

Some Thoughts On Writing

By Aaron Gertler

But largely stolen from writers much better than Aaron Gertler

Before you start:

- 1) When asked how he carved such wonderful sculptures, Michelangelo replied: “I see [David](#) in the marble, and carve away everything that isn’t David.” Do this for short essays: find a single thing you want to say, and make sure that everything you write helps to communicate that thing. In the course of carving your David, you’ll take some interesting detours, but keeping a shape in your head will improve the final product.
- 2) Still, don’t worry if you don’t have a “conclusion” when you begin. All you really need is a topic, an opening thought. Writing is one of the best ways to think through a tricky question or contemplate the meaning of a difficult experience. And few pleasures trump the joy of writing something that surprises you---something that seems to have come from the mind of another person altogether.
- 3) Save your title for the end, unless the title is your reason for writing the piece. (And if it is, it should be a *splendid* title.) The best titles are keys to an entire work, and you can't forge the key when you haven't built the lock.
- 4) Don’t be afraid. First drafts are never, ever, pretty. Almost. To paraphrase Anne Lamott, author of [Bird by Bird](#): “I know exactly one writer whose work is perfect from the moment she types it. The rest of us hate her.” When your first draft is done, you’ll have a few great sentences, a few terrible sentences, and many sentences with the potential to become great. Keep the first, cut the second, and improve the third. (Ta-da!)
- 5) No fear! I said it once already, but I’ll say it again, differently: *Final* drafts aren’t always pretty. Sometimes, a piece just doesn’t work out. So how’s a writer to deal with failure? If the writing’s all dead, not even slightly alive?
- 6) With the following paraphrase from [The Princess Bride](#): “If he's all dead, there’s usually only one thing you can do. Go through his pockets and look for loose change.” So give the piece one last look-over and find the “loose change” (good sentences, fun metaphors, interesting arguments, whatever). Then bury it in your favorite trash can.

Structure:

- 1) Essays do not have to be five paragraphs. Or any other number. Don't worry about word count. Readers don't count words. They read. If there are too many words, they'll stop. If that happens, take some out.
- 2) If a paragraph is giving you trouble, ask yourself if it needs to be there. Sometimes, the transition from paragraph A to paragraph C is better than those from A to B or B to C.
- 3) And if you can cut paragraphs, sentences are even more vulnerable! If it isn't working, if it won't stop sounding "off", if the words turn to mush in your mouth, kill it and begin again.
- 4) A paragraph can take up a whole page *if you have a very good reason*. But short paragraphs are easier to read, and readers are lazy people. [See what I mean?](#) If you must have long paragraphs, mix in some short ones as well.
- 5) Same goes for sentences. Think of yourself as a football coach: The long sentences are easy jogs, short ones are wind sprints. If the workout's all jogging, the team will be slow and flabby. All sprinting, and they'll die of heat exhaustion. Mix it up.
- 6) Feel free to finish with something that isn't a simple "conclusion". Not all problems can be solved. Some stories don't have clean endings. (Though we should know when we've reached the end of *your* telling of a story: don't cut off in mid-sentence.)
- 7) Not all essays need to have a "circular" structure, but the best endings tend to be those that that evoke their beginnings, and vice-versa.
- 8) I'll end with a point on beginnings: Logically, your first sentence is the one that the most people will see, so make it as perfect as you can, even if it means spending less time elsewhere. You can drop us into the middle of the action, tell us something surprising about yourself, use a mechanical headline that draws readers [like gerbils to food pellets...](#) whatever makes us want to keep reading. (Well, maybe not the food pellets. Whatever lets you sleep at night.)

Sentences:

- 1) Most writing is packed with superfluous fluff. Make sure that every word, in every sentence, is doing something. If you think a word doesn't need to be there, kill it. If the page doesn't catch on fire in the next few seconds, keep it dead.
- 2) Make your details as specific as possible. As Anne Fadiman points out, there's a major difference between writing about a woman's "beautiful face" and praising her "delicate left clavicle". Details are

what make your piece different from any writing we've seen before. And if it weren't different, why would we want to read it?

3) Imagery is excellent: You want to help your readers see the story. But don't forget to help them hear and smell and taste the story, too. They should know what it was like to have been you, for that moment or minute or month: what you felt, they should feel. (Unless you have another plan in mind. If you cried, but want us to laugh, make us laugh.)

4) Watch out for clichés, but also for the harder-to-spot words that are simply boring. Thesauruses are your friends: they add flavor to your sentences and leave useful new words nested in your brain.

5) If you write dialogue, it's fine to have someone speak without perfect grammar or complete sentences, and you don't have to use their exact words (as long as you're not reporting a story). But be fair to the people you "quote" (don't embellish their accents or lower their IQs), and make sure the conversation is going somewhere. If you can summarize the dialogue without losing any good lines, do it.

6) Sentences should end on strong words. This will happen more often when you write with the **active voice**. Think specific nouns and verbs or sharp, commanding phrases. The end of each sentence is a trampoline. The reader bounces from one to the next, until the end of the paragraph, when they land on solid ground, ready for another jump.

Revising:

1) **Do whatever you can to change the look of the piece before you edit.** Double-space it, change the font, print it out, have a friend read it out loud--the less familiar it is, the better. You can't reasonably edit the same words you've been staring at for the last hour. Changing the format helps you replicate the feeling you'll have when you see the piece the next day, get it back from your teacher in a week, or see it published in a month. Every published writer knows the feeling of wanting desperately to change something that's already been printed for the world to see, but these regrets can be minimized with proper strangification.

2) Sleeping before you revise also helps. Ernest Hemingway tells us to "write drunk, edit sober". I write tired and edit less tired. You must be 21 or over to drink in the state of Connecticut. Do the math. (Note: this was added later. I do not encourage my students to write under the influence of alcohol or the equally pernicious influence of staying up past their bedtimes.)

3) Don't publish anything unless you want to. Even if other people claim to like a piece, you are your own best reader, and the person most likely to revisit the work in later years. This advice doesn't apply to **Franz Kafka**, who tried to have his best books burned before anyone could see them, but if you're Franz Kafka, what are you doing here? You're dead!

4) Still, even if you don't publish something right away, schedule a time *on your actual calendar* to read it again. (I like to wait a week, unless something pulls me back sooner. Listen to the things that pull you back.) Sometimes, you'll abandon the ruins of an old shack and come back to a promising fixer-upper. Or, if it still can't be salvaged, you'll suddenly spot the iceberg that sank it, and be inspired to start something tough enough to break the ice. Speaking of which, now seems like a good time to get back to the screenplay I left unfinished, *Titanic II: The British Empire Strikes Back*.

5) Mixed metaphors are only permissible if there's a really good joke at the end. The way to determine whether it's a really good joke is to tell me the joke and see if I laugh. This is how I test all my jokes.

Last words:

Various personal things having to do with the class. For outside readers, though, my last words are advisory.

First, if you aren't already doing both of these, start keeping a journal and a list of ideas. The journal doesn't have to be about your life, and it can be the same document as your list of ideas. Either way, you should *always* have something nearby with which you can record ideas, whether it's a pocket-sized notebook or a series of text messages sent to your own phone. My favorite system at the moment is [Todoist](#) on the go, transferred to [Evernote](#) once I'm on my laptop. But I used to have a pair of Word documents, one for fiction (stories, poems, novels) and one for nonfiction (essays, journalism, blog posts), and that worked almost as well. Point being, once you can instantly record your ideas, you won't just stop losing them---you'll start having *more* of them. It's like magic, but consistent and repeatable and even better than magic.

Second, find a writing ritual that works for you. Mine is "write to procrastinate from doing things that seem more difficult than writing at this particular moment", but many other people have come up with [rituals that are far superior](#). Doesn't have to be every day, or six hours on one specific day, but if you notice after a couple of weeks that you haven't really been writing, try a different mindset.

Finally, read lots of books. The best thing about being a writer is that, while eating good food won't make you a better chef and watching football won't make you a better quarterback (unless you're already skilled at those things), reading good books *will* improve your writing. Again: like magic, only better.

Actual last words:

Remember: Even if only a few other people ever read and enjoy the thing you've written, by writing it, you've made the world a better place to be a reader.

(Okay, **there are some exceptions**. But you know what I mean.)