

## Murder Your Darlings: And other gentle writing advice from Aristotle to Zinsser

By Roy Peter Clark  
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### 1. Murder your darlings. Keep your eye on those fancy phrases.

*On the Art of Writing*  
By Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

Toolbox: You will write things you love. That's wonderful. Enjoy that feeling. During revision, though, ask yourself a crucial question. Does that gorgeous passage or that clever thought support your main idea? If not, take it out. You do not have to "murder" that darling metaphor. You can save it for another story on another day.

### 2. Find and cut the clutter. Search for lazy words, even after several drafts.

*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*  
By William Zinsser

Toolbox: Like William Zinsser, assume that your third draft, even your fifth draft, maybe your eleventh draft, contains too many words. But how can you cut clutter if you can't see it? Test every word. You do not have to keep the reader on the "proper path." The word path has the idea of "proper" built in.

### 3.

### Learn to live inside words. Recognize both their literal meanings and their associations.

*Writing Well*  
By Donald Hall

Toolbox: You have language inside you. What a blessing. But what if we flipped the switch? What if we imagined that we lived inside the language, a fish breathing in the ocean? Writers swim inside words. When you see words from the inside out, you learn the absence of pure synonyms. Sofa is no longer interchangeable with couch. Learn not just the literal meanings of words, but their associations and connotations.

### 4. Shape a sentence for the desired effect. To achieve clarity, put the main clause first, with subject and verb together.

*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*  
By George Campbell, D.D.

Toolbox: Some sentences put the main thought at the beginning, others near the end. The difference matters. Sentences that make a point early seem more natural and conversational. Reading those sentences, the reader is more likely to focus on the content, and less on the writer. To create a special effect, a variation of the pattern with more of a flourish, save the trumpet blast till the end.

### 5. Work from a plan. Include a lead or an intro you can write without referring to notes.

*Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process*  
By John McPhee

*The John McPhee Reader*  
Edited by William L. Howarth

Toolbox: The larger the writing project, the more you need a plan. You need it to organize your material, identify the parts, and reinforce a governing idea – a focus. If you lack a planning process, you can borrow on from another author, such as John McPhee. An important tool in his process is the "lead," a section of up to 2,000 words that helps the writer and the reader see what is ahead. Write this passage without referring to your notes. It will serve as a flashlight that shines down into the well of the story, illuminating the unknown.

## 6. Recognize two contradictory meanings of style. Be prepared to abandon the agreed-upon style of a group to express your individual style.

*The Elements of Style*

By William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

Toolbox: The meaning of the word *style*, as in the book *The Elements of Style*, is mercurial. Just when you think you've contained it, it squirts away, assuming a new shape and significance. Some words with the same spelling have opposite meanings. If you "sand" wood, you make it smooth. If you "sand" ice, you make it gritty. The word *style* is almost like that. With some style books, the goal is consistency: we agree – or not – to use the serial comma. But style is also an approach to writing that makes an author's work distinctive. These two definitions are not mutually exclusive, but they can rub, causing a creative friction. You may have to violate a group's style in order to express your individual style.

## 7. Vary sentence length to create a pleasing rhythm. Think of each period as a stop sign.

*100 Ways to Improve Your Writing: Proven Professional Techniques for Writing with Style and Power*

By Gary Provost

*Steering the Craft: A 21st-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*

By Ursula K. Le Guin

Toolbox: Short sentences sound truthful. Writers use them to grab your attention. Longer sentences take you on a journey, showing you the snowy, rusty cityscape along the edge of the tracks as the train rumbles by. By length alone – short, medium, long – sentences send secret messages to the reader. With variation, sentences can take on a musical rhythm, from legato to staccato. As in music, pleasure comes from the combined experience of repetition and variation.

## 8. Use visual markings to spark your creative process. Also use them to signify your revisions.

*Authors at Work*

Edited by Robert H. Taylor and Herman W. Liebert

*Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking*

By Vera John-Steiner

Toolbox: Draw pictures of your writing ideas. Create maps of your process. Visualize your revisions. Think charts, diagrams, lists, story shapes. Use circles, spirals, triangles, pyramids, stick figures, and arrows – lots of arrows. These blueprints can guide your thinking from conception (those scribbles on napkins) through the final changes in the margins of your text. Even in the digital age, edit on hard copy to better envision both your path and destination.

## 9. Tune your voice for the digital age. Experiment with language and forms of delivery.

*Wired Style: Principles of English Usage in the Digital Age*

By Constance Hale and Jessie Scanlon

Toolbox: I studied classical piano as a boy, using muscle memory to master works by Mozart and Beethoven. But I was enjoying rock 'n' roll. To play like Little Richard required me to change the way I listened to music. I had to learn chord progressions and improvisations. In the same way, writers in the digital age must expand their range. Readers now expect not just a conventional voice, but a distinctive one, a writer willing to experiment with language. This means not getting trapped in the jargon of technology, writing on a richer variety of cultural experiences (the Bible *and* Twitter), using colloquial language to achieve sophisticated effects, and, at least on occasion, finding a way to combine high seriousness with deep irreverence.

## 10. Turn the dials that adjust the way you sound as a writer. Read the work aloud to make sure it sounds like you – or a little better.

*The Sound on the Page: Great Writers Talk about Style and Voice in Writing*  
By Ben Yagoda

Toolbox: Think of your writing voice as a version of your amplified singing voice. If you were on stage, you would be singing into a microphone and through a sound system, where your voice would be influenced by certain controls: volume, bass, treble, echo. Your writing voice has those kinds of levers too: whether you use I or we; whether you write stories or reports; whether you quote Aristotle or your local street philosopher. Learn how to manipulate these levers to discover and deliver your best writing voice.

## 11. Learn the steps of the writing process. Good writing is not magic, but it's full of surprises.

*The Essential Don Murray: Lessons from America's Greatest Writing Teacher*  
Edited by Thomas Newkirk and Lisa C. Miller

Toolbox: Before you master the requirements of your particular genre, understand the steps of the process all writers must climb: finding story ideas, gathering the material you need, discovering a focus, selecting your best stuff, envisioning a structure, building a draft, revising all parts of the process over time. For each step, you can find strategies that will help you solve problems and make meaning.

## 12. Keep writing; things will get better. Never be discouraged by the inadequacies of early drafts.

*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*  
By Anne Lamott

Toolbox: No writer writes the perfect story, one perfect word at a time. In writing, perfect is the enemy of good. Since imperfection is necessary, it also becomes desirable. Never be discouraged by early problems in a text. It is a cognitive distortion to think that “shitty first drafts” – to use Anne Lamott’s earthy term – make you a shitty writer. With experience, you will learn that such early writing is not sculpture, but clay, the stuff in which you will find the better work.

## 13.

*Writing without Teachers: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process And Writing with Power*  
By Peter Elbow

## Write freely to discover what you want to say. Use a “zero draft” to move you toward a first draft.

Toolbox: Writers help themselves by writing sooner than think they can. Before a first draft, try a “zero draft,” early scribbles that may not even reach sentence form. Freewriting – fast drafting without self-censorship – is another path toward liberation. In these early forms of writing, the goal is not communication. You write here to compile, remember, and gain knowledge. “What do I already know?” you ask yourself. “And what do I still need to learn?”

## 14. Say it loud: “I am a writer.” Assume the identity of a writer, especially at moments of self-doubt.

*Becoming a Writer*  
By Dorothea Brande

*If you Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*  
By Brenda Ueland

Toolbox: A goal of mastery of any craft is self-identification. Consider the difference between task and role; becoming and being; craft and a sense of mission and purpose; the how and the why. Many play golf and music but do not think of themselves as golfers or musicians because, after all, they are not Tiger Woods or Jimi Hendrix. If you write, a day may come when you identify yourself as a writer. You are not the Scarecrow. You don’t need a credential to prove you have a brain. Your credential is your writing. Learn to take encouragement anywhere you can find it.

## 15.

### **Develop the writing habit. Find a reliable work space, free of distractions, where you can aim for a daily level of production.**

*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*  
By Stephen King

**Toolbox:** Stephen King offers an odd bit of advice: that you should read bad writing so you can learn what not to write. More practical is the way in which King serves as a role model of productivity, a prodigious one to be sure. He claims he can write a novel in a season. That's four books per year. This pace comes from the elements of a writing habit: a reliable and comfortable place to write, the equipment and materials you need, protection from the distractions of television or digital media, a self-imposed daily target – up to 2,000 words a day. I promise you will not reach his standard, and neither can I. But we don't have to. We can scale it down as fits our personalities and responsibilities. Regular writing is a habit you should not kick.

## **16. Understand the value of storytelling. Guide readers in identifying danger to avoid and people who will help.**

*On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*  
By Brian Boyd

**Toolbox:** Reports convey information. Stories expand our experience. We have brains big enough to give us language, and that gift allows us to tell stories – nonfiction and fiction. The purposeful writer can draw energy from the two essential benefits of storytelling:

- We can identify dangers to our survival: a disease, an outlaw, that storm brewing in the Gulf.
- We can teach ourselves how to work together to achieve goals and solve problems.

Keeping those ends in mind will help you connect your craft to a higher purpose.

## **17. Prefer the complex human narrator. Try alternatives to the all-knowing or completely unreliable storyteller.**

*How Fiction Works*  
By James Woods

**Toolbox:** When you write a story, figure out who is the teller. Who is my narrator? What does that person know? What are his or her motives and backstory? What is the limit of that person's knowledge? We used to have two choices, narrators who were reliable or unreliable. A third choice is called the "free indirect style." It is not easy to master, but worth the effort. It lends credibility to the narration by replacing omniscience with a degree of uncertainty, an unsteadiness that reflects the way humans actually know the world.

## **18. Write for sequence, then for theme. Readers want to know what happens next and also what it means.**

*Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*  
By Northrop Frye

**Toolbox:** For as long as there have been stories, authors have played with time, and so can you. We say that life is experienced in chronological order, but that does not take into account dreams or memories. Stories have the power to distract us from daily life and plunge us into narrative time. Our experience of story time differs with each reading. Our first reading is usually sequential, a compulsive drive to discover what happens next. At some point our memory takes control. "What happens next?" is replaced by "What does it all mean?" Those questions give writers a dual responsibility. We attend to both what happens and what it means. We move from scenic action to matters of theme, myth, and archetype.

## 19. Distill your story into five words – maybe three. Use the “premise” or other tools to articulate what your work is really about.

*The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*

By Lajos Egri

Toolbox: There’s a quality in prose I call “altitude.” It describes that moment when the story “takes off” from what happens to what it means. In the last chapter, the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye describes this movement in an academic way. Playwright Lajos Egri taught a more practical way. He believed in writing a “premise,” a short sentence that summarizes what the work is all about. “Great love defies even death” describes the premise of *Romeo and Juliet*. You may not have the premise in your bag of writing tricks, but you need something like it. The capacity to encapsulate has different names in different writing disciplines: the theme, the nut, the point, the angle, the take, the thesis statement, even the hoo-ha (an old Yiddish exclamation of surprise, in this context slang for the moment a reader figures out what a piece of writing is about). Say it in five words.

20.

## Add dimension to characters. Flat ones are useful; round ones feel more human.

*Aspects of the Novel*

By E.M. Forster

Toolbox: Novelist E.M. Forster became famous among teachers of literature for drawing a distinction between “flat” characters and “round” ones. The more complex, the more crazily human characters feel, the rounder they are. Flat characters are easy to recognize: they are types – at worst, stereotypes – but at best compelling embodiments of a single trait. Any character details that add a degree of tension or ambiguity – the chef who loves fast foods, the feminist addicted to pornography, the pacifist who owns a gun – drives us and the reader toward roundness.

21.

## Report for story. Gather what you need to make nonfiction read like a novel.

*Frank Sinatra Has a Cold: And Other Essays*

By Gay Talese

*The New Journalism*

Edited by Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson

Toolbox: A gift of language lets us fabricate stories, describing actions that never happened by characters who never existed. Most of us associate words like story, yarn, tale, or fable with making things up. Authors of nonfiction can take the stuff of everyday life and weave it into something that is experienced as a novel is. The most effective – and ethical – method to create this “reads-like-fiction” effect is immersive research or reporting. Spend a day with a gravedigger. Collect character details, scenes, dialogue, points of view. Together they create that experience we call “story.”

## 22. Anticipate the needs of readers. Deliver urgent information or compelling narratives.

*Literature as Exploration*

And

*The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*

By Louise M. Rosenblatt

Toolbox: Good writers anticipate the needs of readers. In an emergency a reader may need “just the facts.” Another reader may benefit from an elaborate narrative that offers pleasure as well as wisdom. At times the writer stays in the background so as not to distract the reader from urgent information. At other times, the writer steps forward in a way that calls attention to the writer’s craft. Ask yourself: What is my reader looking for: to carry away information, or to experience something richly aesthetic. Each need calls for a different set of tools.

## 23. Embrace rhetoric as the source of language power. Use it to move your best words out of hiding.

*Quintilian: On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*

Edited by James J. Murphy

Toolbox: Anytime you hear what strikes you as a great speech, ask yourself “What makes it great?” The answer requires examining a text, whether it is a sermon, lecture, campaign speech, eulogy, or TED Talk. From the ancient to the modern, teachers of rhetoric offer reliable tools for making meaning and being persuasive. They have a million names for these strategies (like hyperbole!). You need only a few to build your writing muscles: establish a parallel pattern, then give it a twist; juxtapose elements that don’t easily sit together; and place the most emphatic word or phrase at the end of a sentence, or better yet, of a paragraph.

## 25. Sign a social contract with the reader. Be transparent about your methods, especially with memoir and the personal essay.

*The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*

By Vivian Gornick

*The Art of Memoir*

By Mary Karr

Toolbox: What constitutes responsible practice in genres such as the personal essay or the memoir? The answer is wrapped in controversy. Many writers think of these as hybrid genres, real-life stories distorted by the limitations of memory. A strict interpretation holds the memoirist to the same standards as the journalist. There is an implied social contract between the writer and the reader. Yes, memory may be faulty or inadequate, but there is a difference between the failures of memory and intentional fabrications. The best way to reconcile these differences is through the strategic virtue of transparency. At the beginning of a work – not at the end – let us in on your techniques: Composite characters? Conflated scenes? Invented dialogue? If you don’t want your reader to know what you’re up to, avoid that strategy – or label your work fiction.

## 24. Influence the emotional responses of your audience. Drive readers and viewers to the conflicting emotions of pity and fear.

*Poetics*

By Aristotle

*Aristotle’s Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization*

By Michael Tierno

Toolbox: If you have ever sat in a dark movie house with tears in your eyes, you have experienced a feeling that Aristotle describes as catharsis. Yes, people have been crying in theaters for more than 3,000 years. Where do those tears come from? Aristotle argues that a catharsis is the purging of emotions – a physiological venting of pity and fear. It’s easy enough for a writer to bring tears to your eyes. Just allow a child to go missing, or instead, to be reunited with her mother. Tragedy requires more. At the beginning we must move closer to the character, admiring his virtues, hoping he survives and triumphs. When terrible things happen to that character, we can pity him. But we must also realize that the forces that threaten the hero threaten all of us. There is fear in our tears.

## 26. Write to the level of your reader – and a little higher. Learn the tricks that make a text easy to read or, if you prefer, hard.

*The Art of Readable Writing*

By Rudolf Flesch

*How to Take the Fog Out of Writing*

By Robert Gunning

Toolbox: Since the 1940s, certain writers and teachers have tried to make prose more comprehensible to readers at different educational levels. I might write differently for a kindergarten class than I would for a law school seminar. That said, some great prose – *Charlotte’s Web* comes to mind – can be read with pleasure and insight by readers who are eight years old or eighty. The algorithm of comprehensibility is not difficult to learn and requires no calculators. Shorter words and shorter sentences slow down the pace of information in a good way. Each period is a stop sign. While useful to some with technical knowledge, jargon – niche language used by experts – and long words delivered in long sentence and paragraphs clot the flow of meaning for a general audience.

## **27. Learn the strategies that make reports reliable. Monitor your bias and unload your language.**

*Language in Thought and Action*  
By S.I. Hayakawa

Toolbox: When it comes to communication, reports are the building blocks of democratic life. Self-government and responsible enterprise depend on the report. A report differs from a story or an essay or a letter to the editor. To understand how best to write a report, consider its opposite: a text that spins or shapes the truth. Subjectivity, partisanship, and bias can never be eliminated from a report, but they can be tamed in the interest of impartiality. There are methods to build reliable reports in every field of endeavor. Pay attention to the connotations as well as the denotations of words; learn how to unload the language; offer a variety of points of view – not just two; avoid false equivalence. In an era of misinformation, propaganda, and vicious conspiracy theories, we need reports.

## **28. Write to make your soul grow. Transform the disadvantage of suffering into the redemptive advantage of powerful writing.**

*Like Shaking Hands with God: A Conversation about Writing*  
By Kurt Vonnegut and Lee Stringer

Toolbox: A teacher met an author who had just published a book about his time in prison. “You’re lucky,” said the teacher. “How’s that?” “You have such interesting experiences to write about. A bad experience for me is forgetting where I parked my minivan at the mall.” For the writer, disadvantage becomes advantage. Kurt Vonnegut makes sense: To write a good story, take a sympathetic character and place him in horrible circumstances to see what he’s made of. If you need models, look no further than the holy books – from Job to Jesus. Righteousness never means escape from suffering.

## **29. Write to delight and instruct. Often you can accomplish one or the other, but you are at your best when you can do both.**

*The Epistles of Horace*  
“*Ars Poetica*” (or “*Art of Poetry*”)  
Translated by David Ferry

Toolbox: Perhaps you are a poet. Or you write headlines for a big-city tabloid newspaper: “Headless Man in Topless Bar.” Better still, maybe you are both. Poets and headline writers both compress language for meaning. They also play with words. The higher purposes of good writing are ancient and enduring: to delight and instruct. One effect can exist without the other, but when they are combined the writer climbs to the top of the mountain. For your most public stories, look for subjects that are both interesting and important. Do not try to fool readers into thinking that all interesting things are important. But do try to make important things interesting so readers will pay attention and, when needed, take action.

**30.**

## **Become the eyes and ears of the audience. Write from different visual and aural perspectives, from a distance and up close.**

*In Search of Light: The Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, 1938 – 1961*  
Edited by Edward Bliss Jr.

Toolbox: More than ever, writers write with sound and visual elements – from photographs to videos to spreadsheets. This multimedia versatility has been more than a century in the making. Our hero of the craft is Edward R. Murrow, who helped invent broadcast news on both radio and television. Even without pictures, he would write to help listeners “see,” in both the visual and cognitive sense. One of his best strategies was to vary the distance between himself as a narrator and what he was witnessing. He could stand atop an urban landscape and describe what he was seeing in the sky, or he could walk into a concentration camp and describe the smell of a prisoner, the tatters of his clothes. The camera on your smartphone is a valuable writing tool. Or turn your notebook into that camera. Write down what you see.

## 31. Choose advocacy over propaganda. Never appeal to readers' base instincts, and challenge those who do.

*Brave New World Revisited*  
By Aldous Huxley

1984  
By George Orwell

*Amusing Ourselves to Death*  
By Neil Postman

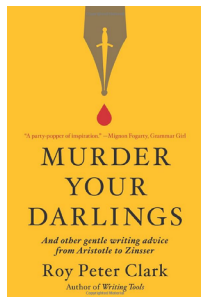
Toolbox: Learn the difference between advocacy and propaganda. One appeals to rational self-interest, the other to emotion and the baser instincts, such as fear of the stranger. This does not mean that emotion is out of bounds for the advocate. Stories – about child abuse, for example – ignite righteous anger and a desire for reform. Here is the key: Stories filled with emotion must be based on fact. Check every fact. Develop a BS detector that helps you sense when a message or messenger is trying to exploit you.

## 32. Be a writer – and so much more. Use all your resources to see the whole sky.

*Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*  
By Natalie Goldberg

*The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling*  
By Charles Johnson

Toolbox: Accept that you are a writer. But being a writer is only one of the roles that you play. You may also be a musician, a photographer, a mechanic, a yoga instructor, a bartender, a chaplain, a baker, or – what the heck – a candlestick maker. Of all these and many more, writing is the craft into which you can incorporate the others. The more you draw from your various experiences, the more integrated and authentic your writing voice will become. You will experience life more intently, you will see with more insight, you will feel with more empathy. Like Jimi Hendrix, you will kiss the sky.



### From Little, Brown *About the Author of Murder Your Darlings*

By some accounts, Roy Peter Clark is America's writing coach, devoted to creating a nation of writers. A PhD in medieval literature, he is widely considered the most influential writing teacher in the rough-and-tumble world of newspaper journalism. With a deep background in traditional media, Clark has illuminated the discussion of writing on the internet. He has gained fame by teaching writing to children and has nurtured Pulitzer Prize-winning authors such as Thomas French and Diana K. Sugg. He is a teacher who writes and a writer who teaches.

For more than three decades, Clark has taught writing at the Poynter Institute, a school for journalists in St. Petersburg, Florida, considered among the most prominent such teaching institutions in the world. He graduated from Providence College with a degree in English and earned his PhD from Stony Brook University. In 2017 he received an honorary degree from PC and delivered the commencement address to cap the school's centennial celebration.

In 1977 Clark was hired by the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times) as one of America's first writing coaches and worked with the American Society of Newspaper Editors to improve newspaper writing nationwide. He has taught writing at news organizations, schools, businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies in more than forty states and on five continents.

Among his clients at Poynter: The New York Times, the Washington Post, national Public Radio, USA Today, CNN, Gannett, Microsoft, IBM, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Disney, AAA, the World Bank, and countless colleges and universities. He has appeared on Today and The Oprah Winfrey Show. Clark has authored or edited nineteen books about writing, reading, language, and journalism. Humorist Dave Barry has said of him: "Roy Peter Clark knows more about writing than anybody I know who is not currently dead." He plays keyboard in a rock band. He lives with his family in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he has become famously fond of pelicans.