the internet age, that means SEO. But if you concentrate on that first — the marketing, the *business* — rather than the writing, you will never become a writer in any meaningful sense of that word, no matter how successful you get.

You will be little more than someone who monetizes text, which is fine if that's your thing. But don't call it writing. Publishing perhaps, but not writing.

Meanwhile, if you focus on the quality of the writing first, you'll create things people can't wait to read, rather than just the stuff they're reading because they can't be

bothered to search beyond the first page on Google after tapping out a few keywords.

Ultimately, becoming a better writer requires developing your voice. And you can't do that if you're obsessing over making your next essay fit into a 5-minute read because somebody — a content creator, no doubt — thinks writing is like YouTube, and that's as long as a piece can be if you want "optimal results."

Listen, some things can be said in *two* minutes, or a *meme* even — God forbid.

But most important things can't be, and however tedious longer essays can be, they still amount to *writing*. That's more than can be said for listicles, or any piece about Bitcoin, no matter how "SEO-maximizing" its crypto-bro author — who is neither a writer nor a very good financial advisor — might have been in crafting it.

Sorry, couldn't resist.

And yes, diss tracks *are* writing, by the way.

As someone who has been writing professionally for over 30 years and has nine reasonably successful, well-reviewed books to show for it, there are only two things that I know for sure work when it comes to making one's writing better.

Everything else anyone ever told me was either crap or

derivative of these, so if you do them, all that other stuff will develop in time.

Here they are. Ready?

First, *write*.

I know, it sounds like snark, but I'm serious. We learn by doing.

Even people with raw talent have to work at whatever it is they do.

The more you write, even if 90 percent of it never sees the light of day, the better you'll get. I've probably started three drafts for every essay I've published, only to delete them when I either got bored with them or decided the writing was crap. But each attempt, even if aborted before take-off, helps mold the next one.

And on several occasions, I've started drafts that sat undeveloped as mere germs of an idea, only to revisit and build them out later due to some news event or personal experience that made them timely.

So when I say *write*, I don't just mean fully-formed concepts from start to finish. I mean, come up with a placeholder title, subtitle, and a bit of text for as many pieces as you can think of. That way, even if one idea grows cold or stagnant, you can move over to another one while keeping the other in reserve, possibly for later.



And that way, even if you aren't completing an essay every day, or even a few a week, you can have several started and "in development." The practice you'll get developing them, in and of itself, will benefit your writing, even if you aren't able to turn out pieces as regularly as you'd like.

While the whole Malcolm Gladwell, 10,000-hours-to-become-great-at-anything rule is oversold, the general truth that practice matters is undeniable.

So, for instance, here I am, 33 years ago, back when I typed with one finger on each hand, on a thing called a typewriter, while sporting a side-part as deep as the San Andreas fault. As it turns out, practice is not only helpful for writing but also for figuring out how to wear one's hair.



he author in New Orleans, Fall 1988 (age 20) in my hunt-and-peck days

The second piece of advice? Read good writing — lots of it.

This is crucial, and for years I didn't do it.

In high school, I skated by, reading as little as I could get away with in my Lit classes. I read books about history and politics, but as much as those interested me, they weren't typically written all that well.

Scholars, come to find out, are not necessarily good at prose.

So I learned how to write in an academic kind of way, which meant that my research papers were pretty good. Later, when I was writing policy papers for several non-profits, those too were strong in the sense of conveying data and facts and analysis.

But would you want to *read* any of them?

Probably not, unless you were really into the subjects covered in those reports.

However, once I started reading actual writers — narrative non-fiction primarily, and classic gold standards of essay writing like James Baldwin and Wendell Barry — I developed a sense of what good writing looked like.

And that helped me become better at my own.

When you find writers whose words display artistry that moves you in some way, read more of their work and the

work of others like them. Then read still more of it.

At first, you may find yourself mimicking their voice a bit, stylistically. But over time, you'll find your own, having come to see how good writers use theirs.

And that's it.

Seriously, nothing else really matters, and if it does, it likely will develop from those two.

So now you don't have to read any more articles about how to be a better writer. Instead, you can focus on what you set out to do in the first place — to speak your truth into the void, whatever that truth may be, and no matter who, if anyone, reads it.

Or, if writing proves too difficult, you can keep trying to convince people (or at least yourself) that to be a crypto-millionaire is to be something other than a temporarily overconfident, soon-to-be-broke grifter.

Either way, best of luck, and don't forget to write.