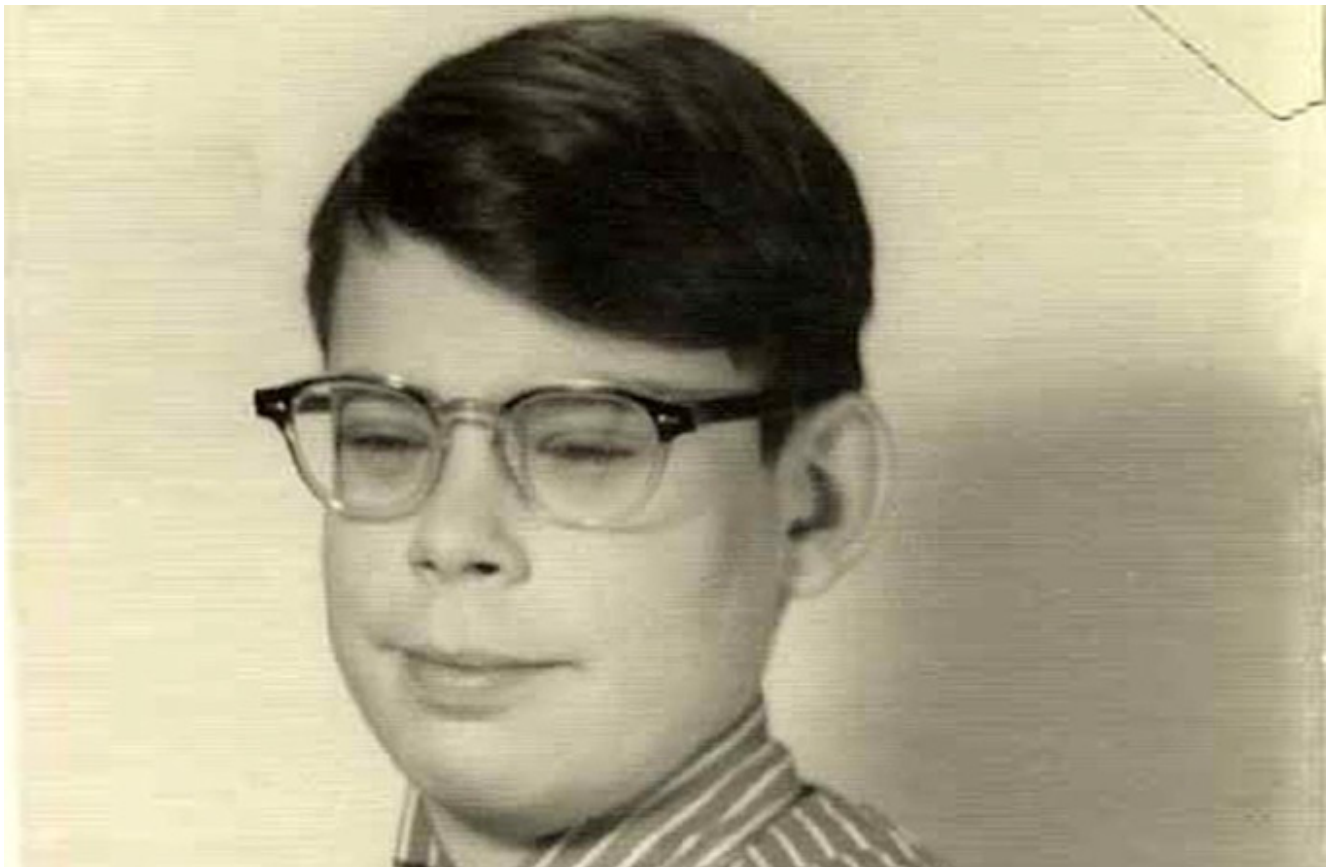


Sundays with Stephen King's "On Writing"

[Scott Myers](#)

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A series featuring reflections on writing from the famed author's memoir.



A very young Stephen King

I had not read Stephen King's memoir *On Writing* for several years when it occurred to me to do so again. While at it, why not share reflections from the renowned writer in a weekly Sunday series at Go Into The Story?

King is a prolific author. Fair to say that is an

understatement. One need only glance at a roster of his [written works](#) to determine that. If any contemporary writer has earned the right to reflect on the craft, it would be King. However, that is not the motivation he had in writing his memoir. This excerpt from the 'First Foreword' of *On Writing* explains the genesis of the book, a fateful exchange with Amy Tan, fellow writer and member of an authors' charity rock music group [The Remainders](#).

One night while we were eating Chinese before a gig in Miami Beach, I asked Amy if there was any one question she was *never* asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk — that question you never get to answer when you're standing in front of a group of author-struck fans and pretending you don't put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Amy paused, thinking it over very carefully, and miss said: "No one ever asks about the language."

I owe an immediate debt of gratitude to her for saying that. I had been playing with the idea of writing a little book about writing for a year or more at that time, but had held back because I didn't trust my own motivations — *why* did I want to write about writing? What made me think I had anything worth saying?

The easy answer is that someone who has sold as many books of fiction as I have must have *something* worthwhile to say about writing it, but the easy answer isn't always the truth. Colonel Sanders sold a hell of a lot of fried chicken,

but I'm not sure anyone wants to know how he made it. If I was going to be presumptuous enough to tell people how to write, I felt there had to be a better reason than my popular success. Put another way, I didn't want to write a book, even a short one like this, that would leave me feeling like a literary gasbag or a transcendental asshole. There are enough of those books — and those writers — on the market already, thanks.

But Amy was right: nobody ever asks about the language. They ask the DeLillos and the Updikes and the Styrons, but they don't ask popular novelists. Yet many of us proles also care about the language, in our humble way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper. What follows is an attempt to put down, briefly and simply, how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, and how it's done. It's about the day job; it's about the language.

My intention is similar to the [Sundays with Ray Bradbury series](#): Each week as I re-read King's memoir, print notable excerpts at Go Into The Story to inspire our creativity and conversation about the craft.

The journey we have taken through the previous twenty-five weekly installments in this series has led us to the middle part of the book, a section entitled "On Writing": 16 chapters, 105 pages. Here King details "everything I know about how to write fiction." Moving forward, we will spend months of Sundays going through King's observations. This

is the "heart" of the book.

Today: From the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *On Writing*, an excerpt from pp. 141–142 in which King frames this central part of the book with "two theses."

There are no bad dogs, according to the title of a popular training manual, but don't tell that to the parent of a child mauled by a pit bull or a rottweiler; he or she is apt to bust your beak for you. And no matter how much I want to encourage the man or woman trying for the first time to write seriously, I can't lie and say there are no bad writers. Sorry, but there are *lots* of bad writers. Some are on-staff at your local newspaper, usually reviewing little-theater productions or pontificating about the local sports teams. Some have scribbled their way to homes in the Caribbean, leaving a trail of pulsing adverbs, wooden characters, and vile passive-voice constructions behind them. Others hold forth at open-mike poetry slams, wearing black turtlenecks and wrinkled khaki pants; they spout doggerel about "my angry lesbian breasts" and "the tilted alley where I cried my mother's name."

Writers form themselves into the pyramid we see in all areas of human talent and human creativity. At the bottom are the bad ones. Above them is a group which is slightly smaller but still large and welcoming; these are the competent writers. They may also be found on the staff of your local newspaper, on the racks of your local bookstore, and at poetry readings on Open Mike Night. These are folks

who somehow understand that although a lesbian may be angry, her breasts will remain breasts.

The next level is much smaller. These are the really good writers. Above them — above almost all of us — are the Shakespeares, the Faulkners, the Yeatses, Shaws, and Eudora Weltys. They are geniuses, divine accidents, gifted in a way which is beyond our ability to understand, let alone attain. Shit, most geniuses aren't able to understand themselves, and many of them lead miserable lives, realizing (at least on some level) that they are nothing but fortunate freaks, the intellectual version of runway models who just happen to be born with the right cheekbones and with breasts which fit the image of an age.

I am approaching the heart of this book with two theses, both simple. The first is that good writing consists of mastering the fundamentals (vocabulary, grammar, the elements of style) and then filling the third level of your toolbox with the right instruments. The second is that while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it *is* possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.

This brings to mind the words of actor-writer-director George Clooney who is quoted as saying: "It's possible for me to make a bad movie out of a good script, but I can't make a good movie from a bad script." I suppose per King's

observation we may infer that you can also make a good movie from a *competent* script.

In the next few pages, King writes about “lots of critics” who would adhere to the philosophy that a good writer — and certainly a *great* writer — is born with the requisite talent to manifest their gift. This reflects a kind of thinking echoed in theological circles: [predestination](#). God (or Fate) has either “chosen” us to have the necessary and innate talent to be a good writer ... or not.

King disagrees.

I want to believe why King is of the opinion that competent writers have the potential to grow into good writers is because he has had the experience as a teacher of the craft. That is, I bet King has experienced students evolving into good writers under his tutelage as well as the influence of their life experiences and hard work required to develop their writing skill sets.

I know / have. As someone who has taught screenwriting for two decades, first as a hobby, then part-time, and now full-time, I have witnessed this creative transformation with quite literally dozens of students, either at the undergraduate or graduate film school level, or adults pursuing their dream of becoming a writer while holding down a job which pays the bills.

Hell, I experienced this evolution myself. When I wrote the spec script *K-9*, it was just my third screenplay. [Even](#)

[though it sold to Universal Pictures for three-quarters of a million dollars](#), it was at best a competent script with a great story concept. I may have used that success to break into Hollywood, but I was aware enough to realize that unless I got my act together — and in a hurry — I had zero chance of creating a career as a professional screenwriter.

Guided by my instincts, I pursued the path King details above: I learned the “fundamentals,” in this case how to write a screenplay. I filled the “third level of [my] toolbox with the right instruments” by reading every script I could get my hands on... watching or listening to every screenwriter interview I could find ... studying every movie, every screenplay, doing scene-by-scene breakdowns to analyze their structure. And I wrote. Pages upon pages upon pages. In short, I immersed myself in the world of movies and the craft of screenwriting. Over the years through that intensive self-education process, I got better as a writer.

I moved from a competent writer to a good writer. Good enough to have written thirty-plus movie and television projects at nearly every major Hollywood studio and broadcast TV network.

I have witnessed a similar creative arc with many of my students. Through their “hard work, dedication, and timely help,” the latter through the influence and support of their teachers they became good writers.

Which is why King's words ring true to me. I have seen it happen with so many of my students. I have seen it happen with myself.

If this is your aspiration — to become a good writer — and you are a competent writer, the possibility you may achieve your goal *does* exist. But as King writes in the next few paragraphs of his book: You have to be willing to “work your ass off.”

That is the subject of next week's installment in this series.

Come back next week and many weeks thereafter for more in the *Sundays with Stephen King's "On Writing"* series.

[Stephen King's website](#)

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[*On Writing: A Memoir on the Craft* by Stephen King](#)

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