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Handrailing

ELEVATING YOUR STYLE FROM THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

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Call me a fake. You are about to begin reading *Handrailing*. If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I learned to write, and what my first lousy essay was like, and how I thought of using shoulders and giants in an article about writing anyway, and all that *Ellen DeGeneres Show* kind of crap. You don't understand what I'm doing right now unless you've read Isaac Newton's letter to Robert Hooke, but that ain't no matter.

If any of the above phrases seem familiar, it's because each of them is ripped off from the "100 Best First Lines from Novels," as selected by the *American Book Review*.

In their original context, they concerned entirely unrelated subjects; I just made a few alterations to tailor them to my own purpose and experiment with style. Whenever I write, I've found it helpful to turn to great essays from seasoned writers as scaffolds of sorts for my own.

For papers in History or SOSH, for example, I'll look at scholarly essays in those fields—even pieces my instructors have published! Not only do you encounter interesting new ideas and rhetorical moves; you can also learn from their style and syntax to express your own thoughts more effectively. I call this kind of active, imitative approach “**handrailing**”—you guide your own stylistic development as a writer by leaning on and learning from the standards set by others. It doesn't matter if you're looking to classic literature or contemporary journalism and scholarship. As you adapt other styles to make them your own—that's crucial, so that you don't plagiarize—you'll improve your writing by a mile.



To practice ‘handrailing,’ read *how* writers write, not just *what* they write about.

As you read, try to make sense of how authors catch your attention and convey their message to you. If it sounds good to you, you can probably use something like it in your own writing. Take the sources for the first two sentences of this writing guide:

“Call me Ishmael.” Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)

“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.” Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (1979)

Melville establishes the identity of his protagonist right away; Calvino’s frank, upfront style couldn’t be clearer. By using variations of their sentences to begin my guide, I sought to accomplish some of the same things. Read on to learn more about how to put this in action...

In order to practice handrailing...

Don't be afraid to arrange words differently than how you're used to.

The only way you can write a notch above your current skill is to take the uncomfortable step of expressing yourself apart from your conversational diction. Everyone starts with their first simple subject-verb-predicate sentences before they begin to employ compound, vividly descriptive syntax. Take the words of Holden Caulfield, the main character in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951):

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

A beginning writer might simply have had Caulfield say, "you want to know where I was born but I won't tell you." Instead, Salinger elaborates with three additional clauses that really capture the mind and voice of his character; in doing so, he gives his readers a much more accurate and engaging sense of who they're dealing with. The style he uses is crucial to the meaning he wants to convey. Moreover, he also includes a reference to a popular literary work, *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, which my rip-off at the beginning of this writing guide replaces with a more contemporary reference (the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*). You've got to be willing to experiment by injecting vivid detail in your prose, sometimes in unfamiliar ways, whenever you can.

But...make sure that you also pick an appropriate style to peg your own work to.

Every stylistic approach has its limits. Conversational styles, in particular, only work well for specific audiences. For instance, consider this excerpt from the beginning of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885):

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter.

The colloquial diction and intentionally errant grammar here fit well with the comic Southern atmosphere that Twain was trying to depict for his audience, who was also familiar with his previous work. If you're writing about the recent drop in oil prices for your Economics class, however, you'd probably be better off looking for exemplary writing in the pages of *The Economist*. Sometimes, instructors are also willing to share exceptional work from previous students; it's always a good idea to scrutinize examples like that closely.

Whatever you read, actively analyze the approaches other authors take, consider why they chose them, and apply those lessons to your own writing tasks.

Note how writers you admire grab the attention of their readers; recognize how published authors present their ideas and transition from one claim to the next in their paragraphs. Then see if you can craft similar approaches.

Effective writers are well-versed in organizing their arguments; oftentimes you can enlist the same scaffolds you find in their work to frame your own papers on entirely different topics.

Bottom line: before acting as a writer, use your perspective as an alert, critical reader to pinpoint techniques to try out in your own essays!