

WRITE

UNORIGINAL

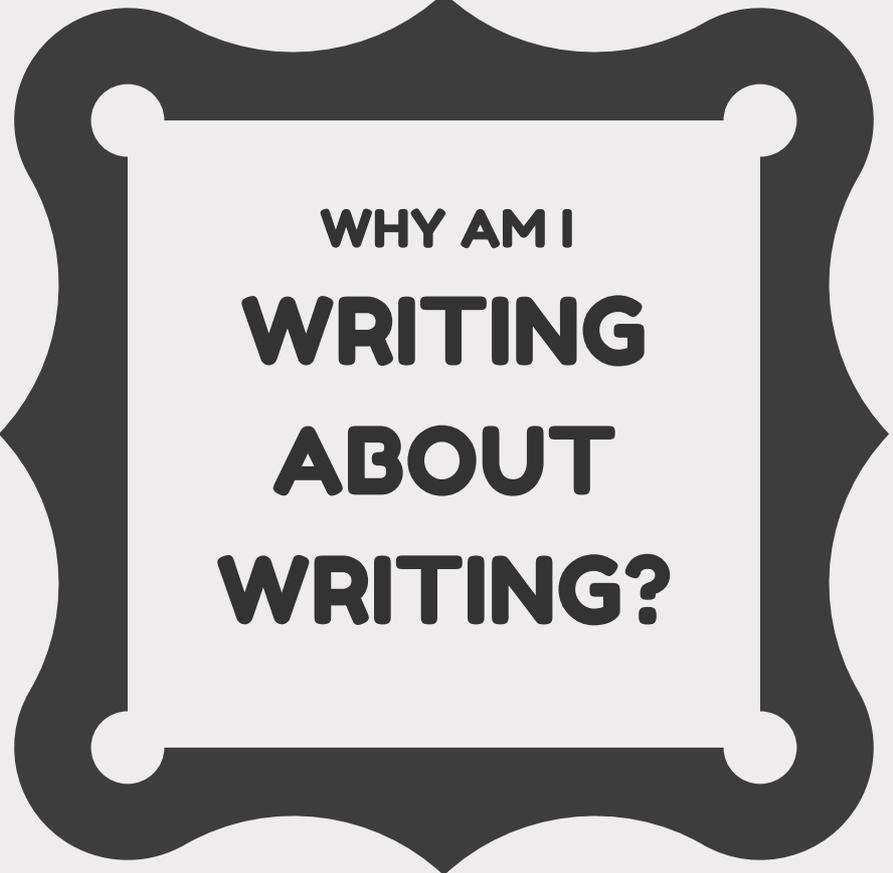
MORE

(BUT HELPFUL) TIPS

BETTER

FOR WRITING WELL

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WHY AM I WRITING ABOUT WRITING?

An increasingly popular topic (and, arguably, increasingly popular faux pas) is writing about writing. Now, there are certain people who can and should write about writing. For example, when a Doug Wilson or Stephen King writes about writing, it's going to be worth reading.

Why? Because they have wisdom to impart that's based upon decades of experience.

But most of us aren't these men. We lack experience and are short on wisdom. So when we write about writing, it's usually about stuff like calling and destiny and dreams and such things. But writing this way has an unfortunate side effect: more often than not, we come across a bit pretentious.

That's been one of my great fears writing this book (and the blog series that preceded it).

Most of my training has come on the job. I didn't go to school for journalism or anything like that. I wasn't a writer until I was one, and I didn't plan on being one at all. So, when I'm asked the question, "How do I get better at writing," I feel a little embarrassed. This is not because I don't know what to say, but because I often feel like I'm making it up as I go along (even when I'm not).

I started writing out of pure desperation. It wasn't a perceived calling. I didn't have a fire in my bones or any such thing. I was thrown into a writing job and needed to figure out how to not suck at it.

If you're in the same boat I was a few years ago, or are just looking for some advice on how to write well, this book is for you. But a word of caution: This is not the work of someone who has "arrived" or anything like that. Nor is a "here I write, I can do no other" type piece.

What you're going to find in the pages that follow are the tips that I've found helpful on the journey to becoming a writer. My goal here has been to be practical, helpful, and (hopefully) write something that's enjoyable.

Alright, let's get started.



WRITE MORE BETTER

TIP ONE:

**WRITE
SIMPLY**

Writing simply is harder than it looks. (And a more obvious sentence has yet to be written.)

When we're starting out, we often try to sound like we know what we're doing. Our impressive vocabularies (or impressive proficiency with thesaurus.com) are on display for all to see.

The only problem? No one wants to read it.

Generally speaking, readers don't enjoy it when writers appear to enjoy the sound of their own voice a little too much. It comes across like the man or woman who, at a dinner party, is constantly telling everyone how amazing and wonderful he or she is. These people suck the fun out of

parties (and aren't terribly fun to read, either).

This is not to say that we aren't to have fun with words and engage in wordplay (keep reading), but it does mean three basic things:

1. Avoid technical jargon

Now, there are times when technical jargon or other big words are unavoidable. When it is, we should bring clarity by explaining what they mean. But any time we can avoid jargon, we should. Often, we use jargon not because we must, but because it's convenient. This does a disservice to our readers and paints us as being a bit lazy.

2. Keep your sentences simple

While there are appropriate levels of complexity, overly-complicated sentences tends to suggest we don't know what we're doing.

Take this sentence for example:

"A chief programmatic outcome is to ensure beneficiaries have developed sufficient relational skills to thrive."

I'm sure you can figure out what I'm saying here, but there are easier ways to write it. If I were writing with simplicity in mind, it might look a little more like this:

"We are going to teach people how to make friends because it's important."

The first makes you die a little on the inside. The second actually tells you something.

3. Don't be a show-off

The best way to summarize this point is as follows:

Don't use "utilize" when "use" will do.

I hate people using the word "utilize." Just hearing the word is like fingernails running down a chalkboard, something that amuses my coworkers greatly. While I don't believe most people mean it this way, using unnecessary big words often comes across as showing off.

You're trying to impress us with your vocabulary, but you're really only making yourself look silly.



WRITE MORE BETTER
TIP TWO:
BE
COACHABLE

I've never met a good writer who has it all figured out. The best I know are eager for feedback. This isn't because they love having their egos stroked, but because they want to get better at what they do. As much fun as praise is—I mean, who doesn't love reading an encouraging comment (they're not just an urban legend!) or a thoughtful review of a book you've written?—it doesn't help you become a stronger writer.

For that, you need thoughtful critique. And you also need humility in order to learn from it. Which takes us to the second tip in our quest to become better writers:

Be coachable.

Being coachable is primarily an issue of character. It means being humble enough to evaluate oneself honestly and to receive instruction and correction where needed. As a writer, there are several groups you must be willing to hear from:

1. Editors

One of the most difficult moments of writing my second book was when my editor told me, “What you’ve said is right and good and true, but you’re losing focus. I need you to re-work it.” Hearing this, I was disheartened. After all, I’d put in a ton of work already, and the idea of more wasn’t terribly appealing (since I was trying to avoid a season of writing from after dinner until 1 am). But the criticism was bang-on. So, I got to work and we wound up with a better book as a result.

Why do I share this? Because good editors are your best friends. They’re there to help you sharpen your words and ideas, and help steer you back in the right direction when you’re going off on a rabbit trail. Listen to them!

2. Audience

Yes, our writing is “for” us, but it’s also for other people (or else, we would keep diaries instead of blogs). My favorite moments here have been receiving constructive criticism in a comment and taking that as an opportunity to revisit what I’ve written. An engaged audience is really helpful to learn where you’re lacking clarity, making a weak argument or a strong point. Listen to them!

3. Peers

This is a funny group, because they sometimes act as our editors (informally), other times they are a part of our audience, and a lot of the time they're simply there to help us push through a block or work out an idea. They're also really great at providing hard critique in a way that doesn't crush your spirit. Listen to them!

But the ability to listen to any of these really comes down to your character. You can "hear" what's said and not do anything with it, but your writing will suffer for it. But if you can be humble and learn from the critique (or outright criticism) you receive, and act on it, you'll be much better off.



WRITE MORE BETTER
TIP THREE:
READ.
A LOT.

There are certain authors whose books are about as much fun for me to read as chewing glass. Some are written so poorly that, in my cynical moments, I wonder whether their authors are functionally illiterate or simply hate words. Most of these are written by pastors and academics, sadly.

There are several reasons for this: some, while being very well-spoken, lack writing skills (they're only being published because they have a big church). But others either don't read or read too many of the wrong types of books.

But if you want to be a better writer, you need to read. A lot.

1. Read a lot of books

This advice is well-known, particularly to those familiar with Stephen King's *On Writing*, or Douglas Wilson's *Wordsmithy*. Both are strong advocates of writers being readers:

"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot," King writes. "There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of."

"Go for total tonnage, and read like someone who will forget most of it ... Most of what is shaping you in the course of your reading you will not be able to remember," Wilson likewise encourages. "The fact that you can't remember things doesn't mean that you haven't been shaped by them."

Both advocate reading in terms of sheer volume, but another concern needs to be raised: variety.

2. Read more than one genre

Writers—especially Christian writers—desperately need to vary their reading. I've never really had a problem reading a lot, but I have frequently had issues varying the genres I read. It's easy, especially when one writes a lot of contemporary theological issues or reviews books written with Christians in mind, to get stuck reading only books of that sort. This was me up until a couple of years ago

when my friend and colleague, Amber, called me out on it and challenged me to start reading fiction again, which I've been doing increasingly ever since.

What's been fun for me in reengaging fiction, beyond enjoying good storytelling, has been looking at how authors are using words—the emotions they're trying to convey, the response they're encouraging, what they're doing to keep me following along and interested... This is really helpful from a practical standpoint (as well as being a lot of fun).

Some may read this and object, saying, "But I don't like fiction." Okay. My wife is right there with you. Try it anyway. But try the right stuff. Go to your public library, for goodness' sake. Ask for recommendations on Facebook or Twitter. Heck, read the blog post I'll write on this sometime next week! But even if you never want to write fiction, you should still read it. It'll make your non-fiction work better.

To be fair, being a reader doesn't make one a writer. Many people read a great deal yet still cannot string together a coherent sentence (without the help of a well-paid ghostwriter). Regardless, while not all readers are writers, exceptional writers are readers.



WRITE MORE BETTER

TIP FOUR:

LEARN

TO PLAY

One of the worst things a writer can do is play it safe. I don't mean intentionally trying to be controversial or anything like that. I mean never try anything different. They stick to their strengths continually, and never attempt to develop in any areas of weakness. But for a writer to really grow, he or she needs to learn how to play.

Writers can't afford to play it safe. They have to be willing to try new things, or they will lose interest in their craft (and so will their audience).

So learn how to play. Here are a couple of ways to do that.

1. Play with genres

If you write children's stories, try writing a non-fiction article. If you write on theology, write a poem. These never have to see the light of day, but that doesn't mean they're not worth trying. One of the best I know in this regard is Stephen Altrogge, who regularly releases short stories, collections of essays, and serial novels through Amazon. This is also why I'm glad my work requires me to write differently than I would here. I write fundraising material during the day (when I write anything). I write about theology and books here. You can't think about these the same way. And this is a really good thing for me because it makes me a more nimble writer.

2. Play with words

There's a reason I called this book, "Write more better," and it's not because my grammar is terrible. It's because it's fun to play with words—pay attention to the rhythm of your writing, effectively wield irony, alliteration and other literary devices for the good of all who read your work. Try to write something that makes you smile! When I can see an author's love of words in what he or she writes, I get excited.

Don't underestimate the value of "fun" as a writer. When you're in a rut, it shows. When you play it safe, your readers know it. But when you experiment, you're more creative and engaging (even if the only person who knows about your experiments is you).



WRITE MORE BETTER

TIP FIVE:

JUST

WRITE!

We're already at the end. Do you feel like a better writer? Hopefully you're not looking for a refund (this is free, so you get none!).

As you continue on the journey to being a better writer, I have one final piece of advice, one that's pretty simple, but easy to overlook: just write.

This isn't mind-blowing by any means, but it's so necessary. Writers who want to improve in their craft must write. As much as we want to think otherwise, we can't just decide to be better writers. It takes effort. Let's consider what that means.

1. Write consistently

There is rarely a day that goes by where I don't write something. Most of it is never seen by anyone but me. But the point of writing consistently isn't to have material for an audience. The point is to get better at my craft.

Think about it like exercise: In order to see results, you have to stick to a routine. You have to work out regularly in order to lose weight and gain muscle. You don't get the same result from a three hour workout once a week as you would from three one hour workouts. It's the same with learning to play an instrument. We don't learn well from long, but inconsistent practice sessions. We learn from regular practice.

So if you want to write better, you need to write consistently.

2. Find your voice

Don't write for an audience "out there," write for you. Write what you enjoy. Write what makes you smile. Write what makes you feel something. Be really comfortable with stinking for a good long while. Don't worry about how to get published. Don't worry about how many people are or aren't reading your blog.

Just write. This is all a part of figuring out your voice as a writer. And it's just as awkward as when we first learned how to speak in the first place. For a while, it's not going to feel right. We're going to be frustrated. Our sentences might not even make sense. But eventually, it'll click. And

it won't feel quite so bad. We might even get to a place where we actually enjoy reading what we write (it happens). And the more you write, the more you learn from your mistakes, if you truly do have a gift for the craft, the better you will become.

And so, friends, we have reached the end of our journey. And now it's up to you. If you want to be a better writer:

Write simply. Be patient. Be humble. Be willing to learn. Read a lot. And have fun.

Now go write something, will you?



**RECOMMENDED
READING
FOR
WRITERS**

Wordsmithy by Douglas Wilson

Wilson's writing is not for everyone (I know some who downright hate reading him), but the advice he gives in this book is some of the best you're going to get anywhere. Seriously.

How to Write Short by Roy Peter Clark

Clark's advice is practical, helpful and geared to writing in an age of short attention spans: "We need more good short writing—the kind that makes us stop, read, and think—in an accelerating world. A time-starved culture bloated with information hungers for the lean, clean, simple, and direct. Such is our appetite for short writing that not only do our long stories seem long, but our short stories feel too long as well." Well worth checking out.

On Writing by Stephen King

There are few authors as prolific as King, and even fewer who've made the impact on popular culture he has. Although I've personally not been a fan of his work, *On Writing* is wonderfully helpful and full of tough love for aspiring authors.

**THANKS
FOR
READING!**

If you've got feedback on this resource, I'd love to hear it. Shoot me a line anytime at aaron.armstrong9@gmail.com. For more content, visit bloggingtheologically.com.