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Some Tips to Help You Become a Better Writer

And Your Point is What?

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A well-honed ego is one of the most important tools a writer can have. Good writers must believe two things beyond all shadow of doubt: 1) That you have something worthwhile to say and 2) That you can say it in a manner that commands the respect and understanding of your readers.

That means your ego had better be as solid as your skills. Beyond ego, consider these tips for your own writing:

1. Know to whom you are writing. That means know your audience. Not as easy as it sounds. The employees of my company range from GED high school equivalency to an earned doctorate in art history. Knowing them doesn’t mean parroting the line from Human Resources. It means really finding out who they are, what they care about and how they react to various methods of communicating. Target your writing. Ask yourself these questions:

   - Who will read this?
   - Who will be affected by it?
   - Who are the main people involved?
   - What is my purpose?
   - What do I want to tell my readers?
   - What do I want them to do?
   - When did or will it happen?
• When do I expect my readers to react?
• Where did or will it happen?
• Where can the reader get more information if needed?
• Why do the readers need this information?
• Why is this the best way to give it to them?

2. Know for whom you are writing. That means know your industry or business and your company. And that’s not easy, either. Your assignments may range from short bits for the employee newsletter or website to policy speeches for the CEO. Know your industry. Your boss expects it.

3. Know your tools. The first rule of good writing I ever learned was always keep your clay damp. Otherwise, you’re up the creek without a stylus. Sorry. Bad joke. The first rule of good writing I ever learned was always put the carbon paper in shiny side down. My most important tool was a manual Royal typewriter. I still use it at home. At the office, however, I can reboot with the best of them. Keep up with the technology of communication. And remember that no technology can turn bad writing into good. That’s your job as the liveware that resides between the hardware and the software.

4. Be an eternal student. Learn something new every day. Sooner or later, it will make a difference in your writing. Find an author or two you really like and respect. Take the time to figure out why you admire them. I have two: the poet Stephen Vincent Benet and Robert Rourke. On those days when I feel I’ve really scored, I take out Benet’s epic poem John Brown’s Body and open it to any page. Then I remember how really pedestrian a writer I am and how much I have to learn.

5. Read. A good writer is a voracious reader. If you don’t have at least one or two books going at any given time, you’re not serious about your craft.

6. Be serious about writing. This is a craft. You can develop your skills, but only if you make the commitment to do so. Writing a little poetry on the weekend doesn’t cut it. It’s also hard work. Dorothy Parker said it best: “Writing is not fun. To have written is fun.” You must write every day. Like any skill, you get rusty through disuse.

7. Don’t take yourself too seriously. There is a small stream of humor that bubbles along below our feet throughout our daily activities. Take time to dip into it. My job is hard work. It’s also the most fun you can have with your clothes on. Smile, kid!
8. Be a critic. Words have motion, meaning, texture, color and feel. Learn to discover the subjective side of what we do for a living. Be critical of every word you use, every lead you write, every sentence you craft. Pay attention. “Over” doesn’t mean “more than.” You aren’t going to try and do that. You’re going to try to do that. Don’t get sloppy. And, for the sake of Thoth, the Egyptian god who gave us writing, avoid jargon, marketspeak, technospeak and any other combination of letters and punctuation that isn’t clearly understood English. The first purpose of the language is to communicate ideas, not to bring joy and warmth to the hearts of the Human Resources, Marketing and Strategic Planning people (who haven’t spoken a word of English in years!).

9. The lead and the rudder are the most important parts of a good story. Don’t neglect either. And if you’re still using quotation leads, you’re lazy. Fit the lead to the story. A straight news story still demands a summary lead not some silly wandering anecdotal morality tale.


Why bother with all this? Two reasons: It will make you a better, more focused, more critical writer, more valuable to yourself and your employer.

It is your obligation. You and I stand at a remarkable point in history. We have been gifted with the skills to communicate at a level most people will never reach (if you doubt that, check on your local high school graduating class) and, equally as important, through our professional positions we have been given access to the most sophisticated communications tools in the history of our species. How we develop our skills and how we manage the tools in our care will determine, I believe, much more than just whether we meet the deadline for our employee newsletter or the CEO’s next speech.

That’s enough. There are plenty of good books that will help you polish the basics. When you’re ready to move to the next step, drop by the library or bookstore. Find that book or author we were talking about the one you admire.

And finally, take pride in what you do.