Fifty Writing Tools

From the workbench of

Roy Peter Clark.

Senior Scholar, Poynter Institute

online at :

Introduction :

At times, it helps to think of writing as carpentry. That way, writers and editors can work from a plan and use tools stored on their workbench. You can borrow a writing tool at any time. And here's a secret: Unlike hammers, chisels, and rakes, writing tools never have to be returned. They can be cleaned, sharpened, and passed on.

Each week, for the next 50, I will describe a writing tool that has been useful to me. I have borrowed these tools from writers and editors, from authors of books on writing, and from teachers and writing coaches. Many come from the X-ray reading of texts I admire.

I have described most of these tools in earlier lists, first of 20 and then 30. In those renditions, I defined each tool in shorthand, 50 words or less, without elaboration or exemplification. In spite of -- perhaps because of -- their brevity, many aspiring writers found them useful, and the tools popped up all over the Internet, translated into several languages. This warm acceptance has given me the courage to do more with these tools, to hone them, to discard some rusty ones, and to add to my collection.

As you study and discuss these, please remember:

- **These are tools and not rules.** They work outside the realm of right and wrong, and inside the world of cause and effect. You will find many examples of good writing that seem to "violate" the general advice described here.
- **It will not help to apply these tools at once**, just as aspiring golfers swing and miss if they try to remember the 30 or so different elements of an effective golf swing.
- **You will become handy with these tools over time.** You will begin to recognize their use in the stories you read. You will see chances to apply them when you revise your own work. Eventually, they will become part of your flow, natural and automatic.
- **You are already using many of these tools without knowing it.** It is impossible to speak, write, or read without them. But now these tools have names, so you can begin to talk about them in different ways. As your critical vocabulary grows, your writing will improve.

My friend Tom French, who won a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, told me he liked my tool list because it covered writing from the "sub-atomic to the metaphysical level." By sub-atomic, he meant the ways words, phrases, and sentences work. By metaphysical, he meant the ways writers live, dream, and work.

With that as both introduction and promise, let us begin.

The Tools :

#1: Branch to the Right
#2: Use Strong Verbs
#3: Beware of Adverbs
#4: Period As a Stop Sign
#5: Observe Word Territory
#6: Play with Words
#7: Dig for the Concrete and Specific
#8: Seek Original Images
#9: Prefer Simple to Technical
#10: Recognize Your Story's Roots
#11 Back Off or Show Off
#12: Control the Pace
#13: Show and Tell
#14: Interesting Names
#15: Reveal Character Traits
#16: Odd and Interesting Things
#17: The Number of Elements
#18: Internal Cliffhangers
#19: Tune Your Voice
#20: Narrative Opportunities
#21: Quotes and Dialogue
#22: Get Ready
#23: Place Gold Coins Along the Path
#24: Name the Big Parts
#25: Repeat
#26: Fear Not the Long Sentence
#27: Riffing for Originality
#28: Writing Cinematically
#29: Report for Scenes
#30: Write Endings to Lock the Box
#31: Parallel Lines
#32: Let It Flow
#33: Rehearsal
#34: Cut Big, Then Small
#35: Use Punctuation
#36: Write A Mission Statement for Your Story
#37: Long Projects
#38: Polish Your Jewels
#39: The Voice of Verbs
#40: The Broken Line
#41: X-Ray Reading
#42: Paragraphs

#43: Self-criticism
#44: Save String
#45: Foreshadow
#46: Storytellers, Start Your Engines
#47: Collaboration
#48: Create An Editing Support Group
#49: Learn from Criticism
#50: The Writing Process

Writing Tool #1: Branch to the Right

Begin sentences with subjects and verbs, letting subordinate elements branch to the right.

Even a long, long sentence can be clear and powerful when the subject and verb make meaning early.

To use this tool, imagine each sentence you write printed on an infinitely wide piece of paper. In English, a sentence stretches from left to right. Now imagine this: A reporter writes a lead sentence with subject and verb at the beginning, followed by other subordinate elements, creating what scholars call a "right-branching sentence."

I just created one. Subject and verb of the main clause join on the left ("A reporter writes") while all other elements branch off to the right. Here's another right-branching sentence, written by Lydia Polgreen as the lead of a news story in The New York Times:

> Rebels seized control of Cap Haitien, Haiti's second largest city, on Sunday, meeting little resistance as hundreds of residents cheered, burned the police station, plundered food from port warehouses and looted the airport, which was quickly closed. Police officers and armed supporters of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide fled.

That first sentence is 37 words long and rippling with action. The sentence is so full, in fact, that it threatens to fly apart like some overheated engine. But the writer keeps control by creating meaning in the first three words: "Rebels seized control..." Think of that main clause as the locomotive that pulls all the cars that follow.

Master writers can craft page after page of sentences written in this structure. Consider this passage by John Steinbeck from "Cannery Row," describing the routine of a marine scientist named Doc:

> He didn't need a clock. He had been working in a tidal pattern so long that he could feel a tide change in his sleep. In the dawn he awakened, looked out through the windshield, and saw that the water was already retreating down the bouldery flat. He drank some hot coffee, ate three sandwiches, and had a quart of beer.
>
> The tide goes out imperceptibly. The boulders show and seem to rise up and the ocean recedes leaving little pools, leaving wet weed and moss and sponge, iridescence and brown and blue and China red. On the bottoms lie the incredible refuse of the sea, shells broken and chipped and bits of skeleton, claws, the whole sea bottom a fantastic cemetery on which the living scamper and scramble.

In each sentence, Steinbeck places subject and verb at or near the beginning. Clarity and narrative energy flow through the passage, as one sentence builds upon another. And he avoids monotonous structure by varying the length of his sentences.

Subject and verb often get separated in prose, usually because we want to tell the reader something about the subject before we get to the verb. When we do this, even for good reasons, we risk confusing the reader:

> A bill that would exclude tax income from the assessed value of new homes from the state education funding formula could mean a loss of revenue for Chesapeake County schools.

Eighteen words separate the subject "bill" from its weak verb "could mean," a fatal flaw that turns what could be an important civic story into gibberish.

If the writer wants to create suspense, or build tension, or make the reader wait and wonder, or join a journey of discovery, or hold on for dear life, she can save the verb until the end.

Workshop:

Read through an edition of The New York Times with a pencil. Mark the location of subjects and verbs.

Do the same with a collection of your own stories.

Do the same with a draft of a story you're working on now.

The next time you struggle with a sentence, see if you can rewrite it by placing subject and verb at the beginning.

Writing Tool #2: Use Strong Verbs

Use verbs in their strongest form, the simple present or past. Strong verbs create action, save words, and reveal the players.

President John F. Kennedy testified that his favorite book was "From Russia With Love," the 1957 James Bond adventure by Ian Fleming. This choice revealed more about JFK than we knew at the time and created a cult of 007 that persists to this day.

The power in Fleming's prose flows from the use of active verbs. In sentence after sentence, page after page, England's favorite secret agent, or his beautiful companion, or his villainous adversary performs the action of the verb.

> Bond climbed the few stairs and unlocked his door and locked and bolted it behind him. Moonlight filtered through the curtains. He walked across and turned on the pink-shaded lights on the dressing-table. He stripped off his clothes and went into the bathroom and stood for a few minutes under the shower. …… He cleaned his teeth and gargled with a sharp mouthwash to get rid of the taste of the day and turned off the bathroom light and went back into the bedroom.
>
> Bond drew aside one curtain and opened wide the tall windows and stood, holding the curtains open and looking out across the great boomerang curve of water under the riding moon. The night breeze felt wonderfully cool on his naked body. He looked at his watch. It said two o'clock.
>
> Bond gave a shuddering yawn. He let the curtains drop back into place. He bent to switch off the lights on the dressing-table. Suddenly he stiffened and his heart missed a beat.
>
> There had been a nervous giggle from the shadows at the back of the room. A girl's voice said, "Poor Mister Bond. You must be tired. Come to bed."

In writing this passage, Fleming followed the advice of his countryman George Orwell, who wrote of verbs: "Never use the passive when you can use the active."

Never say never, Mr. Orwell, lest you turn one of the writer's most reliable tools into a rigid rule. But we honor you for describing the relationship between language abuse and political abuse, and for revealing how corrupt leaders use the passive voice to obscure unspeakable truths and shroud responsibility for their actions. They say: "It must be admitted after the report is reviewed that mistakes were made," rather than, "I read the report, and I admit I made a mistake."

News writers reach often for the simple active verb. Consider this New York Times lead by Carlotta Gall on the suicidal desperation of Afghan women: "Waiflike, draped in a pale blue veil, Madina, 20, sits on her hospital bed, bandages covering the terrible, raw burns on her neck and chest. Her hands tremble. She picks nervously at the soles of her feet and confesses that three months earlier she set herself on fire with kerosene."

While Fleming used the past tense to narrate his adventure, Gall prefers verbs in the present tense. This strategy immerses the reader in the immediacy of experience, as if we were sitting — right now -- beside the poor woman in her grief.

Both Fleming and Gall avoid the verb qualifiers that attach themselves to standard prose like barnacles to the hull of a ship:

- Sort of
- Tend to
- Kind of
- Must have
- Seemed to
- Could have

- Use to

Scrape away these crustaceans during revision, and the ship of your prose will glide toward meaning with efficient speed and grace.

Workshop:

Verbs fall into three categories: active, passive, and forms of the verb "to be." Review three of your stories and circle the verb forms with a pencil. In the margins, mark each verb by category.

Look for occasions to convert passive or "to be" verbs into the active. For example, "It was her observation that ……" becomes "She observed ……"

In your own work and in the newspaper, search for verb attachments and see what happens when you cut them from a story.

Read "Politics and the English Language," by George Orwell. As you listen to political speech, mark those occasions when politicians or other leaders use the passive voice to avoid responsibility for problems or mistakes.

Writing Tool #3: Beware of Adverbs

Beware of adverbs. They can dilute the meaning of the verb or repeat it.

The authors of the classic "Tom Swift" adventures for boys loved the exclamation point and the adverb. Consider this brief passage from "Tom Swift and His Great Searchlight":

> "Look!" suddenly exclaimed Ned. "There's the agent now! ... I'm going to speak to him!" impulsively declared Ned.

That exclamation point after "Look" should be enough to heat the prose for the young reader, but the author adds "suddenly" and "exclaimed" for good measure. Time and again, the writer uses the adverb, not to change our understanding of the verb, but to intensify it. The silliness of this style led to a form of pun called the "Tom Swiftie," where the adverb conveys the punch line:

"I'm an artist," he said easily.

"I need some pizza now," he said crustily.

"I'm the Venus de Milo," she said disarmingly.

At their best, adverbs spice up a verb or adjective. At their worst, they express a meaning already contained in it:

- "The blast completely destroyed the church office."
- "The cheerleader gyrated wildly before the screaming fans."
- "The accident totally severed the boy's arm."
- "The spy peered furtively through the bushes."

Consider the effect of deleting the adverbs:

- The blast destroyed the church office.
- The cheerleader gyrated before the screaming fans.
- The accident severed the boy's arm.
- The spy peered through the bushes.

In each case, the deletion shortens the sentence, sharpens the point, and creates elbow room for the verb.

A half-century after his death, Meyer Berger remains one of great stylists in the history of The New York Times. One of his last columns describes the care received in a Catholic hospital by an old blind violinist:

> The staff talked with Sister Mary Fintan, who (in) charge of the hospital. With her consent, they brought the old violin to Room 203. It had not been played for years, but Laurence Stroetz groped for it. His long white fingers stroked it. He tuned it, with some effort, and tightened the old bow. He lifted it to his chin and the lion's mane came down.

The vigor of verbs and the absence of adverbs mark Berger's prose. As the old man plays "Ave Maria……"

> Black-clad and white-clad nuns moved lips in silent prayer. They choked up. The long years on the Bowery had not stolen Laurence Stroetz's touch. Blindness made his fingers stumble down to the violin bridge, but they recovered. The music died and the audience pattered applause. The old violinist bowed and his sunken cheeks creased in a smile.

How much better that "the audience pattered applause" than that they "applauded politely."

Excess adverbiage reflects the style of an immature writer, but the masters can stumble as well. John Updike wrote a one-paragraph essay about the beauty of the beer can before the invention of the pop-top. He dreamed of how suds once

"foamed eagerly in the exultation of release." As I've read that sentence over the years, I've grown more impatient with "eagerly." It clots the space between a great verb ("foamed") and a great noun ("exultation"), which personify the beer and tell us all we need to know about eagerness.

Adverbs have their place in effective prose. But use them sparingly.

Workshop

Look through the newspaper for any word that ends in —ly. If it is an adverb, delete it with your pencil and read the new sentence aloud.

Do the same for your last three essays, stories, or papers. Circle the adverbs, delete them, and decide if the new sentence is better or worse.

Read through your adverbs again and mark those that modify the verb or adjective as opposed to those that just intensify it.

Look for weak verb/adverb combinations that can be revised into strong verbs: "She went quickly down the stairs" can become "She dashed down the stairs."

Writing Tool #4: Period As a Stop Sign

Place strong words at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs, and at the end. The period acts as a stop sign. Any word next to the period says, "Look at me."

Strunk & White's "The Elements of Style" advises the writer to "Place emphatic words in a sentence at the end," which offers an example of its own rule. The most emphatic word appears at "the end." Application of this tool —- an ancient rhetorical device —- will improve your prose in a flash.

In any sentence, the comma acts as a speed bump and the period as a stop sign. At the period, the thought of the sentence is completed. That slight pause in reading flow magnifies the final word. This effect is intensified at the end of a paragraph, where the final words often adjoin white space. In a column of type, the reader's eyes are drawn to the words next to the white space.

Emphatic word order helps the news writer solve the most difficult problems. Consider this news lead from The Philadelphia Inquirer. The writer must make sense of three powerful news elements: the death of a United States Senator, the collision of aircraft, and a tragedy at an elementary school:

> A private plane carrying U.S. Sen. John Heinz collided with a helicopter in clear skies over Lower Merion Township yesterday, triggering a fiery, midair explosion that rained burning debris over an elementary school playground.
>
> Seven people died: Heinz, four pilots, and two first-grade girls at play outside the school. At least five people on the ground were injured, three of them children, one of whom was in critical condition with burns.
>
> Flaming and smoking wreckage tumbled to the earth around Merion Elementary School on Bowman Avenue at 12:19 p.m., but the gray stone building and its occupants were spared. Frightened children ran from the playground as teachers herded others outside. Within minutes, anxious parents began streaming to the school in jogging suits, business clothes, house-coats. Most were rewarded with emotional reunions, amid the smell of acrid smoke.

On most days, any of the three news elements would lead the paper. Combined, they form an overpowering news tapestry, one that the reporter and editor must handle with care. What matters most in this story? The death of a senator? A spectacular crash? The death of children?

In the first paragraph, the writer chose to mention the crash and the senator upfront, and saved "elementary school playground" for the end. Throughout the passage, subjects and verbs come early -— like the locomotive and coal car of a railroad train —- saving other interesting words for the end —- like a caboose.

Consider, also, the order in which the writer lists the anxious parents, who arrive at the school in "jogging clothes, business suits, house-coats." Any other order weakens the sentence. Placing "house-coats" at the end builds the urgency of the situation, parents racing from their homes dressed as they are.

Putting strong stuff at the beginning and the end allows writers to hide weaker stuff in the middle. In the passage above, notice how the writer hides the less important news elements -— the who and the when ("Lower Merion Township yesterday") -— in the middle of the lead. This strategy also works for attributing quotations:

> "It was one horrible thing to watch," said Helen Amadio, who was walking near her Hampden Avenue home when the crash occurred. "It exploded like a bomb. Black smoke just poured."

Begin with a good quote. Hide the attribution in the middle. End with a good quote.

These tools are as old as rhetoric itself. Near the end of Shakespeare's famous tragedy, a character announces to Macbeth: "The Queen, my Lord, is dead."

This astonishing example of the power of emphatic word order is followed by one of the darkest passages in all of

literature. Macbeth says:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

The poet has one great advantage over those of us who write prose. He knows where the line will end. He gets to emphasize a word at the end of a line, a sentence, a paragraph. We prose writers make do with the sentence and paragraph —- signifying something

Workshop:

1. Read Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech to study the uses of emphatic word order.

2. With a pencil in hand, read an essay you admire. Circle the last words in each paragraph.

3. Do the same for recent examples of your own work. Look for opportunities to revise sentences so that more powerful or interesting words appear at the end.

4. Survey your friends to get the names of their dogs. Write these in alphabetical order. Imagine this list would appear in a story. Play with the order of names. Which could go first? Which last? Why?

Writing Tool #5: Observe Word Territory

Observe "word territory." Give key words their space. Do not repeat a distinctive word unless you intend a specific effect.

I coined the phrase "word territory" to describe a tendency I notice in my own writing. When I read a story I wrote months or years ago, I am surprised by how often I repeat words without care

Writers may choose to repeat words or phrases for emphasis or rhythm. Abraham Lincoln was not redundant in his hope that a "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Only a mischievous or tone-deaf editor would delete the repetition of "people."

To observe word territory you must recognize the difference between intended and unintended repetition. For example, I once wrote this sentence to describe a writing tool:

> Long sentences create a flow that carries the reader down a stream of understanding, creating an effect that Don Fry calls "steady advance."

It took several years and hundreds of readings before I noticed I had written "create" and "creating" in the same sentence. It was easy enough to cut out "creating," giving the stronger verb form its own space. Word territory.

In 1978 I wrote this ending to a story about the life and death of Beat writer Jack Kerouac in my hometown of St. Petersburg, Florida:

> How fitting then that this child of bliss should come in the end to St. Petersburg. Our city of golden sunshine, balmy serenity, and careless bliss, a paradise for those who have known hard times. And, at once, the city of wretched loneliness, the city of rootless survival and of restless wanderers, the city where so many come to die.

Years later, I admire that passage except for the unintended repetition of the key word "bliss." Worse yet, I had used it again, two paragraphs earlier. I offer no excuse other than feeling blissed out in the aura of Kerouac's work.

I've heard a story, which I cannot verify, that Ernest Hemingway tried to write book pages in which no key words were repeated. That effect would mark a hard-core adherence to word territory, but, in fact, does not reflect the way that Hemingway writes. He often repeats key words on a page —— table, rock, fish, river, sea —— because to find a synonym strains the writer's eyes and the reader's ears.

Consider this passage from "A Moveable Feast":

> All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know. So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say. If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written.

As a reader, I appreciate the repetition in the Hemingway passage. The effect is like the beat of a bass drum. It vibrates the writer's message into the pores of the skin. Some words —— like "true" or "sentence" —— act as building blocks and can be repeated to good effect. Distinctive words —— like "scrollwork" or "ornament" —— deserve their own space.

Finally, leave "said" alone. Don't be tempted by the muse of variation to permit characters to "opine," "elaborate," "chortle," "cajole," or "laugh."

Workshop:

Read a story you wrote at least a year ago. Pay attention to the words you repeat. Divide them into three categories:
a. function words ("said" or "that")
b. foundation words ("house" or "river")
c. distinctive words ("silhouette" or "jingle")

Do the same with the draft of a story you are working on now. Your goal is to recognize unintended repetition before it is published.

Read some selections from novels or nonfiction stories that make use of dialogue. Study the attribution, paying close attention to when the author uses "says" or "said," and when the writer chooses a more descriptive alternative.

Writing Tool #6: Play with Words

Play with words, even in serious stories. Choose words the average writer avoids but the average reader understands.

Just as the sculptor works with clay, the writer shapes a world with words. In fact, the earliest English poets were called "shapers," artists who molded the stuff of language to create stories the way that God, the Great Shaper, formed heaven and earth.

Good writers play with language, even when the topic is about death:

"Do not go gentle into that good night," wrote Welsh poet Dylan Thomas to his dying father, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Play and death may seem at odds, but the writer finds the path that connects them. To express his grief, the poet fiddles with language, prefers 'gentle' to 'gently,' chooses 'night' to rhyme with 'light,' and repeats the word 'rage.' Later in the poem, he will even pun about those "grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight." The double meaning of 'grave men' leads straight to the oxymoron 'blinding sight.' Word-play.

The headline writer is the journalist most like the poet, stuffing big meaning into small spaces. Consider this headline about a shocking day during the war in Iraq: **Jubilant mob mauls four dead Americans.**

The circumstances of the story are hideous: Iraqi civilians attack American security officers, burn them to death in their cars, beat and dismember their charred carcasses, drag them through the street, and hang what's left from a bridge -- all while onlookers cheer. Even amidst such carnage, the headline writer plays with the language. The writer repeats consonant sounds (like 'b' and 'm') for emphasis and contrasts words such as 'jubilant' and 'dead' with surprising effect. 'Jubilant' stands out as well-chosen, derived from the Latin verb that means 'to raise a shout of joy.'

Words like 'mob,' 'dead,' and 'Americans' appear in news reports all the time. 'Mauls' is a verb we might see in a story about a dog attack on a child. But 'jubilant' is a distinctive word, comprehensible to most readers, but rare in the context of news.

Too often, writers suppress their own vocabularies in a misguided attempt to lower the level of language for a general audience. Obscure words should be defined in texts or made clear from context. But the reading vocabulary of the average news user is considerably larger than the writing vocabulary of the typical reporter. As a result, scribes who choose their words from a larger hoard often attract special attention from readers and gain reputations as "writers."

Kelley Benham of the St. Petersburg Times is such a writer:

> When they heard the screams, no one suspected the rooster.
>
> Dechardonae Gaines, 2, was toddling down the sidewalk Monday lugging her Easy Bake Oven when she became the victim in one of the weirder animal attack cases police can recall.

The writer's choice of words brings to life this off-beat police story in which a rooster attacks a little girl. 'Screams' is a word we see in the news all the time, but not 'rooster.' Both 'toddling' and 'lugging' are words common to the average reader, but unusual in the news.

Benham uses other words that are common to readers, but rare in reporting: Ventured, belly, pummeling, freaking, swatted, backhanded, shuffled, latched on, hammered, crowing, flip-flops, shucked, bobbed, skittered, and sandspurs.

All of us possess a reading vocabulary as big as a lake, but draw from a writing vocabulary as small as a pond. The good news is that the act of reporting always expands the number of useable words. The reporter sees and hears and records. The seeing leads to language.

"The writer must be able to feel words intimately, one at a time," writes poet Donald Hall. "He must also be able to step back, inside his head, and see the flowing sentence. But he starts with the single word." Hall celebrates writers who "are original, as if seeing a thing for the first time; yet they report their vision in a language that reaches the rest of us. For the first quality the writer needs imagination; for the second he needs skill ... Imagination without skill makes a lively chaos; skill without imagination, a deadly order."

Workshop:

Read several stories in today's newspaper. Circle any surprising word, especially one you are not used to seeing in the news.

Write a draft of a story or essay with the intention of unleashing your writing vocabulary. Show this draft to some test readers and interview them about your word choice and their level of understanding. Share your findings with others.

Read the work of a writer you admire with special attention to word choice. Circle any signs of playfulness by the writer, especially when the subject matter is serious.

Find a writer, perhaps a poet, whose work you read as an inspiration for writing.

Writing Tool #7: Dig for the Concrete and Specific

Always get the name of the dog.

Dig for the concrete and specific: the name of the dog.

Novelist Joseph Conrad once described his task this way: "By the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel —— it is, before all, to make you see." When Gene Roberts, a great American newspaper editor, broke in as a cub reporter in North Carolina, he read his stories aloud to a blind editor who would chastise young Roberts for not making him see.

Details of character and setting appeal to the senses of the reader, creating an experience that leads to understanding. When we say "I see," we most often mean "I understand." Inexperienced writers may choose the obvious detail, the man puffing on the cigarette, the young woman chewing on what's left of her fingernails. Those details are not telling —— unless the man is dying of lung cancer or the woman is anorexic.

In St. Petersburg, editors and writing coaches warn reporters not to return to the office without "the name of the dog." That reporting task does not require the writer to use the detail in the story, but it reminds the reporter to keep her eyes and ears opened. When Kelley Benham wrote the story of the ferocious rooster that attacked a toddler, she not only got the name of the rooster, Rockadoodle Two, but also the names of his parents, Rockadoodle and one-legged Henny Penny. (I cannot explain why it matters that the offending rooster's mother only had one leg, but it does.)

Just before the execution of a serial killer, reporter Christopher Scanlan flew to Utah to visit the family of one of the murderer's presumed victims. Years earlier a young woman left her house and never returned. Scanlan found the detail that told the story of the family's unending grief. He noticed a piece of tape over the light switch next to the front door —— so no one could turn it off. The mother always left the light on until her daughter returned home, and though years had passed, that light was kept burning like an eternal flame.

Here's the key: Scanlan saw the taped-over switch and asked about it. The great detail he captured was a product of his curiosity, not his imagination.

The quest for such details has gone on for centuries, as any historical anthology of reportage will reveal. British scholar John Carey describes these examples from his collection Eyewitness to History:

> This book is …… full of unusual or indecorous or incidental images that imprint themselves scaldingly on the mind's eye: the ambassador peering down the front of Queen Elizabeth I's dress and noting the wrinkles …… the Tamil looter at the fall of Kuala Lumpur upending a carton of snowy Slazenger tennis balls …… Pliny watching people with cushions on their heads against the ash from the volcano; Mary, Queen of Scots, suddenly aged in death, with her pet dog cowering among her skirts and her head held on by one recalcitrant piece of gristle; the starving Irish with their mouths green from their diet of grass.

(Though there is no surviving record of the name of Mary's dog, I have learned that it was a Skye terrier, a Scottish breed famous for its loyalty and valor!)

The good writer uses telling details, not only to inform but to persuade. In 1963 Gene Patterson wrote this passage in a column mourning the murders of four girls in the dynamite bombing of a church in Alabama:

> A Negro mother wept in the street Sunday morning in front of a Baptist Church in Birmingham. In her hand she held a shoe, one shoe, from the foot of her dead child. We hold that shoe with her.

Patterson will not permit white Southerners to escape responsibility for the murder of those children. He fixes their eyes and ears, forcing them to hear the weeping of the grieving mother, and to see the one tiny shoe. The writer makes us empathize and mourn and understand. He makes us see.

Workshop:

Read today's edition of The New York Times looking for passages in stories that appeal to the senses. Do the same with a novel.

Ask a group of colleagues or students to share stories about the names of their pets. Which names reveal the most about the personalities of the owners?

With some friends, study the collected work of an outstanding photojournalist. Make believe you are writing a story about the scene captured in the photo. Which details might you select, and in what order would you render them?

With some willing subjects, ask to see the contents of a wallet, purse, or desk drawer. Ask the owners to give you a 'tour' of the contents. Take extensive notes. Which details best convey the owner's character?

Writing Tool #8: Seek Original Images

Seek original images. Make word lists, free-associate, be surprised by language. Reject cliches and "first-level creativity."

The mayor wants to rebuild a downtown in ruins but will not reveal the details of his plan. "He's playing his cards close to his vest," you write.

You have written a cliche, a worn-out metaphor. This one comes from the world of gambling, of course. The mayor's adversaries would love a peek at his hand. Whoever used this metaphor first, wrote something fresh. With overuse, it became familiar and stale.

"Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print," writes George Orwell. He argues that using cliches is a substitute for thinking, a form of automatic writing: "Prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house." Orwell's last phrase is a fresh image, a model of originality.

The language of sources threatens the good writer at every turn. Nowhere is this truer than in sports journalism. A post-game interview with almost any athlete in any sport produces a quilt of cliches: We fought hard. We stepped up. We just tried to have some fun. It's a miracle that the best sports writers are so original. A favorite of mine, Bill Conlin, wrote this about the virtues of one baseball great:

> Cal Ripken is a superstar anomaly. His close-cropped hair is gray by genetics, not chartreuse, cerise, or hot pink by designer dye. He puts a ring around his bat while on deck, not through his nose, nipples, or other organs.

So what is the original writer to do? When tempted by a tired phrase, "white as snow," stop writing. Take what the practitioners of natural childbirth call a "cleansing breath." Then jot down the old phrase on a piece of paper. Start scribbling alternatives:

- White as snow.
- White as Snow White.
- Snowy white.
- Gray as city snow.
- White as Prince Charles.

Saul Pett, a reporter known for his style, once told me that he might have to create and reject more than a dozen images before the process led him to the right one. Such duty to craft should inspire us, but the strain of such effort can be discouraging. On deadline, write it straight: "The mayor was being secretive about his plans." If you fall back on the cliche, make sure there are no others around it.

More deadly than cliches of language are what Donald Murray calls "cliches of vision," the narrow frames through which writers learn to see the world. In "Writing to Deadline," Murray lists common blind spots: victims are always innocent, bureaucrats are lazy, politicians are corrupt, it's lonely at the top, the suburbs are boring.

I have described one cliche of vision as "first-level creativity." For example, it's impossible to survive a week of American journalism without reading or hearing the phrase: "But the dream became a nightmare."

This frame is so pervasive that it can be applied to almost any story: the golfer who shoots 33 on the front nine, but 44 on the back; the company CEO jailed for fraud; the woman who suffers from botched plastic surgery.

Writers who reach the first level of creativity think they are being original or clever. In fact, they settle for the ordinary, the dramatic or humorous place any writer can reach with minimal effort.

I remember the true story of a Florida man, who, walking home for lunch, fell into a ditch occupied by an alligator. The gator bit into the man, who was rescued by firefighters. In a writing workshop, I gave reporters a fact sheet from which they were to write five different leads for this story in five minutes. Some leads were straight and newsy, others nifty and

distinctive. But almost everyone in the room, including me, had this version of a lead sentence:

When Robert Hudson headed home for lunch Thursday, little did he know that he'd become the meal.

We agreed that if 30 of us had landed on the same bit of humor, it must be obvious -- first level creativity. We discovered the next level in a lead that read: "Perhaps to a 10-foot alligator, Robert Hudson tastes like chicken." We also agreed that we preferred straight writing to the first pun that came to mind. What value is there in the story of a renegade rooster that mentions "foul play," or, even worse, "fowl play"?

Some forms of cleverness are irresistible. When the Salvador Dali Museum opened in St. Petersburg, Fla., who could blame the headline writer who typed out "Hello, Dali"? But if a dream never more becomes a nightmare, American journalism and the public it serves will be better for it.

Workshop:

Read the newspaper today with a pencil in your hand and circle any phrase you are used to seeing in print.

Apply this process to your own stories. Read some old ones and circle the cliches or tired phrases. Revise them with straight writing or original images.

Brainstorm alternatives to these common metaphors: red as a rose, white as snow, brown as a berry, blue as the sky, cold as ice, hot as hell.

Re-read some passages from your favorite writer. Can you find any cliches? Circle the most original and vivid images.

Writing Tool #9: Prefer Simple to Technical

Prefer the simple to the technical: shorter words and paragraphs at the points of greatest complexity.

I once learned a literary technique called "defamiliarization," a hopeless and ugly word that describes the process by which an author takes the familiar and makes it strange. Film directors create this effect with super close-ups or with shots from severe or distorting angles. This is harder to do on the page, but the effect can be dazzling as with E.B. White's description of a humid day in Florida:

> On many days the dampness of the air pervades all life, all living. Matches refuse to strike. The towel, hung to dry, grows wetter by the hour. The newspaper, with its headlines about integration, wilts in your hand and falls limply into the coffee and the egg. Envelopes seal themselves. Postage stamps mate with one another as shamelessly as grasshoppers.

What could be more familiar than a mustache on a teacher's face, but not this mustache, as described by Roald Dahl in his childhood memoir:

> A truly terrifying sight, a thick orange hedge that sprouted and flourished between his nose and his upper lip and ran clear across his face from the middle of one cheek to the middle of the other……It was curled most splendidly upwards all the way along as though it had a permanent wave put into it or possibly curling tongs heated in the mornings over a tiny flame…….The only other way he could have achieved this curling effect, we boys decided was by prolonged upward brushing with a hard toothbrush in front of the looking-glass every morning.

Both White and Dahl take a common experience or object — the humid day or the mustache — and, through the filter of their prose style, force us to see it in a new way.

We might as well give a name to the opposite and more common process. For balance we'll call it "familiarization," taking the strange, or opaque, or complex, and through the power of explanation, making it comprehensible, even familiar.

Too often, writers render complicated ideas with complicated prose, producing sentences such as this one, from an editorial about state government:

> To avert the all too common enactment of requirements without regard for their local cost and tax impact, however, the commission recommends that statewide interest should be clearly identified on any proposed mandates, and that state should partially reimburse local government for some state imposed mandates and fully for those involving employee compensation, working conditions and pensions.

The density of this passage has two possible explanations: the writer is writing for a specialized one, legal experts already familiar with the issues. Or, the writer thinks that form should follow function, that complicated ideas should be communicated in complicated prose.

He needs the advice of writing coach Donald Murray, who says the reader benefits from shorter words and phrases, simpler sentences, at the points of greatest complexity. What would happen if readers encountered this translation of the editorial?:

> The state of New York often passes laws telling local governments what to do. These laws have a name. They are called "state mandates." On many occasions, these laws improve life for everyone in the state. But they come with a cost. Too often, the state doesn't consider the cost to local government, or how much money taxpayers will have to shell out. So we have an idea. The state should pay back local governments for some of these so-called "mandates."

The differences in these passages are worth measuring. This first one takes six lines of text. The revision requires one additional line. But consider this: The original writer only has room for 57 words in six lines, while I get 81 words in seven lines. His six lines give him room for only one sentence. I fit eight sentences into seven lines. My words and

sentences are shorter. The passage is much clearer. I use this writing strategy to fulfill a mission: to make the strange workings of government clearer to the average citizen. To make the strange familiar.

It is important to remember that clear prose is not just a product of sentence length or word choice. It derives first from a sense of purpose — a determination to inform. What comes next is the hard work of reporting, research, and critical thinking. The writer cannot make something clear until the difficult subject is clear in the writer's head. Then, and only then, does she reach into the writer's toolbox, ready to explain to readers, "Here's how it works."

Workshop:

Review a story you think is unclear, dense with difficult information. Study the length of words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Repeat the process with your own prose. Pay special attention to passages you now think are too complicated. Try to revise a passage using the tools described above.

Begin to collect examples of stories where the writer has turned hard facts into easy reading. You can start by browsing through a good academic encyclopedia.

Look for an opportunity in a story to use the sentence: "Here's how it works."

Writing Tool #10: Recognize the Roots of Stories

Recognize the mythic, symbolic, and poetic. Be aware (and beware) that common themes of news writing have deep roots in the culture of storytelling.

In 1971 John Pilger described a protest march by Vietnam veterans against the war:

> "The truth is out! Mickey Mouse is dead! The good guys are really the bad guys in disguise!" The speaker is William Wyman, from New York City. He is 19 and has no legs. He sits in a wheelchair on the steps of the United States Congress, in the midst of a crowd of 300,000 ... He has on green combat fatigues and the jacket is torn where he has ripped away the medals and the ribbons he has been given in exchange for his legs, and along with hundreds of other veterans ... he has hurled them on the Capitol steps and described them as shit; and now to those who form a ring of pity around him, he says, "Before I lost these legs, I killed and killed! We all did! Jesus, don't grieve for me!"

Since the Greek poet Homer wrote "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," writers have recorded stories of soldiers going off to war and their struggles to find a way home. This story pattern —— often called "there and back" —— is primeval and persistent, an archetype so deep within the culture of storytelling that we writers can succumb to its gravitational pull without even knowing it.

Ancient warriors fought for treasure and for reputation, but in the passage above, the blessing becomes the curse. Symbols of bravery and duty turn to "shit" as angry veterans rip them from green jackets and toss them in protest. These soldiers return not to parades and glory, but to loss of faith and limb that can never be restored.

Good writers strive for originality, but they can achieve it by standing on a foundation of narrative archetypes, a set of story expectations that can be manipulated, frustrated, or fulfilled, on behalf of the reader.

- The journey there and back.
- Winning the prize.
- Winning or losing the loved one.
- Loss and restoration.
- The blessing becomes the curse.
- Overcoming obstacles.
- The wasteland restored.
- Rising from the ashes.
- The ugly duckling.
- The emperor has no clothes.
- Descent into the underworld.

My high school English teacher, Father Horst, taught us two important things about the reading and writing of literature. The first was that if a wall appears in a story, chances are it's "more than just a wall." But, he was quick to add, when it comes to powerful writing, a "symbol" need not be a "cymbal." Subtlety is a writer's virtue.

That said, writers in search of a new story will often stumble upon ancient stories forms. Let's call them archetypes, story shapes that are so deeply rooted in the culture that they appear over and over again. Badly used, archetypes can become stereotypes —— clichéés of vision —— warping the reporter's experience of the world to satisfy the requirements of the form. Used well, these forms turn the stuff of daily life into powerful experiences of news and

culture.

Some of the best writers in America work for National Public Radio. The stories they tell, making great use of natural sound, open a world to listeners that is both fresh and distinctive, and yet often informed by narrative archetypes. Margo Adler admitted as much when she revealed that her feature story on the New York homeless living in subway tunnels borrowed on her understanding of myths in which the hero descends into the underworld.

More recently, NPR reported the story of an autistic boy, Matt Savage, who has become, at the age of nine, an accomplished jazz musician. The reporter, Margo Melnicove, tapped into the standard form of the young hero who triumphs over obstacles. But the story gives us something more: "Until recently Matt Savage could not stand to hear music and most other sounds." Intensive auditory therapy turns the boy's neurological curse into a blessing, unleashing a passion for music expressed in jazz.

"We use the archetypes," says Pulitzer winner Tom French. "We can't let the archetypes use us."

As a cautionary tale, he cites the reporting on the dangers of silicone breast implants to the health of women. Study after study confirms the medical safety of this procedure. Yet the culture refuses to accept it. Why? French wonders if it may arise from the archetype that vanity should be punished, or that evil corporations are willing to profit by poisoning women's bodies.

Use archetypes. Don't let them use you.

Workshop:

Read Joseph Campbell's "Hero With a Thousand Faces" as an introduction to archetypal story forms.

As you read and hear coverage of the military actions in the Middle East, look and listen for examples of the story forms described above.

Re-examine your own writing over the last year. Can you now identify stories that fit or violate archetypal story patterns? Would you have written them differently?

Discuss Father Horst's advice: a symbol need not be a cymbal. Can you find a symbol in any of your stories? Is it a cymbal?

Writing Tool #11: Back Off or Show Off

When the news or topic is most serious, understate. When the topic is least serious, exaggerate.

George Orwell wrote, "Good writing is like a window pane." The best prose calls the reader's attention to the world being described, not to the writer's cleverness. When we look out the window onto the horizon, we don't notice the pane. Yet the pane frames our vision just as the writer frames our view of the story.

Most writers have at least two modes: One says "Pay no attention to the writer behind the screen. Look only at the world." The other says, without inhibition: "Look at me dance. Aren't I a clever fellow?" In rhetoric, these two modes have names. The first is called understatement. The second is called overstatement or hyperbole.

Here's a rule of thumb that works for me. The more serious or dramatic the subject, the more the writer backs off, creating the effect that the story is "telling itself." The more playful or inconsequential the topic, the more the writer can show off. Back off or show off.

Consider this lead to John Hersey's famous book "Hiroshima":

> At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department of the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl in the next desk.

This book, described by some as the most important work of nonfiction in the 20th Century, begins with the most ordinary of circumstances, a recitation of the time and date, and two office workers about to converse. The flashing of the atomic bomb almost hides inside that sentence. Because we can imagine the horror that is to follow, the effect of Hersey's understatement is chilling.

In 1958, R. M. Macoll, writing for an English newspaper, describes the execution of a man and woman in Saudi Arabia. The man is quickly and efficiently beheaded, but the woman suffers a crueler fate:

> Now a woman was dragged forward. She and the man had together murdered her former husband. She, too, was under 30, and slender.
>
> The recital of her crime too was read out as she knelt, and then the executioner stepped forward with a wooden stave and dealt a hundred blows upon her shoulder.
>
> As the flogging ended, the woman sagged over on her side.
>
> Next, a lorry loaded with rocks and stones was backed up and its cargo deposited in a pile. At a signal from the prince the crowd leaped and started pelting the woman to death.
>
> It was difficult to determine how she was facing her last and awful ordeal, since she was veiled in Muslim fashion and her mouth was gagged to muffle her cries.

I can easily imagine a version of this passage laced with outrage, but I find the straightforward account vivid and disturbing, leaving room for my own emotional and intellectual response, that this is a cruel and unusual punishment, designed to keep women in their place.

Let's contrast such understatement to the spritely style of the great AP writer, Saul Pett, who wrote this description of New York City's colorful mayor Ed Koch:

> He is the freshest thing to blossom in New York since chopped liver, a mixed metaphor of a politician, the antithesis of the packaged leader, irrepressible, candid, impolitic, spontaneous, funny, feisty, independent, uncowed by voter blocs, unsexy, unhandsome, unfashionable, and altogether charismatic, a man oddly at peace with himself in an unpeaceful place, a mayor who presides over the country's largest Babel with unseemly joy.

Pett's prose is over-the-top, a squirt of seltzer down your pants, as was Mayor Koch. Although municipal politics can be serious business, the context here allows Pett room for the full theatrical review.

The clever uber-writer can, in the words of Anna Quindlen, "write your way onto page one," as investigative reporter

Bill Nottingham did the day his city editor assigned him to cover the local spelling bee: "Thirteen-year-old Lane Boy is to spelling what Billy the Kid was to gun-fighting, icy-nerved and unflinchingly accurate."

To understand the difference between understatement and overstatement, consider the cinematic difference between two Steven Spielberg movies. In "Schindler's List," Spielberg evokes the horrors of the Holocaust rather than depict them graphically. In a black and white movie, he makes us follow the life and inevitable death of one little Jewish girl dressed in red.

"Saving Private Ryan" reveals in grisly detail the gruesome warfare on the shores of France during the Invasion of Normandy, complete with severed limbs and spurting arteries. I, for one, favor the more restrained approach where the artist leaves room for my imagination

Workshop:

Keep your eyes open for lively stories that make their way onto page one of the newspaper, even though they lack traditional news value. Discuss how they were written.

Review some of the stories written after the tragedies of Sept. 11, 2001. Notice the difference between the stories that seemed "restrained" and the ones that seem "over-written."

Read some examples of feature obits from The New York Times' "Portraits of Grief." Study the understated ways in which these are written.

Read works of humor from writers such as Woody Allen, Roy Blount Jr., Dave Barry, S.J. Pearlman, or Steve Martin. Look for examples of both hyperbole and understatement.

Writing Tool #12: Control the Pace

Control the pace of the story by varying sentence length.

Long sentences create a flow that carries the reader down a stream of understanding, an effect that Don Fry calls "steady advance." Or slam on the brakes.

The writer controls the pace of the story, slow or fast or in between, and uses sentences of varying lengths to create the music, the rhythm of the story. While these metaphors of sound and speed may seem vague to the aspiring writer, they are grounded in useful tools and practical questions. How long is the sentence? Where is the comma and the period? How many periods appear in the paragraph?

Writers name three good reasons to slow the pace of a story:

To simplify the complex.

To create suspense.

To focus on the emotional truth.

Consider this unusual lead to a story about the city government budget:

Do you live in St. Petersburg? Want to help spend $548 million?

It's money you paid in taxes and fees to the government. You elected the City Council to office, and as your representatives, they're ready to listen to your ideas on how to spend it.

Mayor Rick Baker and his staff have figured out how they'd like to spend the money. At 7 p.m. Thursday, Baker will ask the City Council to agree with him. And council members will talk about their ideas.

You have the right to speak at the meeting, too. Each resident gets three minutes to tell the mayor and council members what he or she thinks.

But why would you stand up?

Because how the city spends its money affects lots of things you care about.

Not every journalist likes this approach to government writing, but its author, Bryan Gilmer, gets credit for an effect I call "radical clarity." Gilmer eases the reader into this story with a sequence of short sentences and paragraphs. All the stopping points give the reader the time and space to comprehend. Yet there is enough variation to imitate the patterns of normal conversation.

But clarity is not the only reason to write short sentences. Let's look at suspense and emotional power, what some people call the "Jesus wept" effect. To express Jesus's profound sadness at learning of the death of his friend Lazarus, the Gospel writer uses the shortest possible sentence. Two words. Subject and verb. "Jesus wept."

I learned the power of sentence length when I read a famous essay by Norman Mailer, "The Death of Benny Paret." Mailer has often written about boxing, and in this essay he reports on how prizefighter Emile Griffith beat Benny Paret to death in the ring after Paret questioned Griffith's manhood.

Mailer's account is riveting, placing us at ringside to witness the terrible event:

Paret got trapped in a corner. Trying to duck away, his left arm and his head became tangled on the wrong side of the top rope. Griffith was in like a cat ready to rip the life out of a huge boxed rat. He hit him 18 right hands in a row, an act which took perhaps three or four seconds, Griffith making a pent-up whimpering sound all the while he attacked, the right hand whipping like a piston rod which has broken through the crankcase, or like a baseball bat

demolishing a pumpkin.

Notice the rhythm Mailer achieves by beginning that paragraph with three short sentences, culminating in a long sentence filled with metaphors of action and violence.

As it becomes clearer and clearer that Paret is fatally injured, Mailer's sentences get shorter and shorter:

> The house doctor jumped into the ring. He knelt. He pried Paret's eyelid open. He looked at the eyeball staring out. He let the lid snap shut. But they saved Paret long enough to take him to a hospital where he lingered for days. He was in a coma. He never came out of it. If he lived, he would have been a vegetable. His brain was smashed.

All that drama. All that raw emotional power. All those short sentences.

In a 1985 book, Gary Provost created this tour de force to demonstrate what happens when the writer experiments with sentences of different lengths:

> This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.
>
> Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length.
>
> And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals -- sounds that say listen to this, it is important.
> So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences.
>
> Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear.
>
> Don't just write words. Write music.

Workshop:

> Review some of your recent stories to examine your sentence length. Either by combining sentences or cutting them in half, see if you can establish a rhythm that suits your tone and topic.
>
> When reading your favorite authors become more aware of variation of sentence length. Mark off some very short sentences, and very long ones, that you find effective.
>
> Most writers think that a series of short sentences speeds up the reader, but I'm arguing that they slow the reader down, that all those periods are stop signs. Discuss this effect with colleagues and see if you can reach a consensus.
>
> Read some children's books, especially for very young children, to see if you can gauge the effect of sentence length variation on the reader.

Writing Tool #13: Show and Tell

Good writers move up and down the ladder of abstraction. At the bottom are bloody knives and rosary beads, wedding rings and baseball cards. At the top are words that reach for a higher meaning, words like "freedom" and "literacy." Beware of the middle, the rungs of the ladder where bureaucracy and public policy lurk. In that place, teachers are referred to as "instructional units."

The ladder of abstraction remains one of the most useful models of thinking and writing ever invented. Popularized by S.I. Hayakawa in his 1939 book "Language in Action," the ladder has been adopted and adapted in hundreds of ways to help people think clearly and express meaning.

The easiest way to make sense of this tool is to begin with its name: The ladder of abstraction. That name contains two nouns. The first is "ladder," a specific tool you can see, hold in your hands, and climb. It involves the senses. You can do things with it. Put it against a tree to rescue your cat Voodoo. The bottom of the ladder rests on concrete language. Concrete is hard, which is why when you fall off the ladder from a high place you might break your leg.

The second word is "abstraction." You can't eat it or smell it or measure it. It is not easy to use as an example. It appeals not to the senses, but to the intellect. It is an idea that cries out for exemplification.

An old essay by John Updike begins, "We live in an era of gratuitous inventions and negative improvements." That language is general and abstract, near the top of the ladder. It provokes our thinking, but what concrete evidence leads Updike to his conclusion? The answer is in his second sentence: "Consider the beer can." To be even more specific, Updike was complaining that the invention of the pop-top ruined the aesthetic experience of drinking beer. "Pop-top" and "beer" are at the bottom of the ladder, "aesthetic experience" at the top.

We learned this language lesson in kindergarten when we played Show and Tell. When we showed the class our 1957 Mickey Mantle baseball card, we were at the bottom of the ladder. When we told the class about what a great season Mickey had in 1956, we started climbing to the top of the ladder, toward the meaning of "greatness."

Let's imagine an education reporter covering the local school board. Perhaps the topic of discussion is a new reading curriculum. The reporter is unlikely to hear conversation about little Bessie Jones, a third-grader in Mrs. Griffith's class at Gulfport Elementary, who will have to repeat the third grade because she failed the state reading test. Bessie cried when her mother showed her the test results.

Nor are you likely to hear school board members ascending to the top of the ladder to discuss "the importance of critical literacy in education, vocation, and citizenship."

The language of the school board may be stuck in the middle of the ladder: "How many instructional units will be necessary to carry out the scope and sequence of this curriculum?" an educational expert may ask. Carolyn Matalene, a great writing teacher from South Carolina, taught me that when reporters write prose the reader can neither see nor understand, they are often trapped halfway up the ladder.

Let's look at how some good writers move up and down the ladder. Consider this lead by Jonathan Bor on a heart transplant operation: "A healthy 17-year-old heart pumped the gift of life through 34-year-old Bruce Murray Friday, following a four-hour transplant operation that doctors said went without a hitch." That heart is at the bottom of the ladder —— there is no other heart like it in the world —— but the blood that it pumps signifies a higher meaning, "the gift of life." Such movements up the ladder create a lift-off of understanding, an effect some writers call "altitude."

One of America's great baseball writers, Thomas Boswell, wrote this essay on the aging of athletes:

> The cleanup crews come at midnight, creeping into the ghostly quarter-light of empty ballparks with their slow-sweeping brooms and languorous, sluicing hoses. All season, they remove the inanimate refuse of a game. Now, in the dwindling days of September and October, they come to collect baseball souls.
>
> Age is the sweeper, injury his broom.

Mixed among the burst beer cups and the mustard-smeared wrappers headed for the trash heap, we find old friends who are being consigned to the dust bin of baseball's history.

The abstract "inanimate refuse" soon becomes visible as "burst beer cups" and "mustard-smeared wrappers." And those cleanup crews with their very real brooms and hoses transmogrify into grim reapers in search of baseball souls.

Metaphor and simile help us to understand abstractions through comparison with concrete things. "Civilization is a stream with banks," wrote Will Durant, working both ends of the ladder. "The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting, and doing the things historians usually record, while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry, and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river."

Workshop:

Read newspaper and magazine stories that have anecdotal leads followed by "nut" paragraphs that explain what the story is about. Notice if the level of language moves from the concrete to the more abstract.

Find some stories about bureaucracy or public policy that seem stuck in the middle of the ladder of abstraction. What kind of reporting would be necessary to climb down or up, to help the reader see and understand?

Listen to song lyrics to hear how the language moves on the ladder of abstraction. "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose." Or "War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothin'." Or, "I like big butts and I cannot lie ... " Notice how concrete words and images are used in music to express abstractions such as love, hope, lust, and fear.

Read several stories you have written and try to describe, in three words or less, what each story is "really about." Is it about friendship, loss, legacy, betrayal? Are there ways to make such meanings clearer to the reader?

Do a Google search on "ladder of abstraction."

Writing Tool #14: Interesting Names

Remember that writers are, by training and disposition, attracted to people and places with interesting names.

The attraction to interesting names is not a tool, strictly speaking, but a condition, a kind of sweet literary addiction. I once wrote a story about the name Z. Zyzor, the last name listed in the St. Petersburg, Fla., phone directory. The name turned out to be a fake, made up long ago by postal workers so that family members could call them in an emergency, just by looking up the last name in the phonebook. What captured my attention was the name. I wondered what the Z stood for: Zelda Zyzor? Zorro Zyzor? And what was it like to go through life last in line?

Fiction writers, of course, get to make up names for characters, names that become so familiar they become part of our cultural imagination: Rip Van Winkle, Ichabod Crane, Hester Prynne, Captain Ahab, Ishmael, Huckleberry Finn, Holden Caulfield.

Sports and entertainment provide an inexhaustible well of interesting names: Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, Mickey Mantle, Zola Budd, Johnny Unitas, Joe Montana, Shaquille O'Neal, Spike Lee, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley.

Writers gravitate toward stories that take place in towns with interesting names:

Kissimmee, Florida

- Bountiful, Utah
- Intercourse, Pennsylvania
- Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan
- Fort Dodge, Iowa
- Opp, Alabama

But the best names seem, as if by magic, attached to real characters who wind up making news. The best reporters recognize and take advantage of coincidence between name and circumstance.

A story in The Baltimore Sun revealed the sad details of a woman whose devotion to her man led to the deaths of her two young daughters. The mother was Sierra Swann, who, in spite of a lyrical name evoking natural beauty, came apart in a grim environment, "where heroin and cocaine are available curbside beneath the blank stares of boarded-up windows." The writer traced her downfall, not to drugs, but to an "addiction to the companionship of Nathaniel Broadway."

Sierra Swann. Nathaniel Broadway. A fiction writer could not invent names more apt and interesting.

I opened my phone book at random and discovered these names on two consecutive pages:

- Danielle Mall
- Charlie Mallette
- Hollis Mallicoat
- Ilir Mallkazi
- Eva Malo
- Mary Maloof
- Joe Malpigli
- John Mamagona
- Lakmika Manawadu
- Khai Mang

- Rudolph Mango
- Ludwig Mangold

Names sometimes provide a kind of backstory, suggesting history, ethnicity, generation, and character. (The brilliant and playful American theologian Martin Marty refers to himself as "Marty Marty.")

The writer's interest in names often extends beyond person and place to things. Roald Dahl, who would gain fame from writing the novel "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," remembers his childhood in sweet shops craving such delights as "Bull's-Eyes and Old Fashioned Humbugs and Strawberry Bonbons and Glacier Mints and Acid Drops and Pear Drops and Lemon Drops ... My own favourites were Sherbet Suckers and Liquorice Bootlaces." Not to mention the "Gobstoppers" and "Tonsil Ticklers."

It's hard to think of a writer with more interest in names than Vladimir Nabokov. Perhaps because he wrote in both Russian and English —— and had a scientific interest in butterflies —— Nabakov dissects words and images, looking for the deeper levels of meaning. His greatest anti-hero, Humbert Humbert, begins the narration of "Lolita" with this memorable paragraph:

> Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.
>
> She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

In this great and scandalous novel, Nabokov includes an alphabetical listing of Lolita's classmates, beginning with Grace Angel and concluding with Louise Windmuller. The novel becomes a virtual gazetteer of American place names, from the way we name our motels: "All those Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Pine View Courts, Mountain View Courts, Skyline Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acres, Mac's Courts" to the funny names attached to roadside toilets: "Guys-Gals, John-Jane, Jack-Jill, and even Bucks-Does."

What's in a name? For the attentive writer, and the eager reader, the answer can be fun, insight, charm, aura, character, identity, psychosis, fulfillment, inheritance, decorum, indiscretion, and possession. For in some cultures, if I know and can speak your name, I own your soul. Rumpelstiltskin.

Workshop

In the Judeo-Christian story of Creation, God grants mankind a special power over other creatures: "When the Lord God formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, he brought them to the man to see what he would call them, for that which man called each of them, that would be its name." Have a conversation about the larger religious and cultural implications of naming, including ceremonies of naming such as birthing, baptism, conversion, and marriage. Don't forget nicknames and street names and pen names. What are the practical implications for writers?

> J. K. Rowling is the enormously popular author of the Harry Potter series. Among her many gifts as a writer is her aptitude for naming. Think of her heroes, Albus Dumbledore or Sirius Black or Hermione Granger. And her villains, Draco Malfoy and his henchmen Crabbe and Goyle. Read one of the Harry Potter novels, paying special attention to the author's great imaginative universe of names.
>
> In a daybook or journal, begin to keep a record of interesting character names and place names related to your community.
>
> The next time you are reporting a story, interview an expert who can reveal to you the names of things you do not know: flowers in a garden, parts of an engine, branches of a family tree, breeds of cats. Imagine ways you might use such names in your story.

Writing Tool #15: Reveal Character Traits

Reveal character traits to the reader through scenes, details, and dialogue.

I once read a story in USA Today about a young teenage surfer in Hawaii who lost her arm in a shark attack. The piece, by Jill Lieber, began this way:

> Bethany Hamilton has always been a compassionate child. But since the 14-year-old Hawaiian surfing sensation lost her left arm in a shark attack on Halloween, her compassion has deepened.

The key words in this lead are "compassionate" and "compassion." Writers often turn abstractions into adjectives to define character. One writer tells us that the shopkeeper was "enthusiastic," or that the lawyer was "passionate" in his closing argument, or that the school girls were "popular." Some adjectives —— such as "ashen," "blond," or "winged" —— help us see. But adjectives such as "enthusiastic" are really abstract nouns in disguise.

Though adjectives such as "popular" and "compassionate" convey a general meaning, they become almost useless in describing people. The reader who encounters them screams out silently for examples, for evidence. Don't just tell me, Ms. Writer, that Super Surfer Girl is compassionate. Show me. And she does:

The writer describes how from her hospital bed, Bethany Hamilton "tearfully insisted" that the 1,500-pound tiger shark that attacked her "not be harmed." Later the girl meets with a blind psychologist and offers him the charitable donations she is receiving "to fund an operation to restore his sight."

> And in December, Hamilton touched more hearts when, on a media tour of New York City, she suddenly removed her ski jacket and gave it to a homeless girl sitting on a subway grate in Times Square. Wearing only a tank top, Hamilton then canceled a shopping spree, saying she already had too many things.

Now I see. That girl really is compassionate.

The best writers create moving pictures of people that reveal their characteristics and aspirations, their hopes and fears. Writing for The New York Times, Isabel Wilkerson describes a mother in desperate fear for the safety of her children, but avoids adjectives such as "desperate" and "fearful." Instead she shows us a woman preparing her children for school:

> Then she sprays them. She shakes an aerosol can and sprays their coats, their heads, their tiny outstretched hands. She sprays them back and front to protect them as they go off to school, facing bullets and gang recruiters and a crazy dangerous world. It is a special religious oil that smells like drugstore perfume, and the children shut their eyes tight as she sprays them long and furious so they will come back to her, alive and safe, at day's end.

By re-creating this moment, Wilkerson leads us into the world of this struggling family, offering us the opportunity for empathy. The scenic evidence is supported by the spoken words of the children:

> These are the rules for Angela Whitiker's children, recounted at the Formica-top dining room table:
>
> "Don't stop off playing," Willie said.
> "When your hear shooting, don't stand around —— run," Nicholas said.
> "Because a bullet don't have no eyes," the two boys shouted.
> "She pray for us every day," Willie said.

Writing for the Maine Sunday Telegram, Barbara Walsh introduces us to a group of girls facing the social pressures of middle school. The story begins at a school dance in a gym that "smells of peach and watermelon perfume, cheap aftershave, cinnamon Tic Tacs, bubble gum." Groups of girls dance in tight circles, adjusting their hair and moving to the music.

> "I loooove this song," Robin says.
>
> Robin points to a large group of 20 boys and girls clustered near the DJ.

"Theeeey are the populars, and we're nooot," she shouts over the music.

"We're the middle group," Erin adds. "You've just got to form your own group and dance."

"But if you dance with someone that isn't too popular, it's not cool," Robin says. "You lose points," she adds thrusting her thumbs down.

My colleague Chip Scanlan might ask, "What is this story really about?" The words I choose lead me up the ladder of abstraction: Adolescence. Self-consciousness. Peer-pressure. Social status. Anxiety. Self-expression. Group-think. How much better for us as readers to see and hear these truths through the actions of these interesting young women, with their authentic adolescent vowel sounds, than from the pursed lips of jaded sociologists.

Workshop

1. Some writers talk about reporting a story until they come away with a dominant impression, something they can express in a single sentence: "The mother of the cheerleader is overbearing and controlling." They may never write that sentence in the story. Instead, they review and try to re-create for the reader the evidence that led them to this conclusion. Try out this method on some of your stories.

2. Listen carefully to stories reported and written for National Public Radio. Pay special attention to the voices of story subjects and sources. What character traits do they reveal in their speech? How would you render that speech in a print story?

3. Sit with a notebook in a public place: a mall, a cafeteria, an airport lounge, a sports stadium. Watch people's behavior, appearance, and speech. Write down the character adjectives that come to mind: obnoxious, affectionate, caring, confused. Now write down the specific details that led you to those conclusions.

Writing Tool #16: Odd and Interesting Things

Put them next to each other.

Put odd and interesting things next to each other.

At its best, the study of literature helps us understand what Frank Smith describes as the "grammar of stories." Such was the case upon my first encounter with Emma Bovary, the provincial French heroine with the tragically romantic imagination. I remember my amazement at reading the scene in which author Gustave Flaubert describes the seduction of the married and bored Madame Bovary by the cad Rodolphe Boulanger. The setting is an agricultural fair. In a scene both poignant and hilarious, Flaubert switches from the flirtatious language of the lover to the calls of animal husbandry in the background.

I remember it as a back-and-forth between such language as "I tried to make myself leave a thousand times, but still I followed you" and the sounds of "Manure for sale!"

Or "I will have a place in your thoughts and your life, won't I?" with "Here's the prize for the best pigs!"

Back and forth, back and forth, the juxtaposition exposing to the reader, but not to Emma, Rodolphe's true motives. "Ironic juxtaposition" is the fancy term for what happens when two disparate things are placed side by side, one commenting upon the other.

This effect can work in music, in the visual arts, and in poetry:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky,
> Like a patient etherized upon a table……

So begins "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem in which T.S. Eliot juxtaposes the romantic image of the evening sky with the sickly metaphor of anesthesia. The tension between those images sets the tone for everything that follows.

Eliot died in 1965, my junior year in Catholic high school, and a group of us celebrated the event by naming our rock band after the poet. We were called "T.S. and the Eliots," and our motto was "Music with Soul."

The coupling of unlikely elements is often the occasion for humor, broad and subtle. In "The Producers," for example, Mel Brooks creates a musical called "Springtime for Hitler," starring a hippy Füührer, and featuring June Taylor-style dancers who form the image of a swastika.

Moving from the grotesquely comic to the deadly serious, consider this introduction to The Philadelphia Inquirer's story of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island:

> 4:07 a.m. March 28, 1979.
>
> Two pumps fail. Nine seconds later, 69 boron rods smash down into the hot core of unit two, a nuclear reactor on Three Mile Island. The rods work. Fission in the reactor stops.
>
> But it is already too late.
>
> What will become America's worst commercial nuclear disaster has begun.

What follows is a catalog of all the terrible truths that officials will learn, along with some of the harrowing details: "Nuclear workers playing Frisbee outside a plant gate because they were locked out, but not warned of the radiation beaming from the plant's walls ... "

The suspense that builds from those first short sentences reaches a peak when the high technology of the failed nuclear

reactor produces radiation that bombards workers playing Frisbee. Radiation meets Frisbee. Ironic juxtaposition.

Dramatic tension does not have to be so monumental. Consider the story William Serrin wrote for The New York Times about the first woman killed in an underground mine disaster in the United States:

> What he would not forget, after he had left the hospital where she lay, still in her sweatshirt and long underwear and coveralls, on an emergency room cart, was that there was nothing to suggest she was dead.
>
> All he could see was a trickle of blood from her left temple.
>
> Her face, like all coal miners' faces, was black with coal. But her hands had been covered with gloves. And, as she lay on the hospital cart, the gloves removed, her hands were as white as snow.

Her face black as coal, her hands white as snow.

In some cases, the effect of ironic juxtaposition can be accomplished by a few words embedded in a narrative. The narrator of the dark crime novel "The Postman Always Rings Twice" lays out the plot to murder his girlfriend's husband:

> We played it just like we would tell it. It was about ten o'clock at night, and we had closed up, and the Greek was in the bathroom, putting on his Saturday night wash. I was to take the water up to my room, get ready to shave, and then remember I had left the car out. I was to go outside, and stand by to give her one on the horn if somebody came. She was to wait 'til she heard him in the tub, go in for a towel, and clip him from behind with a blackjack I had made for her out of a sugar bag with ball bearings wadded down in the end.

James M. Cain creates a double effect in this passage, placing the innocent 'sugar bag' between the mechanical 'ball bearings' and the criminal instrument 'blackjack.' A sack for sugar loses its sweetness when converted to a murder weapon.

Workshop

Feature photographers often see startling visual details in juxtaposition: the street person wearing a corsage, the massive sumo wrestler holding a tiny child. Keep your eyes open for such visual images and imagine how you would represent them in your writing.

> Re-read some of your own stories to see if there are ironic juxtapositions hiding inside of them. Are there ways to revise your stories to take better advantage of these moments?
>
> Now that you have a name for this technique, you will begin to recognize its use more often in literature, theater, movies, music, and journalism. Make a mental note of such examples. And keep your eyes open for them in real life as you report your stories.

Writing Tool #17: The Number of Elements

The number of examples you use in a sentence or a story has meaning.

A self-conscious writer has no choice but to select a specific number of examples or elements in a sentence or paragraph. The writer chooses the number, and when it is greater than one, the order. (If you think the order of a list unimportant, try reciting the names of the Four Evangelists in an order other than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.)

The Number One: Declare It

Let's examine some texts with our X-ray reading glasses, looking down beneath the surface meaning to the grammatical machinery at work below.

That girl is smart.

In this simple sentence, the writer declares a single defining characteristic of the girl, her intelligence. The reader must focus on that. It is this effect of unity, single-mindedness, no-other-alternativeness, that characterizes the language of one.

- Jesus wept.
- Call me.
- Call me Ishmael.
- Go to hell.
- Here's Johnny.
- I do.
- God is love.
- Elvis.
- Elvis has left the building.
- Whassup?
- You da man!
- Word.
- True.
- I have a dream.
- I have a headache.
- Not now.
- Read my lips.

Tom Wolfe once told William F. Buckley Jr., that if a writer wants the reader to think something the absolute truth, the writer should render it in the shortest possible sentence. Trust me.

The Number Two: Compare It

We know that girl is smart, but what happens when we learn:

That girl is smart and sweet.

The writer has altered our perspective on the world. The choice for the reader is not between smart and sweet. Instead, the writer forces us to hold these two characteristics in our mind at the same time. We have to balance them, weigh them against each other, compare and contrast them.

- Mom and dad.
- True or false.
- Scylla and Charybdis.
- The devil and the deep blue sea.
- Ham and eggs.
- Abbott and Costello.
- Men are from Mars. Women are from Venus.
- Sam and Dave.
- Dick and Jane.
- Rock and Roll.
- Magic Johnson and Larry Bird.
- I and Thou.

The Number Three: Surround It

The dividing magic of number two turns into what one scholar calls the "encompassing" magic of number three.

That girl is smart, sweet, and determined.

As this sentence grows, we are influenced to see the girl in a more well-rounded way. Rather than simplify her as smart, or divide her as smart and sweet, we now triangulate the elements of her character. In our language and culture, three seems to give us a sense of the whole:

- Beginning, middle, and end.
- Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
- Heaven, purgatory, and hell.
- Tinkers to Evers to Chance.
- Of the people, by the people, for the people.
- A priest, a minister, and a rabbi.
- On your mark, get set, go.
- Mickey, Willie, and the Duke.
- Executive, Legislative, Judicial.
- The Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria.

At the end of his most famous passage on the nature of love, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "For now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three. But the greatest of all is love." The powerful movement is from trinity to unity. From a sense of the whole to an understanding of what is most important.

The Number Four or More: Count It

In the anti-math of writing, the number three is greater than four. Part of the magic of three is that it offers a greater sense of completeness than four or more. Once we add a fourth or fifth detail we have achieved escape velocity, breaking out of the circle of wholeness:

That girl is smart, sweet, determined, and anorexic.

We can add descriptive elements to infinity. Four or more examples create a list, but not a complete inventory. Four or more details in a passage can offer a flowing, literary effect that the best writers have created since Homer listed the names of the Greek ships. Consider the beginning of Jonathan Lethem's novel "Motherless Brooklyn":

"Context is everything. Dress me up and see. I'm a carnival barker, an auctioneer, a downtown performance artist, a speaker in tongues, a senator drunk on filibuster. I've got Tourette's."

If we check these sentences against our theory of numbers, it would reveal this pattern: 1-2-5-1. In the first sentence the author declares a single idea, stated as the absolute truth. In the second, he gives the reader two imperative verbs. In the third, he spins five metaphors. In the final sentence, the writer returns to a definitive declaration —- so important he casts it in italics.

So good writing is as easy as one, two, three ... and four.

In summary:

- Use one for power.
- Use two for comparison, contrast.
- Use three for completeness, wholeness, roundness.
- Use four or more to list, inventory, compile, and expand.

Workshop

Begin an intense process of X-ray reading for examples in which the writer uses the number of items to achieve a specific effect.

Re-read some examples of your own recent work. Examine your own use of numbers. Look for cases in which you might want to add an example or subtract one to create the effects described above.

Have a brainstorming sessions with friends in which you list additional examples of the use of one, two, three, and four. Draw these from proverbs, everyday speech, music lyrics, famous speeches, literature, sports.

Look for an opportunity to use a long list in a story. For example, the names of kittens in a new litter. The items in the window of an old drugstore. Things abandoned at the bottom of a swimming pool. Play with the order of the list to achieve the best effect.

Writing Tool #18: Internal Cliffhangers

Use them to move readers to turn the page.

What makes a page-turner, an irresistible read, a story or book that you can't put down?

Well, lots of things. But one indispensable tool seems to be the internal cliffhanger.

During the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal I read a remarkable story by David Finkel, who writes for the Sunday Magazine of The Washington Post. The title of the piece was "How It Came to This: The Scandal in 13 Acts." More specifically, it answered this question: "How the heck did Monica Lewinsky get into the White House in the first place?"

The "13 Acts" were numbered parts or chapters. It was a fascinating tale, a "page-turner," even if there weren't that many pages to turn.

At the end of each chapter Finkel would plant a story element that motivated the reader to keep reading. It might be an important question without an answer, or a dramatic turn of events, or a moment of insight, or a bit of foreshadowing.

For example, Finkel concludes chapter 8, which describes the taped conversation between Lewinsky and Linda Tripp about the famous soiled blue dress, this way: "And on they went, only one of them aware of the importance of the conversation they'd just had."

You don't need a cliff to write a good cliffhanger.

I found a great example of the internal cliffhanger in my own backyard. A page-one story in the St. Pete Times described the struggle to keep desperate folks from jumping to their deaths from the top of the Sunshine Skyway bridge. This turns out to be a terrible problem, not just in St. Pete, but wherever a high, dramatic bridge lures the desperate or suicidal.

Here's the opening segment of the story by reporter Jamie Jones:

> The lonely young blond left church on a windy afternoon and drove to the top of the Sunshine Skyway bridge.
>
> Wearing black pumps and a shiny black dress, she climbed onto the ledge and looked at the chilly blue waters 197 feet below. The wind seemed to nudge her. It's time, she thought.
>
> She raised her arms skyward and pushed off the edge. Two boaters watched as she began a swan dive into Tampa Bay.
>
> Halfway down, Dawn Paquin wanted to turn back. "I don't want to die," she thought.
>
> A second later, she slammed into the water. It swallowed her, and then let her go. She broke through the surface, screaming.

The internal cliffhanger at the end of that passage made it impossible for me to stop reading. The reporter organized the whole story that way, dividing the work into seven sections, each separated from the others by the visual marker of three black boxes. Each of the sections has a bit of drama at the end, a reward for the reader, and a reason to plunge forward.

The cliffhanger is not thought of as an internal device. We are more inclined to associate it with serialized film or television adventures with big endings. The super-sized ones come at the end of one season and sustain your interest until the next, as in the famous "Who Shot J.R.?"

Think of it as the "to be continued" effect, and consider how much we sometimes resent having to wait six months to find out what happens next.

I stumbled upon the internal cliffhanger by reading adventure books for young readers. I'm holding in my hand a reprint of the very first Nancy Drew mystery story, "The Secret of the Old Clock." I'm quoting from the conclusion of Chapter

XIX:

Clutching the blanket and the clock tightly in her arms, Nancy Drew partly crawled and partly fell over objects as she struggled to get out of the truck before it was too late. She was afraid to think what would happen to her if the robbers discovered her in the van.

Reaching the door, she leaped lightly to the floor. She could now hear heavy footsteps coming closer and closer.

Nancy slammed the truck doors shut and searched wildly for the keys.

"Oh, what did I do with them?" she thought frantically.

She saw that they had fallen from the door to the floor and snatched them up. Hurriedly inserting the right key in the lock, she secured the doors.

The deed was not accomplished a minute too soon. As Nancy wheeled about she distinctly heard the murmur of angry voices outside. The robbers were quarreling among themselves, and already someone was working at the fastening of the barn door.

Escape was cut off. Nancy felt that she was cornered.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she thought in despair.

There you have it, the internal cliffhanger, daring you to stop reading.

Think about it. This technique energizes every episode of every television drama, from "Law & Order" to "The West Wing." Even "American Idol" forces the viewer to sit through the commercial break to learn which performer has been voted off. Any dramatic element that comes right before a break in the action is an internal cliffhanger.

Workshop

As you read novels or nonfiction books, begin to notice what the author places at the ends of chapters. How do these elements drive you to turn the page? Pay attention to the narrative structure of television dramas. Writers of these shows often place dramatic elements just before the commercial break. Look for examples that work and for ones that fail to keep the viewer intrigued. Lead a discussion of what it would take to put a mini-cliffhanger right before we ask readers to 'jump' inside the paper? What if we put a mini-cliffhanger at the end of the first screen full of text online so that readers could not resist a click or scroll?

Writing Tool #19: Tune Your Voice

Tune your voice.

Of all the effects created by writers, none is more important or elusive than that quality called "voice." Good writers, it is said time and again, want to "find" their voice. And they want that voice to be "authentic," a word from the same root as "author" and "authority."

But what is voice, and how does the writer tune it?

The most useful definition comes from my friend and colleague Don Fry: "Voice is the sum of all the strategies used by the author to create the illusion that the writer is speaking directly to the reader from the page."

Poet David McCord tells the story of how he once picked up an old copy of St. Nicholas magazine, which printed stories written by children. One of the stories caught his attention, and he was "suddenly struck by a prose passage more earthy and natural in voice than what I had been glancing through. This sounds like E.B. White, I said to myself. Then I looked at the signature: Elwyn Brooks White, age 11." The qualities that led McCord to recognize the young author who would one day write "Charlotte's Web" can be summed up in the word "voice."

If Fry is correct, that voice is the "sum" of all writing strategies, which of those strategies are essential to creating the illusion of speech? To answer that question, think of a piece of sound equipment called a "Graphic Equalizer." This is the device that creates the range of sounds in a sound system by providing about 30 dials or levers, controlling such things as bass and treble. Push up the bass, pull down the treble, add a little reverb to configure the desired sound.

So, if we all had a handy-dandy writing voice modulator, what ranges would the levers control? Here are a few, expressed as a set of questions:

> What is the level of language? Is it concrete or abstract or somewhere in between? Does the writer use street slang or the logical argument of a professor of philosophy?
>
> What "person" does the writer work in? Does the writer use 'I' or 'we' or 'you' or 'they' or all of these?
>
> What is the range and the sources of allusions? Do these come from high or low culture, or both? Does the writer cite a medieval theologian or a professional wrestler?
>
> How often does the writer use metaphors and other figures of speech? Does the writer want to sound more like the poet, whose work is thick with figurative images, or the journalist, who only uses them for special effect?
>
> What is the length and structure of the typical sentence? Is it short and simple? Long and complex? Or mixed?
>
> What is the distance from neutrality? Is the writer trying to be objective, partisan, or passionate?
>
> What are the writer's frames of reference? Does the writer work with conventional subject matter, using conventional story forms? Or is the writer experimental and iconoclastic?

Consider this passage, a CBS radio broadcast by Edward R. Murrow, on the liberation of Buchenwald concentration camp. Read it aloud to hear how it sounds:

> We entered. It was floored with concrete. There were two rows of bodies stacked up like cordwood. They were thin and very white. Some of the bodies were terribly bruised, though there seemed to be little flesh to bruise. Some had been shot through the head, but they bled but little. All except two were naked. I tried to count them as best I could and arrived at the conclusion that all that was mortal of more than five hundred men and boys lay there in two neat piles.

The journalist grounds his report in the language of eyewitness testimony. I can hear in his report the struggle between the professional reporter and the outraged human being. The level of language is concrete and vivid, describing terrible things to see. He uses a single chilling metaphor, "stacked up like cordwood," but the rest seems plain and straightforward. The sentences are mostly short and simple. His writing voice is not neutral —— how could it be? ——

but it describes the world he sees and not the emotions of the reporter. Yet he places himself on the scene in the last sentence, using the 'I' to give no doubt to the possible deniers that he has seen this with his own eyes. The phrase "all that was mortal" sounds like it might have come from Shakespeare. This brief X-ray reading of Murrow's work shows the interaction of the various strategies that create the effect we know as "voice."

How different is the effect when 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes the passions of mankind:

> Grief for the calamity of another is PITY, and arises from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himself, and therefore is called also COMPASSION, and in the phrase of this present time a FELLOW-FEELING.

The Murrow passage, with its particularity, evokes pity and compassion. The Hobbes passage, with its abstractions, defines them. If you write like Murrow, you'll sound like a great journalist. If you write like Hobbes, you will sound like an antique philosopher.

The most powerful tool on your workbench to test your writing voice is oral reading. Read your story aloud to hear if it sounds like you. When teachers offer this advice to writers, we often meet skeptical glances. You can't be serious, say these looks. You don't literally mean that I should read the story aloud. Perhaps you mean I should read the story "in-loud," quietly, with my lips moving.

No, I mean out loud, and loud enough so that others can hear.

The writer can read the story aloud to herself or to an editor. The editor can read the story aloud to the writer, or to another editor. It can be read this way to receive its voice, or to modulate it. It can be read in celebration, but should never be read aloud in derision. It can be read to hear the problems that must be solved.

Writers complain about tone-deaf editors who read with their eyes and not with their ears. The editor may "see" an unnecessary phrase, but what does the deletion of that phrase do to the rhythm of the sentence? That question is best answered by oral — and aural — reading.

Workshop

Read a draft of a story aloud to a friend or editor. Ask your colleague, "Does this sound like me?" Discuss the response.

After re-reading some of your stories, make a list of adjectives that you think define its voice, such words as "heavy," or "aggressive," or "tentative." Now try to identify the effects in your writing that led you to these conclusions.

Read a draft of a story aloud. Can you hear problems in the story that you cannot see?

Writing Tool #20: Narrative Opportunities

Take advantage of narrative opportunities.

Journalists use the word 'story' with romantic promiscuity. They think of themselves as the wandering minstrels of the modern world, the tellers of tales, the spinners of yarns. And then, too often, they write dull reports.

Reports need not be dull, of course, nor stories interesting. But the difference between story and report is crucial to the reader's expectation and the writer's execution. Story elements, call them anecdotes, appear in many news reports. But few pieces in a newspaper earn the title of 'Story.' Most items we call stories are actually reports.

So what are the differences between report and story, and how can the writer use them to strategic advantage?

A wonderful scholar named Louise Rosenblatt argued that readers read for two main reasons: information and experience. Reports convey information. Stories create experience. Reports transfer knowledge. Stories transport the reader, crossing the boundaries of time, space, and imagination. The report points us there. The story puts us there.

A report sounds like this: "The school board will meet Thursday to discuss the new desegregation plan."

A story sounds like this: "Wanda Mitchell shook her fist at the school board chairman, tears streaming down her face."

The toolsets for reports and stories also differ. For example, while both quotes and dialogue are encased in quotations marks, the explanatory quote enlivens the report, while dialogue reveals character and moves the plot of a story.

The famous Five W's and H, expressed in a form called the Inverted Pyramid, have helped journalists organize the news from most important down to least important. Who, What, Where, and When appear as the most common elements of information. The Why and the How are harder to achieve. When used in reports, these pieces of information are frozen in time, fixed so readers can scan and understand.

A great Seattle journalist, Richard Zahler, showed me how to thaw out those Five W's, converting a report into a story, allowing time to flow and characters to grow. In this process of conversion:

- Who becomes Character.
- What becomes Action. (What happened.)
- Where becomes Setting.
- When becomes Chronology.
- Why becomes Motivation or Causality.
- How becomes Process (How it happened.)

One of your most important jobs as a writer is to figure out when you're writing a story as opposed to a report. Stories, argues Jon Franklin, require rising and falling action, complication, points of insight, and resolution. Tom Wolfe demonstrated how to match truthful reporting with fictional techniques, such as setting scenes, finding details of character, capturing dialogue, and altering points of view.

Narrative, scholars Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg tell us, requires a story and a storyteller. Consider this opening to a series in The Star-Ledger of Newark, about a troubled school nicknamed "Last Chance High":

Ron Orr slumped in his chair, let out a long, deliberate sigh and again wondered what he was doing here.

He could have had a cushy job in the suburbs, he said, holding his head in his hands.

Instead he chose to be the principal of the Valley School, a claustrophobic madhouse full of renegade teenagers, some of them violent, all of them troubled.

At the moment, one of them was outside his door, cursing him out. Another was threatening to smoke marijuana right there in the hallway.Someone yelled to look outside — one of the students was planning to race by in a stolen car.

"Of all days," Orr said, rubbing his temples.

Orr liked to remind himself that he prayed for this job. On this day —- Graduation Day 2003 -— he added, "The Lord giveth, and now I wish he would taketh it back."

It is the beginning to quite a story, and the storyteller, Robin Fisher, helps readers answer this question: What was it like to be in that school with that principal and those students on that particular day, Graduation Day? Fisher becomes our eyes and ears. The virtual reality she creates moves the reader toward empathy, concern for a good man struggling to help young people under difficult circumstances.

Let's break it down. In this passage:

- The 'Who' is the Psalm-revising character of Principal Orr.
- The 'What' is what will happen on Graduation Day. Will principal and students make it through against the odds?
- The 'Where' is the campus of the alternative high school, "the claustrophobic madhouse."
- The 'When' is the beginning of a special day-in-the-life, Graduation Day.
- The 'Why' and the 'How' are explored in the fuller narrative. Why does this principal persist?How does the place work? How does it survive?

To convert a report into a story, the reporter must become a storyteller.

Workshop

Look at the news with the distinction between reports and stories in mind. Look for narrative opportunities missed. Look for bits of stories wherever you may find them.

Take the same approach to your own work. Look for stories, or at least passages in stories, where you transport the reader directly to the scene. Search for places in your reports where you might have included story elements.

Narrative depends upon the strategic use of time in a story. Rick Zahler uses the example of an old hotel destroyed in a fire. Describe the ways a writer could take advantage of time elements, such as the history of the hotel, the time when the fire was discovered and reported, the time it took for firefighters to arrive and control the blaze. For your next story, use time as a reporting and writing tool.

Writing Tool #21: Quotes and Dialogue

Learn how quotes differ from dialogue.

Reporters tell me that one of the most important lessons they learn in journalism school is to "get a good quote high in the story." When people speak in stories, readers listen. But people speak in different ways.

The St. Paul Pioneer Press covered the sad story of Cynthia Schott, a 31-year-old television anchor who wasted away and died from an eating disorder.

"I was there. I know how it happened," says Kathy Bissen, a friend of Schott's from the TV station. "Everybody did what they individually thought was best. And together, we covered the spectrum of possibilities of how to interact with someone you know has an illness. And yet, none of it made a difference. And you just think to yourself, 'How can this happen?'"

Capturing a person's speech has a variety of names. Print reporters call it a "quote." TV reporters tag it a "sound bite." Radio folks struggle under the awkward word "actuality," because someone actually said it. As in the St. Paul case, the quote offers readers these benefits:

- It introduces a human voice.
- It explains something important about the subject.
- It frames a problem or dilemma.
- It adds information.
- It reveals the character or personality of the speaker.
- It introduces what is next to come.

Here are three quotes from page one of the June 28, 2004 edition of The New York Times:

> "We have forces. We have the judicial system, and he is going to go to court. It's going to be a just trial, unlike the trials that he gave to the Iraqi people." ââi€”- Iyad Allawi, interim president of Iraq, on his plans for Saddam Hussein

> "We can do a better job of creating an environment that isn't 'Lord of the Flies,'" ââi€”- Dr. Joel Haber, a psychologist, on how to eliminate bullying from the experience of summer camp

> "Less than two percentage points we can handle just by not eating out as much." ââi€”- Joyce Diffenderfer on how her family copes with mounting credit card debt

But where is Joyce Diffenderfer? Where is she when she speaks these words? In her kitchen? At the desk where she pays her bills? In her workplace? Most quotes are disembodied -- or perhaps it's more accurate to say they are dis-placed. The words are spoken above or outside the action of the story. Quotes are 'about' the action, not 'in' the action. In that sense, quotes interrupt the progress of the narrative.

Which leads us to the power of dialogue. While quotes provide information or explanation, dialogue presents the reader with a form of action. The quote may be heard, but dialogue is overheard. The writer who uses dialogue transports us to a place and time where we get to experience the events described in the story.

Journalists use dialogue in stories so sparingly, the effect stands out like a sunflower in a meadow.

Consider this passage from Tom French on the trial of a Florida firefighter accused of a horrible crime against his neighbor:

> His lawyer called out his name. He stood up, put his hand on a Bible and swore to tell the truth and nothing but. He sat down in the witness box and looked toward the jurors so they could see his face and study it and decide for themselves what kind of man he was.

"Did you rape Karen Gregory?" asked this lawyer.

"No sir, I did not."

"Did you murder Karen Gregory?"

"No sir."

The inhibitions against using dialogue in news stories are unfounded. Although dialogue can be recovered and reconstructed from careful reporting, using multiple sources and appropriate attribution, it can also be directly heard. An angry exchange between the mayor and a city council member can be recorded and published. The reporter who did not witness testimony from a trial may be able to recover accurate dialogue from court transcripts, often available as public records.

The skillful writer can use both dialogue and quotes to create different effects in the same story:

"It looked like two planes were fighting, Mom," Mark Kessler, 6 of Wynnewood, told his mother, Gail, after she raced to the school.

The boy had just witnessed the midair collision of a plane and a helicopter, an accident that dropped deadly wreckage atop an elementary school playground. Here's another passage from the same story:

"It was one horrible thing to watch," said Helen Amadio, who was walking near her Hampden Avenue home when the crash occurred. "It exploded like a bomb. Black smoke just poured."

Helen Amadio offers us a true quote, spoken directly to the reporter. Notice the difference between that quote and the implied dialogue between the young boy and his mother. The six-year-old describes the scene to his frantic mom. In other words, the dialogue puts us on the scene where we can overhear the characters in action.

On rare occasion, the reporter combines the information of the quote and the emotional power of dialogue, but only when the source speaks in the immediate aftermath of the event, and only when the reporter focuses on both words and actions. Rick Bragg carries this off brilliantly in his story on the Oklahoma City bombing:

"I just took part in a surgery where a little boy had part of his brain hanging out of his head," said Terry Jones, a medical technician, as he searched in his pocket for a cigarette. Behind him, firefighters picked carefully through the skeleton of the building, still searching for the living and the dead.

"You tell me," he said, "how can anyone have so little respect for human life?"

Workshop

Read the newspaper looking for quotes and read fiction looking for dialogue. Discuss the different effects upon the reader.

Look for missed opportunities to use dialogue in news reports. Pay special attention to controversial meetings and the coverage of trials.

Develop your ear for dialogue. With a notebook in hand, sit in a public space, such as the mall or an airport lounge. Eavesdrop on nearby conversations and jot down some notes on what it would take to capture that speech in a story.

Read the work of a contemporary playwright, such as Tony Kushner. With friends, read the dialogue aloud and discuss to what extent it sounds like real speech or seems artificial.

Interview two sources about an important conversation they had years ago. See if you can re-create the dialogue to their satisfaction. Begin by speaking to them separately, and then bring them together.

Writing Tool #22: Get Ready

Take a tip from Hamlet and always be prepared to tell the big story: Expect the unexpected.

Get ready.

That great writing coach Prince Hamlet said it best: "The readiness is all."

Great writers get ready for the big story, even if they cannot see it. They expect the unexpected. Like Batman, they cinch up a utility belt filled with handy tools. They report and report and research and then report some more, filling up a reservoir of knowledge they can use at any time.

Sports writers are the world champions of readiness. They write big stories under deadline pressure against formidable competition with the outcome of the event in doubt. Bill Plaschke of the Los Angeles Times was ready when Justin Gatlin won the 2004 Olympic gold in the 100-meter dash:

> His first track event was the 100-meter hydrants, a kid running down Quentin Street leaping over every fire plug in his path.
>
> His second track event was the 100-meter spokes, the kid racing in tennis shoes against his friends riding bicycles.
>
> A dozen years later, on a still Mediterranean night far from home, the restless boy on the block became the fastest man in the world.

The advanced reporting makes that great deadline lead possible. The readiness is all.

Another great sports journalist, Red Smith was ready when Bobby Thomson shocked the world in October 1951 with the most dramatic home run in baseball history:

> Now it is done. Now the story ends. And there is no way to tell it. The art of fiction is dead. Reality has strangled invention. Only the utterly impossible, the inexpressibly fantastic, can ever be plausible again.

Writing the big game story requires readiness enough. Now try to imagine what it took for AP correspondent Mark Fritz to write this 1994 account of the genocidal massacre in Rwanda:

> Nobody lives here any more.
>
> Not the expectant mothers huddled outside the maternity clinic, not the families squeezed into the church, not the man who lies rotting in a schoolroom beneath a chalkboard map of Africa.
>
> Everybody here is dead. Karubamba is a vision from hell, a flesh-and-bone junkyard of human wreckage, an obscene slaughterhouse that has fallen silent save for the roaring buzz of flies the size of honeybees.

Few journalists are as versatile as David Von Drehle of The Washington Post, who in 1994 was assigned to cover a big story, the funeral of former president Richard Nixon. Von Drehle knew he'd be writing on deadline against a small army of competitors. "Deadlines always make me shiver," he admits, but the shivers are a physical manifestation of his readiness to produce prose like this:

> Yorba Linda, Calif. ÃÃ¢¢ââ,,¬¬ââi€œœ When last the nation saw them all together, they were men of steel and bristling crew cuts, titans of their time ÃÃ¢¢ââ,,¬¬ââi€œœ- which was a time of pragmatism and ice water in the veins.
>
> How boldly they talked. How fearless they seemed. They spoke of fixing their enemies, of running over their own grandmothers if it would give them an edge. Their goals were the goals of giants: Control of a nation, victory in the nuclear age, strategic domination of the globe.

The titans of Nixon's age gathered again today, on an unseasonable cold and gray afternoon, and now they were white-haired or balding, their steel was rusting, their skin had begun to sag, their eyesight was failing. They were invited to contemplate where power leads.

"John Donne once said that there is a democracy about death," the Rev. Billy Graham told the mourners at Richard M. Nixon's funeral.

Such powerful work is no accident, and Von Drehle generously shares the secrets of readiness:

At a time like that, you have to fall back on the basics: Sit down and tell a story.

What happened?

What did it look like, sound like, feel like? Who said what? Who did what?

And why does it matter?

What's the point? Why is this story being told? What does it say about life, about the world, about the times we live in? ...

I learned long ago: Don't get fancy on deadline. Keep the structure simple; start at the beginning, march through the middle, end at the end. That's what I did here. There are no flashbacks, no digressions, no interwoven storyline. Just beginning, middle, end. Lead, chronology, kicker.

What else? Lots of short sentences. Active verbs. Clear metaphors. Pithy quotes. Vivid details ... Fall back on the basics. They'll get you through -- even when you feel like you're going to freeze.

I end with the story of the famous foreign correspondent who got to sit in the press box at a football game between the universities of Michigan and Illinois. The date was Oct. 18, 1924. During the first 12 minutes of this game, Red Grange scored four touchdowns for the Illini. Later he scored a fifth, and threw for a sixth. Illinois ended Michigan's 20-game unbeaten streak, as the legendary Galloping Ghost amassed more than 400 yards of offense.

The famous foreign correspondent was awestruck. How could anyone cover this event? "It's too big," he said. This came from a man who had once covered the Russian Revolution. Someone should have quoted Shakespeare: The readiness is all.

Workbench

With the help of an editor or friend make a list of some possible big stories that could emerge from your beat, specialty, or area of interest. Begin 'saving string' on these topics, material that will help you down the road.

2. As you watch big sporting events, such as the World Series or the Super Bowl or the Olympics, rehearse in your head possible leads you would write for the most dramatic stories that emerge. Compare and contrast your ideas with those that appear in the print or on the air.

3. Big stories need big headlines and titles. Get ready for the next big story by re-writing the headlines you see on important contemporary stories. Consider also what you might have written if you were writing headlines for the following events: the assassination of John F. Kennedy; the devastation of Hurricane Andrew; the destruction of the World Trade Center; the Oklahoma City bombing; the destruction of the Berlin Wall; the death of Elvis Presley.

4. For your eyes only, write a memo to persuade an editor to give you the time and resources you need to cover a big story.

Writing Tool #23: Place Gold Coins Along the Path

Learn how to keep your readers interested by placing gold coins throughout your story.

Place gold coins along the path.

How do you keep a reader moving through your story? Don Fry tells this parable:

> Imagine that you are walking on a narrow path through a deep forest.You walk a mile and there at your feet you find a gold coin. You pick it up and put it in your pocket. You walk another mile, and, sure enough, you see another gold coin. What will you do next? Will you walk another mile in search of another coin?

Like our person in the forest, the reader makes predictions about what's down the path of the story. The inverted pyramid trains readers to predict that information will become less important as you read on. When readers read chronological narratives they begin to wonder what will happen next.

Think of a gold coin as any element in a story that rewards the reader for reading that far. A good start is its own reward, of course. And crafty writers know enough to put something shiny at the end, a final reward, an invitation to return to the work of that writer. But what about the territory between beginning and end? With no gold coins for motivation, the reader may drift out of the forest.

"The easiest thing for a reader to do," argues Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Gartner, "is to quit reading."

A gold coin can appear in a story as a small scene or anecdote: "A big buck antelope squirms under a fence and sprints over the plain, hoofs drumming powerfully. 'Now that's one fine sight,' murmurs a cowboy."

It might appear as a startling fact: "Lightning ... is much feared by any mounted man caught on the open plain, and many cowboys have been killed by it."

It can appear as a telling quote, "Most of the real cowboys I know," says Mr. Miller, "have been dead for a while."

These three gold coins appeared in a prize-winning story on the dying culture of the cowboy, written by the great Bill Blundell for The Wall Street Journal, a newspaper that takes the act of rewarding the reader seriously, and sometimes not so seriously.

Which brings me to my favorite gold coin of all time, a passage from a story written in 1984 by Peter Rinearson for The Seattle Times. The gold coin appeared in a long chapter in a long series about the creation of a new airliner, the Boeing 757. The chapter on engineering, for example, included endless details about the passenger door, how it contained 500 parts and was "held together by 5,900 rivets."

Just when my interest in the engineering began to fade, I came across this passage:

> After its stop in Montreal last September, the 757 flew on to England with a load of Eastern and Boeing officials.
>
> On the way, a duck hit one of the cockpit's No. 2 windows, not an unusual incident.
>
> "It's usually not a big deal," said Les Berven, an FAA pilot who was co-piloting the flight. "All it did was just to make him into jelly and he slid down the side of the window."
>
> The window didn't break-- but then Boeing knew it wouldn't because the window had gone through a series of "chicken tests."
>
> Boeing is a little touchy about the subject of chicken tests, and points out they are required by the FAA. Here's what happens:
>
> A live 4-pound chicken is anesthetized and placed in a flimsy plastic bag to reduce aerodynamic drag. The bagged bird is put in a compressed-air gun.
>
> The bird is fired at the jetliner window at 360 knots and the window must withstand the impact. It is said to be a

very messy test.

The inch-thick glass, which includes two layers of plastic, needn't come out unscathed. But it must not puncture. The test is repeated under various circumstances -- "the window is cooled by liquid nitrogen, or the chicken is fired into the center of the window or at its edge. "We give Boeing an option," Berven joked. "They can either use a 4-pound chicken at 200 miles an hour or a 200-pound chicken at 4 miles an hour."

No one who reads about the chicken test thinks about air travel or Colonel Sanders the same way again.

While the authors of books or screenplays know the value of dramatic or comic high points in a story, journalists are at a disadvantage. Their work is so top-heavy that even an eager editor will do the wrong thing for the right reason:

"That's a great quote," says the admiring editor to the writer. "Let's move it up."

"Readers will learn a lot from that anecdote. Let's move it up." And so it goes.

While moving the good stuff up honors the material, it may dishonor the story. The result is a kind of bait and switch.The reader winds up with three or four nifty paragraphs, followed by the toxic waste that drifts to the bottom.

Workbench

Talk with your editor about the concept of gold coins. Together, review some of your stories to see if they are too top-heavy. Look for missed opportunities to create a more balanced structure.

Carry the concept of gold coins into your reading and movie watching. Study the structure of stories looking for the strategic placement of dramatic or comic high points.

Take a draft of a story you are working on and mark it to identify the gold coins. Draw a star next to any story element with a particular shine. Now study their placement and consider moving them around.

See if you can begin to recognize gold coins during your reporting. When you see one or hear one, report it more thoroughly so it can have the best possible effect in your story.

Writing Tool #24: Name the Big Parts

Seeing the structure of a story is easier if you can identify the main parts.

Name the Big Parts

All good stories have parts: Beginnings, middles, and endings. Even writers who achieve a seamless tapestry can trace the invisible stitching. A writer who knows the big parts of a story can name them for the reader, using such techniques as sub-headlines. The reader who sees the big parts is more likely to remember the whole story.

The best way to illustrate this effect is to reveal the big parts of a short, and seemingly simple, children's song, "Three Blind Mice."

Part I is a simple musical phrase repeated once:

Three blind mice, three blind mice

Part II builds on that phrase but adds something:

See how they run, see how they run

Part III adds three more complex phrases:

They all ran after the farmer's wife,
who cut off their tails with a carving knife,
did you ever seen such a sight in your life

Part IV repeats the first phrase, Three blind mice, closing the song into a tight circle.

We remember songs, contrasted to stories, because of their transparent structure: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, instrumental, verse, chorus, coda. The delightful sounds of songs often distract us from the mechanics of structure, but the architecture of music becomes perceptible with more careful listening.

Which brings me to the dreaded O-word.

Many writers of the Old School were required to hand in outlines of our work with drafts of our stories. Such outlines looked something like this:

I.
A.
B.
1.
2.3.
a.
b.
C.

II.

And so on.

Here was my problem: I could never see far enough ahead to plot what the third part of section C was going to be. I had to write my way to that point in the story. In other words, I had to discover what I was going to say.

So, as a survival mechanism, I invented the "reverse outline." I would write a full draft of the story, and then I would create the outline. This turned out to be a useful tool. If I could not write the outline from the story, it meant that I could not discern the parts from the whole, a symptom of disorganization.

Although I still can't write a formal outline in advance of a story, I can write a plan, usually a few phrases scribbled on a

yellow pad. And here's another tool I discovered: An informal plan is nothing more than the Roman Numerals created by a formal outline. In other words, I can see the big parts of the story.

Here's a plan for an obituary of entertainer Ray Bolger, the beloved Scarecrow of "The Wizard of Oz":

I. Lead with image and dialogue from Oz.
II. Great moments in his dance career other than Oz.
III. His signature song: "Once In Love with Amy."
IV. His youth: how he became a dancer.
V. His television career.
VI. A final image from Oz.

I constructed this reverse outline from a close reading of Tom Shales's award-winning obituary of Bolger in The Washington Post.

When a story grows to any significant length, the writer should label the parts. If the story evolves into a book, the chapters will have titles. In a newspaper or magazine, the parts may carry subtitles or sub-headlines. Writers should write these sub-headlines themselves -- even if the newspaper or website does not use them.

Here's why: The sub-headlines will make visible to the busy copy editor and time-starved reader the big parts of the story. The act of writing them will test the writer's ability to identify and label those parts. And, when well-written, these sub-heads will reveal at a glance the global structure of the piece, indexing the parts, and creating additional points of entry into the story.

In 1994, the great American editor Gene Patterson wrote an essay for the St. Petersburg Times titled, "Forged in Battle: The Formative Experience of War." The occasion was the 50th anniversary of the Invasion of Normandy. Patterson fought in World War II as a young tank commander in Patton's Army.

Patterson's mini-epic begins in medias res, in the middle of things:

> I did not want to kill the two German officers when we met by mistake in the middle of the main street of Gera Bronn.
>
> They somersaulted from their motorcycle when it rounded a corner directly ahead of my column of light armor. They scrambled to their feet, facing me 20 yards in front of the cannon and machine gun muzzles of my lead armored car, and stood momentarily still as deer. The front wheel of their flattened motorcycle spun on in the silence.

This passage introduces a meaty memoir of war. Five strong sub-headlines index the body of the work:

- A Man of the 20th Century
- Lead with the Heaviest Punch
- From the Georgia Soil
- Senseless Dying
- Two Certainties about War

Notice how the reader can almost predict the structure and content of Patterson's essay from these subtitles alone. They divide the story into its big parts, name the parts, and make visible a movement of theme, logic, and chronology that readers can perceive and remember.

Workbench

Shakespeare's plays are divided into five acts. The acts are then divided into scenes. Read a comedy and a tragedy, such as "As You Like It" and "Macbeth," paying special attention to the structure of the play and what Shakespeare tries to accomplish in each of the big parts.

2. Find the longest story you have written in the last year. Using a pencil, mark up the story according to its parts. Now label those parts using headlines and sub-headlines.

3. Over the next month, pay more attention to the structure of stories you read. Notice the point in your reading where

you begin to perceive the global structure of the piece. Notice any differences between stories that have sub-headlines and those that don't.

4. Listening carefully to music helps writers learn the structures of composition. As you listen, see if you can recognize the big parts of songs.

5. For your next story, try working from a plan, an informal outline that attempts to plot the three to six big parts of the work. Revise the plan if necessary.

Writing Tool #25: Repeat

Purposeful repetition is not redundancy.

Use repetition to chain parts of a story together.

Repetition works in stories, but only if you intend it. The repetition of key words, phrases, and story elements creates a rhythm, a pace, a structure, a drumbeat that reinforces the central theme of the work.

Such repetition works in music, in advertising, in humor, in literature, in political speech and rhetoric, in teaching, in homilies, in parental lectures -- even in this sentence, where the word 'in' was used 10 times.

Writers use repetition as a tool of persuasion, few as skillfully as Michael Gartner, who, in a distinguished and varied journalism career, won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing.

Consider this excerpt from "Tattoos and Freedom":

> Let's talk about tattoos.
>
> We haven't seen the arms of Jackson Warren, the food-service worker at Iowa State University, but they do sound repulsive. A swastika on one, KKK on the other.
>
> Ugh.
>
> That's obnoxious.
>
> The administrators at the university think so, too, so in response to a student's complaint they've "temporarily reassigned" Warren to a job where he won't be in contact with the general public.
>
> Ugh.
>
> That's outrageous.

Gartner's repetition of "ugh" and "That's obnoxious./ That's outrageous" frame the argument for protection of free speech, even when that speech is expressed in such a despicable way.

> Remember the flag burners in Texas? The Nazi marchers in Skokie? The war protesters everywhere? Protected citizens, one and all. Obnoxious, sometimes. Outrageous, sometimes. Despicable, sometimes.
>
> But never unspeakable.

The pattern throughout is repetition, repetition, repetition, flavored by variation. At the end of the editorial, Gartner answers the question of "what message" the presence of the tattoo man sends to students on campus, many of whom would find the tattoos repugnant:

> The message you're giving is clear:
>
> This is a school that believes in free speech.
> This is a school that protects dissent.
> This is a school that cherishes America.
> That's what Iowa State officials should be saying.
> For Jackson Warren, bedecked in symbols of hate, should himself be a symbol of freedom.

As we've seen in a previous tool, the number of repetitions has meaning. Three gives us a sense of the whole ("This is a school..."), while two creates comparison and contrast, symbols of hate vs. symbol of freedom.

Gartner takes his pattern of repetition to a comic level in an editorial urging donations to the local public radio station.

> Give some money to WOI radio.
>
> We don't often shill for things on these pages, but when we do we're blunt about it and go all out.
>
> Give some money to WOI radio.

The body of the editorial contains eight paragraphs, each containing an argument in favor of giving, and each ending with the "money" sentence: Give some money to WOI radio.

Gartner adds a twist at the end:

> You probably thought you could guess the last line of this editorial. But if you didn't get the message by now, one more pitch won't make a difference. So instead of saying give some money to WOI radio, we'll just say:
>
> Thanks for listening.

For Gartner, repetition is never accidental. "It's the refrain," he told Poynter's Chip Scanlan, "……the rhythmic refrain with a different tag on it each time. It's almost a musical device. I love Broadway musicals and have always thought I could write a musical. Couldn't write the music, but I could write the lyrics because I like word play and rhymes, rhythms, and beats, and cadences. Sometimes I think these editorials are the lyrics to a song that has never been written."

In the hands of master teachers or poets, repetition has a power transcending the rhetorical, ascending to the level of myth and scripture. These words, for example, from the book "Night" by Elie Wiesel are emblazoned on a wall of The United States Holocaust Museum:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
>
> Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
>
> Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

Repetition can be so powerful, in fact, that it can threaten to call attention to itself, overshadowing the message of the story. If you're worried about too much repetition, apply this little test. Delete all the repetition and read the passage aloud without it. Repeat the key element once. Repeat it again. Your voice will let you know when you've gone too far.

Workbench

. Understand the difference between repetition and redundancy. The first is useful, designed to create a specific effect. The latter is useless, words wasted. Read several examples of your own work, looking for examples of both repetition and redundancy. What happens to your prose when you eliminate redundancy but reinforce repetition?

2. Look through an anthology of historical speeches and read it with an eye toward repetition. Make a list of the reasons the authors use repetition, starting with: to help us remember, to build an argument, to underscore emotion.

3. Try re-writing the passage by Elie Wiesel above. For the sake of the exercise, eliminate as many uses of the word "never" as you can without altering the meaning. Now read both the original version and your revision aloud. Discuss what you've discovered.

4. Repetition in a story does not have to be highly rhetorical. For example, you can mention or quote a character three times in a story, at the beginning, in the middle, and near the end, to chain the elements together. Look for cases of this style of repetition in news stories.

Writing Tool #26: Fear Not the Long Sentence

Do what you fear: Use long sentences.

Fear Not the Long Sentence

Everyone fears the long sentence. Editors fear it. Readers fear it. Most of all, writers fear it. Even I fear it. Look. Another short one. Shorter. Fragments. Frags. Just letters. F……f……f……f. Can I write a sentence without words? Just punctuation? ……:!?

Melvin Mencher, the great journalism teacher, preaches the value of being counter-phobic. Do what you fear. So it is with the long sentence. Until the writer tries to master the long sentence, he or she is no writer at all. For while length makes a bad sentence worse, it can also make a good sentence better.

An example:

My favorite Tom Wolfe essay from the early days of the New Journalism movement is titled "A Sunday Kind of Love," named after a romantic ballad of the period. The events described take place one morning in a New York subway station on a Thursday, not a Sunday. Wolfe sees and seizes a moment of youthful passion on the city underground to redefine urban romance.

> Love! Attar of libido in the air! It is 8:45 A.M. Thursday morning in the IRT subway station at 50th Street and Broadway and already two kids are hung up in a kind of herringbone weave of arms and legs, which proves, one has to admit, that love is not confined to Sunday in New York.

That's a fine beginning. Erotic fragments and exclamation points. The concave/convex connection of love captured in "herringbone weave," the quick movement from short sentence to long, as writer and reader dive from the top of the ladder of abstraction, from love and libido down to two kids making out, back up to variations on amour in the metropolis.

During rush hour, subway travelers learn the meaning of length. The length of the platform. The length of the wait. The length of the train. The length of the escalators and stairwells to ground level. The length of lines of hurried, grouchy, impatient commuters. Notice how Wolfe uses the length of his sentences to reflect that reality:

> Still the odds! All the faces come popping in clots out of the Seventh Avenue local, past the King Size Ice Cream machine, and the turnstiles start whacking away as if the world were breaking up on the reefs. Four steps past the turnstiles everybody is already backed up haunch to paunch for the climb up the ramp and the stairs to the surface, a great funnel of flesh, wool, felt, leather, rubber and steaming alumicron, with the blood squeezing through everybody's old sclerotic arteries in hopped-up spurts from too much coffee and the effort of surfacing from the subway at the rush hour. Yet there on the landing are a boy and a girl, both about eighteen, in one of those utter, My Sin, backbreaking embraces.

This is classic Wolfe, a world where 'sclerotic' serves as antonym for 'erotic,' where exclamation points sprout like wildflowers, where experience and status are defined by brand names. (My Sin was a perfume of the day.) But wait! There's more! As the couple canoodles, a cavalcade of commuters passes by:

> All round them, ten, scores, it seems like hundreds, of faces and bodies are perspiring, trooping and bellying up the stairs with arterio-sclerotic grimaces past a showcase full of such novel items as Joy Buzzers, Squirting Nickels, Finger Rats, Scary Tarantulas and spoons with realistic dead flies on them, past Fred's barbershop, which is just off the landing and has glossy photographs of young men with the kind of baroque haircuts one can get in there, and up onto 50th Street into a madhouse of traffic and shops with weird lingerie and gray hair-dyeing displays in the windows, signs for free teacup readings and a pool-playing match between the Playboy Bunnies and Downey's

Showgirls, and then everybody pounds on toward the Time-Life Building, the Brill Building or NBC.

The statement I am about to make may defy the cool reason required for a tool-maker's credibility, but has any reader ever experienced a more glorious long sentence, a more rollicking evocation of underground New York, a more dazzling 128 words from capital letter to period? Probably. But if you find it, I'd like to read it.

A close reading of Wolfe suggests some strategies to achieve mastery of the long sentence:

- It helps if subject and verb of the main clause come early in the sentence. [Tool #1]
- Use the long sentence to describe something long. Let form follow function.
- It helps if the long sentence is written in chronological order.
- Use the long sentence in variation with short sentences and sentences of medium length.
- Use the long sentence as a list or catalogue of products, names, images.
- Long sentences need more editing than short ones. Make every word count. Even. In. A. Very. Long. Sentence.

Writing long sentences means going against the grain. But isn't that what the best writers do?

In the 1940s Rudolf Flesch studied the effects that made a sentence "easy" or "hard" to read. According to Flesch, an 1893 study of literature illuminated the shrinking English sentence: "The average Elizabethan written sentence ran to about 45 words; the Victorian sentence to 29; ours to 20 and less." Flesch used sentence length and syllable count as factors in his readability studies, a calculation once derided by E.B. White. "Writing is an act of faith," wrote White, "not a trick of grammar."

The good writer must believe that a good sentence, short or long, will not be lost on the reader. And although Flesch preached the value of the good 18-word sentence, he praised long sentences written by such masters as Joseph Conrad. So even for old Rudolf, a long sentence, well-crafted, was not a sin against the Flesch.

Workbench

1. With this tool in mind, keep an eye out, in literature and journalism, for well-crafted long sentences. Test these sentences in context, using the criteria above.

2. During revision, most journalists are inclined to take a longish sentence and break it up for clarity. But writers also learn to combine sentences for good effect. Review some examples of your recent work. Try combining shorter sentences and see if the result is a richer variety of sentences structures and lengths.

3. The best long sentences flow from good research or reporting. Review Wolfe's sentences above. Notice the details that come from direct observation and note-taking. The next time you are reporting in the field, look out for scenes or settings that might lend themselves to description in a long sentence.

4. Sentences can be divided into four structural categories: Simple (one clause); Complex (main clause plus dependent clauses); Compound (more than one main clause); Compound-Complex. Here's an important insight: A long sentence does not have to be compound or complex. It can be simple: "A tornado ripped through St. Petersburg Friday, tearing roofs off dozens of houses, shattering glass windows of downtown businesses, uprooting palm trees near bayside parks, and leaving Clyde Howard cowering in his claw-footed bathtub." That 34-word sentence is a simple sentence with one main clause ("A tornado ripped……") Survey the contents of your purse, your wallet, or a favorite junk drawer. Try to write a long simple sentence describing what's inside.

Writing Tool #27: Riffing for Originality

Riff on the creative language of others.

The day after the vice-presidential debate of 2004, I read a clever phrase that contrasted the appearance and styles of the two candidates. Attributed to radio host Don Imus, it described the differences between "Dr. Doom and The Breck Girl." Of course, the tough and dour Dick Cheney was Dr. Doom. And, because of his handsome hair, John Edwards was likened to a pretty girl in a shampoo ad.

By the end of the day, a number of commentators had riffed on this phrase. Riff is a metaphor from jazz to describe a form of improvisation in which one musician borrows and builds on the musical phrase of another. The original Imus phrase morphed into "Shrek vs. Breck," that is, the ogre vs. the hair model.

What followed was a conversation with my clever colleague Scott Libin, who was writing about the language of political analysis. The two of us begin riffing on the popular distinctions between the two candidates. "Cheney is often described as 'avuncular,'" said Scott. The word means "like an uncle." "Last night he looked more carbuncular, than avuncular," I responded, like an angry boil ready to pop.

Like two musicians, Scott and I began to offer variations on our improvisations. Before long, Cheney vs. Edwards became:

Dr. No vs. Mister Glow
Cold Stare vs. Good Hair
Pissed-off vs. Well-coiffed

I first suggested Gravitas vs. Levitas, gravity vs. levity, but Edwards is more toothsome than humorous, so I ventured: Gravitas vs. Dental Floss.

Writers collect apt phrases and colorful metaphors, sometimes for use in their conversation, and sometimes for adaptation into their prose. The danger, of course, is plagiarism, kidnapping the creative work of other writers. No one wants to be known as the Milton Berle of wordsmiths, the stealer of others' best material.

The harmonic way is through the riff. Almost all inventions come out of the associative imagination, that is, the ability to take what is already known and apply it metaphorically to the new. Edison was said to have solved a problem in the flow of electricity by thinking of the flow of water in a Roman aqueduct.

Think of how many words have been adapted from old technologies to describe tools of new media: We file, we browse, we surf, we link, we scroll, just to name a few.

The notion that all new knowledge derives from old wisdom should liberate the writer from fears of piracy or conformity. The apt phrase then becomes not a temptation, the apple in the Garden of Eden, but a tool to compose your way to the next level of invention.

Let me offer an example from my own work. When I moved from New York to Alabama in 1974, I was struck by the generalized American speech patterns of local broadcast journalists. They did not sound like Southerners. In fact, they had been trained to level their regional accents in the interests of comprehensibility. This struck me as more than odd. It seemed like a prejudice against Southern speech, an illness, a form of self-loathing.

As I wrote an essay on this topic, I reached a point when I needed to name it. I remember sitting on a metal chair at a desk I had constructed out of an old wooden door. What name? What name? It was almost like praying. I thought of the word "disease." And I remembered the nickname of a college teacher. We called him "The Disease" because his real name was Dr. Jurgalitis. A litany went through my brain. Jurgalitis. Appendicitis. Bronchitis. I almost fell off my chair: Cronkitis!

The essay, now titled "Infectious Cronkitis," was published on the op-ed page of The New York Times. I received letters from Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, and other well-known broadcast journalists who had lived in the South. I was interviewed by Douglas Kiker for "The Today Show." A couple of years later I met the editor who had accepted the original essay for The Times. He told me he liked the essay, but what sold him was the word "Cronkitis."

"A pun in two languages, no less," he said.

"Two languages?" I wondered.

"Yeah, the word 'krankheit' in German means 'disease.' Back in vaudeville, the comic doctors were called 'Dr. Krankheit.'"

Riffing on language will create wonderful effects you never intended. Which leads me to this writing advice: "Always take credit for good stuff you didn't intend, because you'll be getting plenty of criticism in your career for bad stuff you didn't mean either."

Writing Tool #28: Writing Cinematically

Authors have long understood how to shift their focus to capture both landscape and character.

Turn your notebook into a camera.

Before there was cinema, writers wrote cinematically. Influenced by the visual arts -- by portraits and tapestries -- authors have long understood how to shift their focus back and forth to capture both landscape and character.

Many authors now write books with movies in mind. But cinematic techniques can be traced to the earliest expression of English literature. A thousand years ago, the unnamed poet who wrote the epic "Beowulf" knew how to write cinematically. He could pull back the lens to establish heroic settings of land and sea; and he could move in close to see the jeweled fingers of the queen or the demonic light in a monster's eyes.

In 2004 the Beowulf poet has been replaced by the likes of New York Times reporter C.J. Chivers, who writes a narrative account of the terrorist occupation and bombing of a school in war-torn Belsan, Russia.

> When the first tremendous explosion shook the air, sending a blast wave through the neighborhood around Middle School No. 1, the crowd of women near the southern police barricades buckled over. An old woman's eyes welled instantly with tears. She began to pound her head with her fists. Another woman wailed.
>
> "Nayyyyyyyyyy!" she screamed, and collapsed to her knees.

In two short paragraphs, the writer shows us the event from three distinct camera angles, moving from an almost aerial view of the explosion, to an establishing shot where we see the crowd, to an extreme close-up where we see the tears in the old woman's eyes.

I learned the technique of reporting cinematically from my friend David Finkel, who covered the war in Kosovo in 1999 for the Washington Post. Finkel creates a kind of journalistic cinema in describing refugees so needy that the act of helping them turns into a kind of warfare:

> One of the volunteers picks up a loaf of bread and tosses it blindly. There is no chance it will hit the ground. There are too many people watching its flight, packed too tightly. Out goes another loaf, and another, and hundreds of arms suddenly stretch skyward, fingers extended and waving.

In this paragraph, Finkel begins with a close shot of one worker and then moves the camera back so we can see hundreds of arms. The crowd grows out of control, and Finkel focuses his lens on one woman.

> "For children. For children," a woman is shouting, arms out, trying to reach the cart. She is wearing earrings, a headband and a sweater, and when she can't reach the cart she brings her hands to her head and covers her ears because behind her is her daughter, perhaps 8, holding on to her, getting crushed, screaming.
>
> And behind her is another girl, 10 perhaps, wearing a pink jacket decorated with drawings of cats and stars and flowers and, now mud. She has red hair. There is mud in her hair.

Some simple descriptions of standard camera angles should help writers imagine how to use their "cameras" to create a variety of effects:

1. Aerial view: The writer looks down upon the world, as if he were standing atop a skyscraper or viewing the ground from a blimp: Example: "Hundreds and hundreds of black South African voters stood for hours on long, sandy serpentine lines waiting to cast their ballots for the first time."

2. Establishing shot: The writer stands back to capture the setting in which the action will take place, describing the world that the reader is about to enter, sometimes creating a mood for the story: "Within seconds, as dusty clouds rose over the school grounds, their great widths suggesting blasts of terrifying force, bursts of rifle fire began to sound, quickly building to a sustained and rolling roar."

3. Middle distance: The camera moves closer to the action, close enough to see the key players and their interaction. This is the common distance for most stories written for the newspaper. "Scores of hostages survived, staggering from the school even as intense gunfire sputtered and grenades exploded around them. Many were barely dressed, their faces strained with fear and exhaustion, their bodies bloodied by shrapnel and gunshots."

4. Close-up: The camera gets in the face of the subject, close enough to detect anger, fear, dread, sorrow, irony, the full range of human emotions. "His brow furrowed and the crow's feet deepened as he struggled to understand……The man pulled at the waistband of his beige work pants and scratched his sun-aged face. He stared at her, stalling for time as he tried to understand, but afraid to say he didn't."

5. Extreme close-up: This writer focuses on an important detail that would be invisible from a distance: The pinky ring on the mobster's finger, the date circled on the wall calendar, the can of beer in the cop's hand: "The hand of the cancer-care nurse scooped the dead angel fish out of the office aquarium. Patients at this clinic had enough on their minds. They didn't need another reminder of mortality."

Years ago I attended an outdoor concert in which the punk band, The Ramones, performed in a courtyard adjacent to a Florida retirement hotel. It was quite a scene. Down below were young fans sporting turquoise Mohawk haircuts. Up above, staring out of windows, were blue-haired ladies thinking the world had come to an end. I watched the young writer who had been sent to review the concert stand in one place for two hours with his notebook in his pocket. He should have been exploring the territory like a photographer, seeing the event from down in the mosh pit and then up on the roof-top.

Workbench

1. Read selections of your own recent work, paying special attention to the distance between the writer and the story subjects. Look for your tendencies. Do you move the camera around? Or do you settle for a safe middle distance?

2. Changing camera distance and angle is at the heart of cinematic art. Watch one of your favorite movies with a friend, paying special attention to the camera work. Discuss how you would describe certain scenes if you had to write them in print form.

3. Take a disposable camera with you to your next story assignment. Your goal is not to take publishable photos. It is to keep your eyes opened and your mind attentive. Be sure to take photos from different distances and angles. Review these before your write your story.

4. The next time you write about an event, make a special effort to change the vantage point of your reporting. If possible view the event from close up and far back, from in front of the stage and behind it.

Writing Tool #29: Report for Scenes

The scene is the most basic unit of narrative literature. Scenes put us there, and make us care.

Report for scenes; place them in sequence.

Tom Wolfe argues that realism, in fiction or non-fiction, is built upon "scene-by-scene construction, telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative." This requires, according to Wolfe, "extraordinary feats of reporting," so that writers "actually witness the scenes in other people's lives" as they take place.

That advice was offered more than 40 years ago, but adherence to it still makes eyewitness storytelling seem new.

> Baghdad, Iraq -- On a cold, concrete slab, a mosque caretaker washed the body of 14-year-old Arkan Daif for the last time.
>
> With a cotton swab dipped in water, he ran his hand across Daif's olive corpse, dead for three hours but still glowing with life. He blotted the rose-red shrapnel wounds on the soft skin of Daif's right arm and right ankle with the poise of practice. Then he scrubbed his face scabbed with blood, left by a cavity torn in the back of Daif's skull.
>
> The men in the Imam Ali mosque stood somberly waiting to bury a boy who, in the words of his father, was "like a flower." Haider Kathim, the caretaker, asked: "What's the sins of the children? What have they done?"

This is the work of Anthony Shadid, covering the war in Iraq for the Washington Post, practicing a form of immersion journalism, getting close to the action, capturing scene after bloody scene.

The scene is the basic unit of narrative literature, the capsule of time and space created by the writer and entered by the reader or viewer. What we gain from the scene is not information, but experience. We were there. We are there.

"As the atom is the smallest discrete unit of matter," writes Holly Lisle, "so the scene is the smallest discrete unit in fiction; it is the smallest bit of fiction that contains the essential elements of story. You don't build a story or a book of words and sentences and paragraphs -- you build it of scenes, one piled on top of the next, each changing something that came before, all of them moving the story inexorably and relentlessly forward."

From childhood, we experience scenes everywhere. We get them from literature and news reports, from comic strips and comic books, from movies and television, from advertising and public service announcements, from our memories and dreams. But all these are mimetic, to use an old-fashioned literary term. They are imitations of real life.

The best writers work hard to make scenes real. In one of the great scenes in dramatic literature, Prince Hamlet (III. ii) directs the traveling players on how to create scenes so realistic that they will capture the conscience of the murderous king: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature." Anything exaggerated or "overdone," argues the melancholy Prince, takes away from the purpose of dramatic art, which is "to hold……the mirror up to nature."

The mirror remains a powerful metaphor for the aspiring writer, especially the journalist. The reporter's goal is to re-create life, reflect the world, so that readers can see it, feel it, understand it.

> The wind was so strong it blew the American flag stiff, knocked over rows and rows of folding chairs, and sent the black caps of high school graduates spinning along the ground like tumbleweed. From our seats in the bleachers, we stared west, hoping that another kaleidoscopic Florida sunset would add symbolic luster to this most American rite of passage. But rain clouds roiled behind us.

As I re-read that passage I wrote in 1999 it transports me back in time to the evening of my daughter's high school graduation. I can say with honesty that the scene was really like that. And I believe that if I shared it with the hundreds of

people who were there that night, they would testify on my behalf. "Yessir. That's how it was. You held that mirror up to nature."

But the job of the writer is not merely to capture scenes or compile them. As Tom French demonstrates in his writing and teaching, these scenes, these moments within scenes, must be placed in a sequence.

It may seem obvious that the most common sequence will be chronological. But scenes can be arranged in space as well as in time, from one side of a street to the other. Scenes can be used to balance parallel narrative lines, shifting from the perspective of the criminal to the cop. Scenes can flash back in time, or look ahead.

One of the most arresting stories to come out of the great Florida hurricane season of 2004 was written by Dong-Phuong Nguyen, a colleague of Tom French at the St. Petersburg Times. Set in Pensacola, in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan, the story records the poignant experience of folks returning to their neighborhood to view the destruction for the first time.

It begins from a distance with a simple scene:

> They waited for days in the hot sun behind the patrol cars and sheriff's deputies, straining for any glimpse.

Because of the danger, authorities blocked their return. More elaboration of the scene:

> They brought coolers and portable chairs. They joked about their fine china. They warned each other about using their hands to sift through the rubble because of the snakes.

In another scene they confront the sheriff:

"Why won't you let us in?" they shouted.

Bulldozers clear debris from the neighborhood, and a sequence of scenes reveal the emotional, as well as physical, devastation:

> The residents who had just been joking about what they would find walked along Grand Lagoon Boulevard in silence.
>
> Five houses in, they began to weep.
>
> Women wailed inside cars. Teenagers sat in the beds of pickup trucks with their hands covering their open mouths.

The camera moves closer.

> Carla Godwin quietly walked down Grande Lagoon Court as neighbors lifted roofing from bikes and brushed off ceramic plates. "We don't even having a dining room table anymore," she sobbed. "I don't know where it is. It's gone."

A sequence of tiny scenes follows in this order:

1. A woman finds a television set in her bathroom. It is not hers.
2. The woman walks down the street looking for her neighbors, who cry out to her.
3. Another woman stands in the rubble of her house going through her stuff.
4. "'My cat is alive!' one man came screaming from his house."
5. Another man emerges from his house smiling, strumming his guitar.
6. A distraught woman is comforted by family.
7. A woman finds blistered photos of her babies washed up on a neighbor's patio.
8. A woman takes cell phone calls from other neighbors inquiring about their property.

These are moments of real life, drawn out from the news of the day, and ordered by a skillful young writer into a scenic sequence that gives them meaning and special power.

Workshop

1. The next time you work on a story, pay special attention to the scenes you are witnessing. Describe these scenes in enough detail that you can re-create them for the reader.

2. Dialogue is different from quotations (see Tool # 21: Quotes & Dialogue). As you report for scenes, keep your ears open for dramatic dialogue that can help readers enter the experience.

3. Try an exercise invented by Tom French. With a group of friends or students, view an interesting photograph or artistic portrait (French favors Vermeer). While these images are static, the writer must place details in an order the reader can follow. Write a scene describing each image, and compare your work with others.

4. Sequencing can be learned from careful viewing of film. Take one of your favorite movies and watch it slowly and carefully. Stop the tape often. Notice, perhaps for the first time, how the director lines up the scenes. How is meaning derived from the sequence?

Writing Tool #30: Write Endings to Lock the Box

All writers have a license to end, and there are many ways to do so.

Write endings to lock the box.

From our earliest years as readers, we learn that stories have endings, however formulaic. The prince and princess live happily ever after. The cowboy rides off into the sunset. The witch is dead. The End.

For the journalist, the ending presents a problem. Old, but still reliable, story forms resist the pointed ending. News stories in the inverted pyramid style stack information upside down, from most important to least. In this form, the reader creates the ending by choosing to stop. The busy copy editor cuts from the bottom without fear of deleting something vital.

Many readers and writers prefer other forms of storytelling. Newspapers and magazines are filled with columns, editorials, human-interest stories, narratives, and reviews. The writers who craft these all have a license to end.

When it comes to endings, we face a dividing line. Some journalists think of themselves as reporters, while others aspire to the title of writer. While these labels more often refer to self-image than exercise of craft, the idea of an ending often divides the reporter from the writer. The writer wants to craft an ending. The reporter just wants to stop.

One way to write good endings is to read them, and few works of literature end with power of "The Great Gatsby."

> And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.
>
> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter -- tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning --
>
> So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

F. Scott Fitzgerald plants the seeds for this ending early in the novel, at the end of the first chapter when narrator Nick Carraway sees Gatsby for the first time:

> I decided to call to him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone -- he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward -- and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far way, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.

Powerful lessons are embedded in this passage. Look at the phrase "unquiet darkness." The author shows us that sentences and paragraphs have endings too, even as those endings foreshadow the book's final scene, some 160 pages later, when the green light, the dock, the outstretched arms will return, freighted with thematic significance.

These techniques are not for novelists alone. My colleague Chip Scanlan wrote an op-ed piece for The New York Times in which he argues that journalists should take lessons from citizens when it comes to asking good questions of politicians:

> As Bob Schieffer of CBS News polishes his questions for the final presidential debate tomorrow, he might want to take a page from Daniel Farley. And Randee Jacobs. And Norma-Jean Laurent, Mathew O'Brien, James Varner, Sarah Degenhart, and Linda Grabel.

In that lead paragraph, Chip lists the names of citizens who had asked effective questions in the previous presidential debate. In his final paragraph, Chip closes the circle, replaying the chords he struck in the beginning:

So tomorrow Mr. Schieffer can serve the public interest and teach his fellow reporters an important lesson about truth-gathering. He can model his questions on those asked by a handful of Missourians who understand the toughest questions are those that show the country what a candidate won't -- or can't -- answer.

There are endless ways to begin or end stories, but writers rely on a small toolbox of strategies, just as musicians do. In musical compositions, songs can build to a crescendo, or fade out, or stop short, or echo the opening. In written compositions, the author can choose from among these:

1. Closing the circle. The ending reminds us of the beginning by returning to an important place or re-introducing us to a key character.

2. The tie-back. Keith Woods says he enjoys how humorist Dave Barry ties his ending to some odd or off-beat element in the body of the story.

3. The time frame. The writer creates a tick-tock structure with time advancing relentlessly. To end the story, the writer decides what should happen last.

4. The space frame. The writer is less concerned with time than with place or geography. The hurricane reporter moves us from location to location, revealing the terrible damage from the storm. To end, the writer decides our final destination.

5. The payoff. The longer the story, the more important the payoff. This does not require a "happy ending," but a satisfying one, a reward for a journey concluded, a secret revealed, a mystery solved.

6. The epilogue. The story ends, but life goes on. How many times have you wondered, after the house lights come back on, what happened next to the characters in a movie? Readers come to care about characters in stories. An epilogue helps satisfy their curiosity.

7. Problem and solution. This common structure suggests its own ending. The writer frames the problem at the top and then offers readers possible solutions and resolutions.

8. The apt quote. Often overused, this technique remains a sturdy tool for ending stories. Some characters just speak in endings, capturing in their own words a neat summary or distillation of what has come before. In most cases, the writer can write it better than the source can say it. But not always.

9. Look to the future. Most stories and reports are about things that have already happened. But what do people say will happen next? What is the likely consequence of this decision or those events?

10. Mobilize the reader. The end of a story or report can point the reader in another direction. Attend this meeting. Read that book. Send an e-mail message to the Senator. Donate blood for victims of a disaster.

Your endings will be better if you remember that other parts of your story need endings, too. Sentences have endings. Paragraphs have endings. As in "The Great Gatsby," each of these mini-endings anticipates your finale.

I end with a warning. Avoid endings that go on and on like a Rachmaninoff concerto or a heavy metal ballad. Just as leads can be buried, so can endings. Put your hand over the last paragraph. Ask yourself, "What would happen if my story ended here?" Move it up another paragraph until you find the natural stopping place.

Workbench

1. Review several of your most recent stories. Place your hand over the last paragraph and ask yourself: "What would happen if my story ended here?" Is the natural ending for your story hiding?

2. Begin reading stories, listening to music, and watching movies with endings in mind. Pay close attention to details or themes that are planted early in the work to bear fruit at the end.

3. Some journalists say they report for leads. Fewer say they report for endings. The next time you are out in the field, begin to watch and listen for opportunities to end your story effectively. What happens to your writing process when you begin with an ending in mind?

4. Just for fun, take some of your recent stories and switch the beginnings and the endings. Have you learned anything in the process?

Writing Tool #31: Parallel Lines

Writers shape up their writing by paying attention to parallel structures in their words, phrases, and sentences.

Draw parallel lines. Then cut across them.

Writers shape up their writing by paying attention to parallel structures in their words, phrases, and sentences. "If two or more ideas are parallel," writes Diana Hacker, "they are easier to grasp when expressed in parallel grammatical form. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses."

The effect is most obvious in the spoken words of great orators, such as Martin Luther King:

> So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Notice how Dr. King builds a crescendo from the repetition of words and grammatical structures, in this case a series of prepositional phrases with a noun designating mountains, and an adjective defining majesty.

"Use parallels wherever you can," wrote Sheridan Baker in 1962. Citing passages from Hemingway and Freud, he argued "that equivalent thoughts demand parallel constructions."

Just after reading Baker, I stumbled upon an essay by one of my favorite English authors, G.K. Chesterton, who wrote detective stories and literary essays early in the 20th Century. His more mannered style highlights the parallel structures in sentences and paragraphs:

> With my stick and my knife, my chalks and my brown paper, I went out on to the great downs.

That sentence strides across the page on the legs of two parallel constructions: the fourfold repetition of 'my,' and the pair of pairs connected by 'and.'

> [Old poets] preferred writing about great men to writing about great hills; but they sat on the great hills to write it. They gave out much less about Nature, but they drank in, perhaps, much more.

Notice not only how 'writing about great men' parallels 'writing about great hills,' but also how 'much less' is balanced by 'much more.'

The late Neil Postman once argued that problems of society could not be solved by information alone. He shaped his arguments around a set of parallel propositions:

> If there are people starving in the world -- and there are -- it is not caused by insufficient information. If crime is rampant in the streets, it is not caused by insufficient information. If children are abused and wives are battered, that has nothing to do with insufficient information. If our schools are not working and democratic principles are losing their force, that too has nothing to do with insufficient information. If we are plagued by such problems, it is because something else is missing.

By repeating those "If" clauses -- by ending four consecutive sentences with 'insufficient information,' -- Postman creates a drumbeat of language, a drum-line of persuasion.

Suddenly I began seeing parallels everywhere. Here is a passage from "The Plot Against America," a recent novel by Philip Roth. In one of his trademark long sentences, Roth describes Jewish-American working-class life in the 1940s:

> The men worked fifty, sixty, even seventy or more hours a week; the women worked all the time, with little assistance from labor-saving devices, washing laundry, ironing shirts, mending socks, turning collars, sewing on buttons, mothproofing woolens, polishing furniture, sweeping and washing floors, washing windows, cleaning sinks, tubs, toilets, and stoves, vacuuming rugs, nursing the sick, shopping for food, cooking meals, feeding relatives, tidying closets and drawers, overseeing paint jobs and household repairs, arranging for religious observances, paying bills and keeping the family's books while simultaneously attending to their children's health, clothing, cleanliness, schooling, nutrition, conduct, birthdays, discipline, and morale.

In this dazzling inventory of work, I count 19 parallel phrases, all building upon 'washing laundry.' What makes it sing, though, is the occasional variation from the pattern, such as the phrase 'cleaning sinks, tubs, toilets, and stoves.' The first clause offers a similar example. Roth could have written: "The men worked fifty, sixty, seventy hours a week," a perfectly parallel string of adjectives. Instead, he gives us "even seventy or more." By breaking the pattern, he gives even more emphasis to the final element.

Such intentional violation of parallels also adds power to the conclusion of Dr. King's speech:

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California! [That follows the pattern.]
But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When King points the compass of freedom toward the segregationist South, he alters the pattern. Generalized American topography is replaced by specific locations associated with racial injustice: Stone Mountain and Lookout Mountain. The final variation covers not just mighty mountains but every inch of Mississippi.

All writers will fail, on occasion, to take advantage of parallel structures. The result for the reader can be the equivalent of driving over a pothole on a freeway. It can deliver quite a jolt.

What if the creators of Superman told us that the Man of Steel stood for truth, justice, and doing lots of American things? What if St. Paul taught us that the three great virtues were faith, hope, and committing ourselves to charitable work? What if Abraham Lincoln had written about a government of the people, by the people, and for the entire nation, including the red and blue states? These violations of parallelism should remind us of the sturdy symmetry of the original versions.

Workbench

1. Examine several of your recent stories with parallelism in mind. Look for examples in which you used parallel structures to shape your work. Can you find some potholes -- some unparallel phrases or sentences -- that jar the reader?

2. With this new tool in mind, begin to notice parallel language in novels, in creative nonfiction, in journalism. When you find a passage, underline the parallel structures with a pencil. Discuss the effect of parallelism on the reader. Begin with the passage above from Philip Roth.

3. Just for fun, take parallel slogans or sayings and rewrite the last element. Such as: John, Paul, George, and that drummer who wears the rings.

4. By fiddling with parallel structures, you might discover that an occasional violation of parallelism can lend special emphasis or a humorous imbalance to a sentence.

Writing Tool #32: Let It Flow

A transition from tools to habits

Let it flow.

When my friend Tom French first read my list of writing tools, he offered this appreciation: "Man, you take writing from the sub-atomic to the metaphysical level." At this juncture, with about 20 more tools to go, I'm almost ready to take the big turn from the tools of writing to the habits of good writers. Such habits may not get you a ticket to Metaphysical World. But they should help the writer with the emotional and psychological challenges of the craft. Even if you have a thousand tools on your workbench, writing is a confidence game.

As you stroll around the garden of The Poynter Institute, several inspirational sayings, carved into marble, greet you. One comes from the great sports writer Red Smith: "Writing is easy. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein." That quote reminds me of another from reporter Gene Fowler: "Writing is easy; all you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead." The agony in the garden.

America is not a nation of writers for many reasons. One big reason is The Writer's Struggle. Too many of us talk and act as if writing were a form of procreation without the sex, all labor and pain, all dilation and contraction, with none of the romance and excitement at the point of conception.

For those of you who want to write well, I'm about to reveal a great secret: The Writer's Struggle is over-rated. In fact, the struggle turns out to be not just a confidence game, but a con game, a cognitive distortion, a self-fulfilling prophecy, the best excuse in the world for not writing.

"Why should I get writer's block?" asked veteran newspaper columnist Roger Simon. "My father never got truck driver's block."

Imagine these excuses for procrastination:

- Fire Fighter's Block
- Paramedic's Block
- 7-11 Clerk's Block
- Casino Dealer's Block
- Ditch Digger's Block
- Surgeon's Block
- Postal Worker's Block
- President's Block (OK, this one may be valid.)

I will not deny the periodic utility of The Writer's Struggle, which I learned as a boy. "Son," said mother, "there's a foot of snow on the ground. Go out and help your father shovel."Gee, I'd like to, Mom. But I'm really struggling with this book report."

Let's be honest. We privileged writers are invested in the struggle. We become writers to avoid heavy lifting. Our hernias are mental. But because physical work aversion is considered unmanly, we've created a mythology about our craft. The writer's life is so hard, Hemingway and his ilk taught us, that only drinking, drugs, and infidelity forestall the dissolution that awaits us.

Compare writing to reading. Although good readers may "struggle" with a difficult text, a metaphysical poem by John Donne, few would argue that struggle is the point of reading. The point of reading is fluency. Meaning flows to the good reader. Writing should flow for the good writer, at least as an ideal. One purpose of these writing tools is to help you become a fluent writer.

I come to this discussion as a recovering struggle-holic, having trafficked in the "woe-is-we" business for more than 25 years. I've been quoted as saying, "I don't like writing. I like having written." That sounds more like Dorothy Parker than me, but I've embraced the idea.

As I become a more fluent writer, the more I enjoy the craft and the more productive I become. These days I sound like a Zen master: "The more I write, the more I write." When I look back on my days of struggle, I see a young man trying to tread water while wearing a pair of work boots. I stay afloat much easier in my bare feet.

My path to fluency did not come from someone else's map. Perhaps struggle is the toll we pay to find the path. Looking back, I can remember some trailheads. These guideposts transformed my negative thoughts into useful work, the way Lamaze mothers learn to re-imagine labor pains as muscle contractions.

To become a more fluent writer, try these strategies:

1. Trust your hands. Forget your brain for a while, and let your fingers do the writing. Your hand bones are connected to your brain bones. I had only the most vague sense of what I wanted to say in this chapter until my hands taught me.

2. Adopt a daily routine. Fluent writers prefer mornings. Afternoon and evening writers (or runners) have the whole day to invent excuses not to write (or run). The key is write rather than wait.

3. Build in rewards. Any routine of work (or not-work) can be debilitating, so build in many little rewards: a cup of coffee, a quick walk, your favorite song.

4. Draft sooner. Many writers use reporting and research to fill up the available time. Thorough investigation is key to a journalist's success, but over-reporting makes writing seem tougher. Write earlier in the process so you discover what information you need.

5. Count everything. Don Murray's favorite motto is "Never A Day Without a Line." Not a hundred lines. For the fluent writer, every word counts. Learn to judge your own work by quantity, not quality.

6. Rewrite. The quality comes from revision, rather than from speed writing. Fluent writing gives you the time and opportunity to turn your quick draft into something special.

7. Watch your language. Purge your vocabulary (and your thoughts) of words like "procrastination" and "writer's block" and "delay" and "sucks." Turn your little quirks into something productive. Call it "rehearsal" or "preparation" or "planning."

8. Set the table. When work piles up on my desk, I find it hard to stick to my fluent writing routine. That is when I take a day to throw things away, answer messages, and prepare the altar for the next day of writing.

9. Find a rabbi. We all need one helper who loves us without conditions, someone who praises us for our productivity and effort, and not the quality of the final work. Too much criticism weighs a writer down.

10. Keep a daybook. Story ideas, key phrases, a startling insight, these can be fleeting. A handy companion, like a notebook or daybook, helps you preserve the ingredients for new writing. Although I will return from time to time to hard edged writing tools ("Vary the lengths of those paragraphs!"), the next set of tips are designed to help you develop the habits of a good writer. They will be designed to help you overcome your resistance to writing, making the act of writing

central to the way you see the world. As you add tools to your workbench, you'll begin to see the world as a storehouse of story ideas. As you gain fluency, the act of writing will make you a better student, a better journalist, a better friend, a better citizen, a better parent, a better teacher, a better person.

Finally, remember this quote from poet John Ciardi: "You don't have to suffer to be a poet. Adolescence is enough suffering for anyone."

Writing Tool #33: Rehearsal

Procrastination can be productive.

Turn procrastination into rehearsal.

Almost all writers procrastinate, so there's a good chance that you do too. If you work in a newsroom, surrounded by professional writers and editors, you will see the delay taking many forms. The film reviewer may be checking her e-mail messages for the 10th time. The sports columnist may be watching ESPN. The city hall reporter may be staring into space.

The word 'procrastinate' derives from the Latin word cras, meaning tomorrow. Never write today what you can put off 'til tomorrow. Procrastination is experienced by writers as a vice, not a virtue. During the process of not-writing, we begin to doubt ourselves, sacrificing the creative time when we could be drafting our stories.

But what would happen if we viewed this period of delay, not as something destructive, but as something constructive, even necessary? What if we found a new name for procrastination? What if we called it 'rehearsal'?

Here's what my friend and mentor Donald Murray writes about this act of re-invention:

> When I first became a newspaper writing coach, I found that most of the reporters went out and covered a story, came back to the office, sat down and started to write the story. Sounds logical, doesn't it? But I had been familiar with Donald Graves's research into the writing processes of young children and he discovered that the best writers rehearsed what they were going to write before they began. I found this was also true of the best writers on newspapers. They had been writing the story in their head -- and often in their reporter's notebook -- before they went out on the story, while they were reporting, and all the way back to their desks. They were rehearsing what they might write the way we all rehearse a marriage proposal, a request for a raise, an interview for a new job.

Put simply, authors write stories in their heads. Blind poets and novelists such as Milton and Joyce did this, composing narrative passages through long nights only to be milked by transcribers in the morning. The reporter is no different from the literary artist.

Let's imagine a reporter covering a breaking news story, say a fire at a construction site. This reporter has spent a half-day at the scene, filling a notebook with details. She must now drive a half-hour to the newsroom. There the writer will have one hour before deadline. Adrenalin kicks in. No time to procrastinate.

Thirty minutes in the car are precious. Perhaps the reporter will turn off the radio and begin writing the story in her head. Some reporters can rehearse and remember several paragraphs. More likely, she may begin to imagine the three big parts of the story, or a few key expressions, or perhaps a tentative lead: "High winds whipped a brush fire into an inferno Thursday, destroying most of a three-block condo complex on the outskirts of Ybor City."

Deadlines move most reporters to action. But too many writers wait too long to get their hands moving, until the pressures of deadline become irresistible. The alternative is to reframe the periods of inaction into forms of rehearsal. There is a Zen-like quality to such wisdom: The writer must not write in order to write. To write quickly, Grasshopper, you must write slowly.

Here the dilatory habits of writers come into play. One writer daydreams, another eats, another walks, another listens to music, another paces, another drinks and drinks then urinates, another checks favorite websites (www.poynter.org), another tidies up a desk, another talks, talks, talks. Each act of procrastination can become a time of planning and preparation. The reporter can say with conviction to the skeptical editor: "I am **not** procrastinating, Minion, I am

rehearsing."

More debilitating than procrastination is writer's block, but even this inhibition turns out to have a creative source -- high standards. Listen to poet William Stafford:

> I believe that the so-called "writing block" is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance ... One should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's easy to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing.

No standards. What could be more liberating for the writer? The wisdom of the poet's advice can be seen in the hundreds upon thousands of texts created each day in the form of e-mail messages and weblog entries. Relaxed standards are persuading a generation of online writers that they are members in good standing of what Frank Smith calls the Writing Club.

It would not be hard to make a case that the standards of most bloggers are too low, that these digital innovators would make themselves more readable and persuasive by raising their standards -- but only at the end of the process.

But thereby hangs another tool.

Workbench

1. Many writers use reporting and research as forms of delay. They report for months or years, and then only give themselves hours to write. Here's a tip: Begin writing much earlier than you think you can. Write a summary of the day's reporting. Write a memo to yourself on what you've learned. Write a conditional lead. Let all of this writing teach you what else you need to learn.

2. Have a conversation with a writer who seems to be procrastinating. In a diplomatic and supportive way, ask open-ended questions about the writing: What are you working on? How's it going? It turns out that talking about writing can transform procrastination into rehearsal, maybe even into action.

3. Don Fry divides writers into two types: plodders and plungers. I prefer the words bleeders and speeders. If you are a plodder or a bleeder, it may be worth your time to experiment with some forms of free writing. If you are stuck, try writing for three minutes as fast as you can. The purpose is not to create a draft, but to build a bit of momentum.

4. For one month, keep a daybook. Use it to jot down ideas or capture some phrases. Tell yourself that no sentence in your daybook will appear in your story. This will help you lower your standards. Now write some memos to yourself about your story. This early writing may help you speed up your process.

Writing Tool #34: Cut Big, Then Small

Precise and concise writing comes from disciplined cutting.

Cut big, then small.

After we overcome writer's block, it is easy to fall in love with our words. That is a good feeling, but it can lead to a bad effect.

When we fall in love with all our quotes, characters, anecdotes, metaphors, it seems impossible to kill any of them. But kill we must. In 1914 British author Arthur Quiller Couch wrote it bluntly: "Murder your darlings."

Such ruthlessness is best applied at the end of the process, where creativity can be moderated by cold-hearted judgment. A fierce discipline must make every word count.

"Vigorous writing is concise," wrote William Strunk when E.B. White was still his student. "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that he make every word tell."

But how to do that?

Begin by cutting the big stuff. Donald Murray taught me that "brevity comes from selection, not compression." That requires lifting whole parts from the work. When Maxwell Perkins edited Thomas Wolfe, he often confronted manuscripts that could be measured by the pound. The famous editor once advised the famous author: "It does not seem to me that the book is over-written. Whatever comes out of it must come out block by block and not sentence by sentence." One four-page passage about Wolfe's uncle was reduced to six words: "Henry, the oldest, was now 30."

If your goal is to achieve precision and concision, begin by pruning the big limbs. You can shake out the dead leaves later.

- Cut any passage that does not support the focus of the story.
- Cut the weakest quotations, anecdotes, or scenes to give greater power to the strongest.
- Cut any passage you have written just to avoid prosecutorial editing.
- Don't invite editors to cut. You know the story better. Mark "optional trims." Should they become actual cuts?

If you lack time for revision, shoot for a "draft and a half." That means cutting phrases, words, even syllables. The greatest model for such word editing is William Zinsser. Take a look at pages 10-11 of "On Writing Well." On those pages, Zinsser demonstrates how he cut the clutter from final drafts of his own book. "Although they look like a first draft, they had already been rewritten and retyped ... four or five times. With each rewrite I try to make what I have written tighter, stronger, and more precise, eliminating every element that is not doing useful work."

In his draft, Zinsser writes of the struggling reader: "My sympathies are entirely with him. He's not so dumb. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer of the article has not been careful enough to keep him on the proper path."

That passage seems lean enough, so it's instructive to watch the author slice the fat. In his revision 'entirely' gets the knife. So does 'He's not so dumb.' So does 'of the article.' And so does 'proper.' (I confess that I would keep 'proper path,' just for the alliteration. But 'path' contains the meaning of 'proper.')

The revised passage: "My sympathies are with him. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer has not been careful enough to keep him on the path." Twenty-seven words do more work than the original 36.

Here are some targets for cuts. Look for:

Adverbs that intensify rather than modify: just, certainly, entirely, extremely, completely, exactly.

Prepositional phrases that repeat the obvious: in the story, in the article, in the movie, in the city.

Phrases that grow on verbs: seems to, tends to, should have to, tries to.

Abstract nouns that contain active verbs: consideration becomes considers; judgment becomes judges; observation becomes observes.

Restatements: a sultry, humid afternoon.

A previous draft of this essay you're reading contained 850 words. This version contains 699, a savings of 18 percent. That qualifies me -- with a bullet -- for Chip Scanlan's "Ten Percent Club."

Workshop

Compare and contrast my longer draft with my shorter one. Which revisions make the essay better? Have I cut something you would have retained? State your case for keeping it.

Get a copy of "On Writing Well." Study the cuts Zinsser makes on pages 10-11. See if any patterns emerge. Hint: notice what he does with adverbs.

The next time you watch a DVD version of a movie, pay attention to the deleted scenes. Discuss with friends the director's decisions. Why was a particular scene left "on the cutting room floor"?

Now review three of your published stories. Cut them without pity. Begin with big cuts, then small ones. Count the words you've saved. Calculate the percentage of the whole.

Writing Tool #35: Use Punctuation

Proper punctuation can help a writer control how fast -- or slow -- a reader goes.

Use punctuation to control pace and space.

Some teach punctuation using technical distinctions, such as the difference between 'restrictive' and 'non-restrictive' clauses. Not here. I prefer tools, not rules. My preference shows no disrespect for the rules of punctuation. They help the writer and the reader, as long as we remember that such rules are arbitrary, determined by consensus, convention, and culture.

If you check the end of that last sentence, you will notice that I used a comma before 'and' to end a series. For a quarter century, we at The Poynter Institute have argued about that comma. Fans of Strunk & White (that's me!) put it in. Thrifty journalists take it out.

As an American, I spell the word 'color,' and I place the comma inside the quotation marks. My cheeky English friend spells it 'colour', and she leaves that poor little croissant out in the cold.

Most punctuation is required, but some of it is optional. That leaves the writer with many choices. My modest goal for the next 750 words or so is to highlight those choices, to transform the formal rules of punctuation into useful tools.

'Punctuation' comes from the Latin root 'point.' Those funny dots, lines, and squiggles help writers point the way. To help readers, we punctuate for two reasons:

- To set the pace of reading.
- To divide words, phrases, and ideas into convenient spaces.

You will punctuate with power and purpose when you begin to consider pace and space.

Think of a long, long, well-written sentence with no punctuation except the period. Such a sentence is a long straight road with a stop sign at the end. The period is the stop sign. Now think of a winding road with lots of stop signs. That analogy describes a paragraph with lots of periods, an effect that will slow the pace of the story. The writer may desire such a pace for strategic reasons: to achieve clarity, convey emotion, or create suspense.

If a period is a stop sign, then what kind of traffic flow is created by other marks? The comma is a signal to keep going -- but with caution; the semicolon is a speed bump; the parenthetical expression is a barricade; the colon announces a crossroads; the dash is a tree branch in the road.

A writer once told me that he knew it was time to hand in a story when he had reached this stage: "I would take out all the commas. Then I would put them all back." **The comma** may be the most versatile of marks and the one most closely associated with the writer's voice. A well-placed comma points to where the writer would pause if he were to read the passage aloud. "He may have been a genius, as mutations sometimes are." The author of that line is Kurt Vonnegut. I have heard him speak, and that central comma is his voice.

The semicolon is what we called in driver education a "rolling stop." More muscular than the comma, it is most useful for dividing and organizing big chunks of information. Here Robert Louis Stevenson describes an adventure game in which boys wore cheap tin lanterns -- called bulls-eyes -- under their coats:

> We wore them buckled to the waist upon a cricket belt, and over them, such was the rigour of the game, a

> buttoned top-coat. They smelled noisomely of blistered tin; they never burned aright, though they would always burn our fingers; their use was naught; the pleasure of them merely fanciful; and yet a boy with a bull's-eye under his top-coat asked for nothing more.

The parentheses introduce a play within a play. Like a barricade in the middle of a street, the parenthesis forces the reader to drive around it to regain the original direction. Parenthetical expressions are best kept short and (Pray for us, St. John of Belushi) witty.

My great friend Don Fry has undertaken a quixotic quest to eliminate **the dash**. "Avoid the dash," he insists as often as William Strunk begged his students to "Omit needless words." Don's crusade was inspired by his observation -- with which I agree -- that the dash has become the default mark for writers who never mastered the formal rules -- namely me. But the dash has two brilliant uses. A pair of dashes can set off an idea contained within a sentence. A dash near the end can deliver a punch line.

Edward Bernays uses both kinds of dashes in describing the purposes of propaganda:

> We are proud of our diminishing infant death rate -- and that too is the work of propaganda.
>
> Propaganda does exist on all sides of us, and it does change our mental pictures of the world. Even if this be unduly pessimistic -- and that remains to be proved -- the opinion reflects a tendency that is undoubtedly real.

That leaves **the colon**, and here's what it does: It announces a word, phrase, or clause the way a trumpet flourish in a Shakespeare play sounds the arrival of the royal procession. More from Vonnegut:

> I am often asked to give advice to young writers who wish to be famous and fabulously well-to-do. This is the best I have to offer:
>
> While looking as much like a bloodhound as possible, announce that you are working twelve hours a day on a masterpiece. Warning: All is lost if you crack a smile.

When it comes to punctuation, all writers develop habits that buttress their styles. Mine include wearing out the comma and using more periods than average. I abhor unsightly blemishes so I avoid semicolons and parentheses. I overuse the colon. I prefer the comma to the dash but sometimes use one -- if only to pluck Don Fry's beard.

Workbench

1. Make sure you have a good basic reference to guide you through the rules of punctuation. I favor "A Writer's Reference" by Diana Hacker. For fun, read "Eats, Shoots & Leaves," a humorous if crusty attack by Lynne Truss against faulty punctuation, especially in public texts.

2. Take one of your old stories and re-punctuate it. Add some optional commas, or take some out. Read both versions aloud. See if you can hear a difference.

3. In your next story make conscious decisions on how fast you'd like the reader to move. Perhaps you want readers to zoom across some physical landscape. Or maybe you want them to tiptoe through some technical explanation. Punctuate accordingly.

4. Read the essay above and discuss the uses of punctuation. Feel free to challenge my choices.

5. When you gain confidence, use all your tools to have some fun, not only the punctuation marks described above, but also ellipses, brackets, and capital letters. Here is some inspiration from James McBride describing a preacher in "The Color of Water":

"We……[silence]……know……today……arrhh……um……I said WEEEE……know..THAT [silence] ahhh…… JESUS [church: "Amen!"]……ahhh, CAME DOWN……[Yes! Amen!] I said CAME DOWWWWNNNN! ["Go on!"] He CAME-DOWN-AND —LED-THE —PEOPLE-OF —JERU-SALEM-AMEN!"

Writing Tool #36: Write A Mission Statement for Your Story

Learn how to reach the next level in your writing.

Write a mission statement for your work.

In 1996 the St. Petersburg Times published my series "Three Little Words," the story of a woman whose husband died of AIDS. The series appeared on 29 consecutive days and received unprecedented attention from local readers and journalists everywhere. A month of chapters was a lot to ask of readers. But here was the catch: No chapter was longer than 850 words. You could keep up by reading five minutes a day. Long series, short chapters.

In the words of Donald Murray, good writers turn stories into workshops, intense moments of learning in which they advance their craft. I learned more about reporting and telling stories from "Three Little Words" than from any other writing experience of my life. I'm still learning from it. But I did not learn how much I learned until I stumbled upon a strategy I've turned into a tool.

I wrote a mission statement for my story.

Let's imagine that Mark Twain wrote a mission statement for "Huckleberry Finn": "I want to tell a story through the eyes and in the voice of an 11-year-old boy, Huck Finn. To capture his dialect and his view of the world, I'm going to have to repress my own vocabulary and work through irony. I'm not sure any author has tried anything quite so daring before, if I may be permitted a moment of self-congratulation."

Most writers aspire to some invisible next step -- for a story or a body of work. For some, this aspiration remains unfilled and metastasizes. Writing down your mission turns your vague hopes for a story into language. By writing about your writing, you learn what you want to learn.

I scribbled my mission for "Three Little Words" on two pages of a legal pad. It covers both the content and the form of the story, what I was writing about and how I wanted to write it. It begins: "I want to tell a human story, not just about AIDS, but of the deeply human themes of life, love, death, sorrow, hope, compassion, family, and community." On one page I list seven points, including how I want to frame the life of my main character; how this story on AIDS will differ from others; how I hope readers will react.

On a second page, I turned to issues of story form:

- I want to restore the form of the serial narrative to newspapers —- using the shortest chapters possible.
- I want to reconcile the values of short and long writing.
- I want to give each chapter a stand-alone quality, a cliffhanger ending, a new starting point for readers.

[For a complete version of the mission statement, click here.]

I cannot overstate the value of this exercise, which took only 10 minutes. It gave me a view over the horizon before I began drafting the story. It provided the language I needed to share my hopes with other writers, editors, and readers. It could be tested, expanded, revised -- and it was -- during the drafting process.

Mission statements can bring into focus individual stories or an emerging body of work:

I. "I want to write a city government budget story so clear and interesting that it will attract readers who usually ignore such coverage."

II. "I want to write a story about a World War II veteran who tells great war stories and has lead an amazing life. But I want to render the story in his voice, not mine."

III. "I want to transform the writing of photo captions into an art form."

My "Three Little Words" workshop goes on and on as I hear from readers and journalists years later. From this distance, I see things I would have done differently: reduce the number of chapters by a third; make the reporting and writing methods more transparent; create a straighter narrative line by eliminating one flashback.

By writing that mission statement eight years ago, I not only planted the seeds for my own learning, I created a playing field where many others could tag along.

Workbench

1. Write a short mission statement for your next story. Use it to discuss your aspirations with editors and colleagues.

2. Do the same for the body of your work. Where is the next level for you, that unseen but imagined destination over the horizon?

3. Study some of your old stories, especially ones that worked best. Write a mission statement after the fact, listing what you learned from each.

4. Imagine that famous authors had written mission statements for their masterpieces. What would they look like? If you know the work, write one for "Moby Dick," "Hamlet," "The Catcher in the Rye," "The Color Purple," or "To Kill a Mockingbird."

Writing Tool #37: Long Projects

Breaking a big project into small parts makes it easier to start writing.

Break long projects into parts, long stories into chapters.

Anne Lamott's great book "Bird by Bird" gets its title from an anecdote about her brother. At the age of 10, he struggled with a school report on birds. Lamott describes him as "immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead." But then, "my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'"

We all need such coaching to remind us to break long projects into parts, long stories into chapters, long chapters into episodes. Such advice is both encouraging and practical.

Where writers gather, I often ask this question: "How many of you have ever run a marathon?" In a group of 100, maybe one or two will raise a hand. "If properly trained and motivated, how many of you think you could run 26 miles?" A half-dozen more. "What if I gave you 52 days to do it, so you only had to run a half mile a day?" Most of the hands in the room go up.

Donald Murray puts it this way: "A page a day is a book a year."

When my children were young, I volunteered to teach writing in their elementary school. After each class, I would scribble notes in a journal, never taking more than 10 minutes to complete the task. What had I learned that day? How did the children respond? Why was Bonnie not writing? After three years, I thought I might have a book in me about teaching children to write. I had never written a book before and did not know how to begin, so I transcribed my journal entries. The result was about 250 pages of typed text, not yet a book, but a sturdy foundation for what was to become "Free to Write: A Journalist Teaches Young Writers."

Tiny drops of writing become puddles become rivulets become streams become deep ponds.

It never occurred to me that I could write a serial narrative for a newspaper. The reporting and writing seemed too big. But I knew I could write a newspaper column; in fact, after the research, I could produce one in 90 minutes or less. That became the psychological and architectural strategy for drafting my series "Three Little Words": Each chapter was the length of a newspaper column, about 850 words. I couldn't write a series -- so I thought -- but I could write 29 columns and make them cohere. That's how the work got written in a timely fashion.

The power of this writing habit is overwhelming, like Harry Potter being told for the first time that he is a famous wizard. You are now reading tool #37 in a year-long series, headed for 50. If I had said to my editors, "You know, I'd like to write a book of writing tools," I never would have gotten the work done. At the front end, book projects always seem impossible to get your arms around, like hugging a sumo wrestler. Instead, I pitched the writing tools project as 50 short essays, delivered at the rate of one or two per week.

The same strategy could have produced the book on my nightstand, "The Lord Is My Shepherd" by Harold Kushner, a superb writer and teacher. The foreword begins:

> I have been thinking about the ideas in this book for more than 40 years, since I was first ordained as a rabbi. Every time I would read the Twenty-third Psalm at a funeral or memorial service, or at the bedside of an ailing congregant, I would be struck by its power to comfort the grieving and calm the fearful. The real impetus for this

book came in the wake of the terrible events of September 11, 2001. In the days following the attacks, people on the street and television interviewers would ask me, "Where was God? How could God let this happen?" I found myself responding, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was that, when we had to confront the unfairness of life, we would not have to do it alone for He would be with us." And I realized I had found that answer in the Twenty-third Psalm.

Writers are always looking for the focus of a story, and what a strong focusing idea to write a book about a single 14-line prayer, one that has such powerful meaning within the Judeo-Christian context.

Imagine writing a book about the Lord's Prayer, or the Ave Maria, or one of Shakespeare's sonnets. But how to organize the writing and reading of such a book? Kushner provides an elegant solution: Each chapter is devoted to one line of the Psalm. So there is a chapter called "The Lord Is My Shepherd" and another called "Though I Walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death" and another called "My Cup Runneth Over." A 175-page national bestseller is divided into 15 short chapters, handy units for the writer and the reader.

Bird by bird, tool by tool, line by line.

Workbench

1. Admit it. You want to write something bigger than you've ever written before. But you can't get your arms around the project. The length or breadth of it intimidates you. Cut up the monster. In a daybook or journal break it up into its smallest parts: chapters, sections, episodes, vignettes. Without reference to any notes or research materials write one of these small units. See what happens.

2. Next time you are in the bookstore, take a peek at several big volumes: novels, memoirs, almanacs. Check out the table of contents and figure out the structural units that make up the book. Now check out individual chapters to see how they are subdivided. Begin to notice these small parts in the rest of your reading.

3. The Bible is divided, traditionally, into Books, Chapters, and Verses. Browse through the King James Version and pay special attention to how the books are divided. Notice the difference, for example, between Genesis, Psalms, and the Song of Songs.

4. Before you begin drafting your next story, scribble down on a legal pad what you conceive as the parts of the story. Don't just write down: beginning, middle, and end. Try writing down the smaller parts of those bigger parts.

Writing Tool #38: Polish Your Jewels

In shorter works, don't waste a syllable.

Polish your jewels.

I've seen the Hope Diamond at the Smithsonian. At 45 carats, it is big and blue and buxom, but not beautiful. Smaller gems have more facets and reflect light more brilliantly.

The same can be true of writing. In the ideal, the author of a great big novel should not waste a syllable, but he will, and, chances are, given the setting, the reader will not notice. The shorter the story form, the more precious is each word. So polish your jewels.

Writing with video images and natural sound, Charles Kuralt was the master of making each word -- each pause -- count:

> "I have fallen in love with American names," wrote the poet Stephen Vincent Benet.
>
> Well, really -- how could you not? Not if you've been to Lick Skillet, Texas, and Bug Tussle, and Nip and Tuck, and Cut and Shoot. In California you can travel from Humbug Flat to Lousy Level, with a detour to Gouge Eye.
>
> Could the good people of Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, use some Hot Coffee, Mississippi, to wake them up?
>
> You can go from Matrimony, North Carolina, to Caress, Virginia -- or from Caress to Matrimony.
>
> I have passed time in Monkey's Eyebrow, Kentucky, and Bowlegs and Tombstone, Big Chimney and Bull Town. And I liked Dwarf, Kentucky, though it's just a little town.
>
> "I have fallen in love with American names." How could anybody not?
>
> Robert Louis Stevenson was also struck by the wealth upon our maps. He wrote, "There is not part of the world where nomenclature is so rich, poetical, humorous, and picturesque, as the United States of America." He called our country a "songful, tuneful land."

That's it, the whole essay.

My friend Peter Meinke, a brilliant poet, taught me that short writing forms have three peculiar strengths. Their brevity can give them a focused power; it creates opportunity for wit; and it inspires the writer to polish, to reveal the luster of the language. Kuralt's essay exemplifies all three, capturing the power of the American language with witty examples off the American map, each clever name another facet cut into the diamond.

In his Q & A newspaper column, Jeff Elder wrote this response to a query about the extinction of an American species:

> Passenger pigeons looked like mourning doves, but more colorful, with wine-red breasts, green necks and long blue tail feathers.
>
> In 1800, there were 5 billion in North America. They were in such abundance that the new technology of the Industrial Revolution was enthusiastically employed to kill them. Telegraphs tracked their migration. Enormous roosts were gassed from trees while they slept. They were shipped to market in rail car after rail car after rail car. Farmers bought two dozen birds for a dollar, as hog feed.
>
> In one human generation, America's most populous native bird was wiped out.
>
> There's a stone wall in Wisconsin's Wyalusing State Park. On it is a bronze plaque of a bird. It reads: "This species became extinct through the avarice and thoughtlessness of man."

When I ask readers to appreciate this piece, they point to its many shiny facets. Here are some of the things they notice:

- "The phrase 'rail car after rail car after rail car' actually looks like a rail car."

- "The phrase 'were gassed' carries connotations of a holocaust."
- "The first paragraph is filled with natural imagery; but the second contains the language of destructive technology."
- "Given their extinction, it is fitting that the pigeons looked like 'mourning' doves. The author takes advantage of that coincidence."

In short writing the ending is visible to the reader from the get-go. With his good ending, Elder adds a finish to the polish.

Here is a caption to a photo that appeared in the Atlanta Constitution:

> As a Navy bagpiper played "Amazing Grace" and men and women dabbed at tears, the Atlanta History Center on Thursday dedicated the city's first permanent memorial to metro-area men who died in the Vietnam War.
>
> Erected by the Atlanta Vietnam Veterans business Association, the marker was unveiled as friends and relatives of the fallen, including Janel Harrison (left), watched in silence. It is in a new park on the history center grounds, at the corner of Slaton Drive and West Paces Ferry Road in Buckhead.
>
> Association President Rick Lester read a poem to the fallen that appears on the memorial's bronze plaque. An Army band played martial tunes, a seven-person rifle squad fired a 21-gun salute, and three Army helicopters flew over. Buglers played taps.
>
> Newly laid pine straw and sod gave the memorial the look of a fresh grave.

The author, Bill Hendrick, turns the most conventional of newspaper forms, the photo caption, into a little gem of a story. He transforms what could have been an informational brief into a tiny, shiny narrative, a story of loss and memory, of the sacred and profane.

Workbench

1. Re-read the three short pieces above. Study them for their polished style. Make an inventory of the techniques the writers use to create the effect of the story as a polished jewel.

2. Find the shortest story you have written in the last year. Compare it to the examples above. Try revising it so that every word works.

3. Volunteer to write a photo caption like the one above. Practice on your own, using news or feature photos from newspapers or magazines.

4. Begin a collection of short writing forms. Share these with colleagues. Discuss how they are written. Make a list of techniques you could use in your writing.

Writing Tool #39: The Voice of Verbs

Choose active or passive verbs for their special effects.

Use active verbs -- but don't dismiss the passive.

The gold standard for writing advice is this: "Use active verbs." Those three words have been uttered in countless writing workshops with such conviction that they must be true. But are they?

Check out that last paragraph. In the first clause, I use a form of the verb 'to be,' in this case 'is.' In the next sentence I use the passive voice, 'have been uttered.' In the final sentence, I resort to 'are,' another form of 'to be.' My tricky point is that you can create acceptable prose, from time to time, without active verbs.

I learned the distinction between the active and passive voice as early as fifth grade. I did not learn, until much later, why that distinction mattered. But let me first correct a popular misconception. The 'voice' of verbs (active or passive) has nothing to do with the 'tense' of verbs. Writers will sometimes ask: "Is it ever OK to write in the passive tense?" Tense defines action within time, when the verb happens. Voice defines the relationship between subject and verb, who does what.

- If the subject performs the action of the verb, we call the verb "active."
- If the subject receives the action of the verb, we call the verb "passive."
- A verb that is neither active nor passive is a linking verb, a form of the verb "to be."

All verbs fit into one of those three baskets.

Any of these verb forms can appear in any tense. So an active verb can indicate the past: "Thompson kicked the winning goal." Or the future: "I bet Thompson will kick the winning goal." Or any other tense. So please never confuse voice and tense again.

Why, then, does voice matter? It matters because of the different effects active, passive, and "to be" have on the reader or listener. One of my favorite writers, John Steinbeck, describes this encounter in North Dakota:

> Presently I saw a man leaning on a two-strand barbed-wire fence, the wires fixed not to posts but to crooked tree limbs stuck in the ground. The man wore a dark hat, and jeans and long jacket washed palest blue with lighter places at knees and elbows. His pale eyes [were frosted] with sun glare and his lips scaly as snakeskin. A .22 rifle leaned against the fence beside him, and on the ground lay a little heap of fur and feathers -— rabbits and small birds. I pulled up to speak to him, saw his eyes wash over Rocinante, sweep up the details, and then retire into their sockets. And I found I had nothing to say to him ... so we simply brooded at each other.

I count 13 verbs in that passage, 12 active, and one passive, a ratio Strunk & White would admire. The litany of active verbs heats up the scene, even though not much is happening. The active verbs reveal who is doing what. The author sees the man. The man wears a hat. The author pulls up to talk with him. They brood at each other. Even inanimate objects perform action. The rifle leans against the fence. Dead animals lie on the ground.

Embedded in all that verbal activity is one splendid passive verb. "His pale eyes were frosted with sun glare." Form follows function. The eyes, in real life, received the action of the sun, so the subject receives the action of the verb.

That's a writing tool: Use passive verbs to call attention to the receiver of the action. Remember, from a previous tool, Jeff Elder's short piece on the extinction of the passenger pigeon? He used passive verbs to paint the birds as victims: "Enormous roosts were gassed from trees ...They were shipped to market in rail car after rail car ... In one human generation, America's most populous native bird was wiped out."

The best writers make the craftiest choices between active and passive. A few paragraphs from the one cited above, Steinbeck wrote: "The night was loaded with omens." Steinbeck could have written "Omens loaded the night," but the active voice would have cheated both the night and the omens, the meaning and the music of the sentence.

We would expect strong active verbs in a news story about tsunami relief efforts:

> Rescue planes from throughout the world delivered supplies for millions of survivors around South Asia on

> Wednesday, but disorganization blocked the lifesaving food, water, and medicine from reaching many of those stricken and in need.

But the same Washington Post writer uses the passive when the focus turns to the receivers of action:

> Cartons of food and water were stacked in an airplane hangar in the devastated Aceh region of northern Indonesia after military transports delivered tons of supplies to the provincial capital of Banda Aceh, which was mostly destroyed in the Sunday earthquake and tsunami that hit minutes later.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, uses the distinction between active and passive verbs to challenge an educational system that places the power of teachers over the needs of students. An oppressive educational system, he argues, is one in which:

- the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.

In other words, an oppressive system is one in which the teacher is active and the students are passive.

George Orwell argues that the passive voice can be a tool for political abuse. Rather than say, "The mayor studied this problem and accepts full responsibility for the mistakes he made," we get, "This has been looked into and it must be admitted that mistakes were made." The passive allows the speaker or writer to hide the agent.

A strong active verb can add dimension to the cloudiness created by some uses of the verb 'to be.' Strunk & White provides a nifty example. "There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground" becomes "Dead leaves covered the ground." A five-word sentence outworks one with 12 words.

In graduate school, Don Fry helped me see how my prose wilted under the weight of passive and 'to be' verbs. Sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph began "It is interesting to note that..." or "There are those occasions when...," the kind of pompous indirection bred by the quest for an advanced degree.

But there are sweet uses of "to be," as Diane Ackerman demonstrates in this passage about one difference between men and women:

> The purpose of ritual for men is to learn the rules of power and competition ... The purpose of ritual for women is to learn how to make human connections. They are often more intimate and vulnerable with one another than they are with their men, and taking care of other women teaches them to take care of themselves. In these formal ways, men and women domesticate their emotional lives. But their strategies are different, their biological itineraries are different. His sperm needs to travel, her egg needs to settle down. It's astonishing that they survive happily at all.

'Domesticate' is a strong active verb. So is 'needs' in the sentence about sperm and egg. But, mostly, the author uses the verb 'to be,' what we once called -- promiscuously -- the 'copulative' verb, to forge some daring intellectual connections.

So here's your "tool" of thumb:

- Active verbs move the action and reveal the actors.
- Passive verbs emphasize the receiver, the victim.
- The verb 'to be' links word and ideas.

Workshop

1. In "Politics and the English Language" George Orwell writes "Never use the passive where you can use the active." The word 'never' overstates the case. But give Orwell a chance to make his case. Discuss his argument that the use of the passive contributes to political abuse, to the defense of the indefensible.

2. Take a hard look at the last six stories you have written. Circle all the verbs. Using the categories in this essay, mark each verb as active, passive, or a form of 'to be.' Can you recognize a trend?

3. The next step in this exercise is to transform your passive and 'to be' verbs into the active. Notice when you do this that the emphases in your sentences will change. So will the connections -- the cohesion -- between one sentence and another. What kind of revisions will these changes lead to?

4. From now on, whenever you follow a public scandal, pay attention to the verbs used by the players. Notice especially those uses of passive verbs that leave out the responsible parties.

5. In tool # 37 I wrote this clunker: "That's how the work got written in a timely fashion." Jay Grelen proposed this revision. "That's how I wrote the series in a timely fashion." Discuss the difference.

Writing Tool #40: The Broken Line

Use this tool to combine storytelling with reporting.

Use the broken line to mix narrative and analysis.

Some writing tools work best for straight reports. Others help the writer craft fully realized narratives. But the author will often need tools to do both: construct a world the reader can enter, and then report or comment upon that world. The result is a hybrid, best exemplified by a story form I call "the broken line."

To understand the broken line, think of its opposite, the unbroken line. Most movies are unbroken narrative lines. Frodo takes possession of the ring of power and sets out on a journey to destroy it. James Bond receives an assignment, saves the world, and gets the girl.

On occasion, a director will break the line of the narrative for some other purpose. In the movie "Alfie," the main character stops the action, turns to the camera, and speaks directly to the audience. These surprise soliloquies reveal the nuances of his character and foreshadow the plot complications.

In ancient pornographic movies, the sex would be interrupted by a "doctor" in a white coat, who would supply redeeming social value by commenting on the importance of sex in a healthy married life. Of course, no one would keep watching such a flick without the expectation that the commentary would soon stop and the sex play return.

That is the secret and the power of the broken line. The writer tells us a story then stops the story to tell us about the story. Imagine this story form as a train ride with occasional whistle stops. Something that looks like this:

_____(Report)_____(Analyze)_____(Explain)_____.

A master of this technique is Nicholas Lemann, now dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Lemann writes books about big important topics in American life: the migration of Black Americans from South to North; the tension between merit and privilege in higher education. Wonderful insights and explanations are hung like rubies upon a strong narrative string. A story invites us into a new world. Then the writer explains that world to us.

The pattern begins early in Lemann's book "The Promised Land," when the author introduces us to an African-American family from Clarksdale, Mississippi:

> During that year, 1937, Ruby saw her father for the first time. After World War I, he had moved back to the hills, living here and there. Sometimes he would write letters to Ruby and Ruth in the Delta, or send them dresses. Now that they were grown, they decided to visit him. They traveled by train and bus to the town of Louisville, Mississippi, where they had arranged to meet him in front of a cotton gin. Their first glimpse of each other was a crystal-clear memory for Ruby into old age: "Oh, my children," he cried out, nearly overcome with emotion, and embraced them.

Lemann then pulls the camera back and up from this emotional moment. His next perspective, from high atop the ladder of abstraction, draws upon history, sociology, anthropology, ethnography:

> Americans are imbued with the notion that social systems proceed from ideas, because that is what happened at the founding of our country. The relationship of society and ideas can work the other way around, though: people can create social systems first and then invent ideas that will fulfill their need to feel that the world as it exists makes sense. White people in the Delta responded to their need to believe in the system of economic and political subjugation of blacks as just, fair and inevitable by embracing the idea of black inferiority, and for them the primary evidence of this was lives like Ruby's.

These are startling ideas. They give Lemann's story "altitude," a liftoff from the tarmac of scenes and events to a vantage of meaning from the sky. But too much ozone can leave the reader feeling oxygen deprived. Time to land. (Time to get back to the sex.) And so he does. Over the course of the book, the movement Lemann creates, back and forth, back

and forth, between narrative and analysis is breathtaking.

Many newspapers have miniaturized this movement with a device called "the nut paragraph." Any story that begins without the news requires a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a zone that answers the question "So what?" The Wall Street Journal, over 30 years, has perfected this technique with whimsical front-page features off the news.

Ken Wells begins a story out of New York City:

> Emma Thornton still shows up for work at 5 a.m. each day in her blue slacks, pinstripe shirt and rubber-soled shoes. A letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service, she still dutifully sorts all the mail addressed to "One World Trade Center," and primes it for delivery.
>
> But delivery to where and to whom?

Why is this an important anecdote? The answer requires a little altitude, a movement off the narrative line and up to a higher level of meaning:

> Since Sept. 11, as many as 90,000 pieces of mail a day continue to flood in to the World Trade Center addresses that no longer exist and to thousands of people who aren't alive to receive them. On top of that is another mail surge set off by well-wishers from around the U.S. and the worlds -- thousands of letters addressed to, among other salutations: "The People Hurt," "Any Police Department" and "The Working Dogs" of "Ground Zero, N.Y." Some of this mail contains money, food, even biscuits for the dogs that were used in the early days to help try to sniff out survivors.
>
> The mix of World Trade Center mail and Ground Zero mail represents a calamity for the U.S. Postal Service, which served 616 separate companies in the World Trade Center complex whose offices are now rubble or relocated.

This movement from anecdote to meaning would be nothing more than a cheesy bait and switch without a return to the narrative line, to the world of letter carrier Emma Thornton. The writer delivers: "Her route in the North Tower has been transformed into a 6-by-6 steel cubicle ... surrounded by tall metal racks of pigeonholes."

The broken line is a versatile story form. The reporter can begin with narrative and move to explanation, or begin with straight reporting and then illustrate the facts with an anecdote. In either case, the easy swing, back and forth, can feel like clockwork.

Workshop

1. Read the work of Nicholas Lemann for examples of the broken line. Analyze his movement from narrative to analysis in books such as "The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America" or "The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy."

2. Review some of your own recent work. Try to find a story that might work better if you had used the structure of the broken line.

3. Read the collection of Wall Street Journal features titled "Floating Off the Page." Search it for interesting examples of the "nut paragraph," and the general movement between reporting and narrative.

4. As you review your own work, look for examples where you used the nut paragraph to reveal the higher meaning of the story. Pay special attention to what comes after the nut graph. Do you move back to narrative, or are you practicing "bait and switch" on the reader?

Writing Tool #41: X-Ray Reading

Reading others' work can help make you a better writer.

Read for both form and content.

By the third grade, I knew I was a good reader. My teacher, Miss Kelly, told me so. She was impressed, she said, that I could recognize the word 'gigantic' in a story about Davy Crockett, who killed 'a gigantic bear.' Why, then, did it take me 20 more years to imagine that I was a writer?

Perhaps it's because we teach and learn reading as a democratic craft -- necessary for education, vocation and citizenship -- but writing as a fine art. Everyone should read, we say, but we act as if only those with special talent should write.

One thing we know for sure. Writers read for both form and content. If you put together a puzzle, you benefit from the image on the box. If you try a new recipe, it helps to see a picture of the finished dish. If you are a carpenter, you need to know the difference between a bookcase and a credenza. The writer must answer this question: What am I trying to build? And then this one: What tools do I need to build it?

In literature, the word that describes the form of a story is 'genre.' In the words of reading scholar Frank Smith, the reader learns not only the grammar of language but also the grammar of stories. Children perceive story forms from an early age. If they hear the words "once upon a time," they predict a fairy tale.

Whenever I try to take a big step in my writing, I begin by reading. Of course, I read for content. If I'm writing about anti-Semitism, I read Holocaust memoirs. If I'm writing about AIDS, I read biomedical texts and social histories of the disease. If I'm writing about World War II, I read magazines from the 1940s. So, by all means, read for content.

But also read for form. If you want to write better photo captions, read old issues of LIFE magazine. If you want to become a better explainer, read a great cookbook. If you want to write clever headlines, read the big city tabloids. If you want to write witty short features, read Talk of the Town in The New Yorker magazine.

When it occurred to me that I wanted to write a long serial narrative in short chapters, I began searching for models. I read some Dickens, whose work was serialized. I read "Winesburg, Ohio," a series of connected short stories by Sherwood Anderson. I read "The Story of A Shipwrecked Sailor," a serialized newspaper story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In all these cases, the chapters were too long. Ironically, I found my pattern in the adventure stories of my youth. The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries had chapters I could read in about five minutes or less, with a mini-cliffhanger at the end. That structure became the blueprint for my "Three Little Words."

My friend Tom French may be the best reader among the reporters I know. The power of his nonfiction serial narratives derives in part from his expansive reading, from the Tarzan adventures of his childhood to the 20 volumes of British sea tales written by Patrick O'Brian. Tom says he has always been alert to those parts of a story that made him want to keep reading. What causes the effect, he wonders, of not being able to put the story down? When he hits such a spot he marks it, returns to it, and reflects upon the techniques used by the writer.

I call such an act "X-ray reading." One way writers learn from stories is to use their X-ray vision. (After all, Superman was also a newspaper reporter.) X-ray reading helps you see through the text of the story. Beneath the surface grinds the invisible machinery of grammar, language, syntax and rhetoric, the gears of making meaning, the hardware of the trade.

Here are some reading tricks offered by good writers:

Read to listen to the voice of the writer.

Read the newspaper in search of under-developed story ideas.

Read online to experience a variety of new storytelling forms.

Read entire books when they are compelling; but also taste lots of little parts of books.

In choosing what to read, depend more upon your compass than upon the advice of others.

Sample -- for free -- a wide selection of current magazines and journals in bookstores that serve coffee.

Read on topics outside your discipline, such as architecture, astronomy, economics or photography.

I temper my enthusiasm for reading with this caution: There will be times in the middle of a writing project when you may want to stop reading. While describing these tools, I stopped reading books about writing. I did not want my fascination with the topic to seduce me from my writing time. I did not want to be unduly influenced by the ideas of others. Nor did I wish to be discouraged by the brilliance of finished, published work.

Finally, read with a pen nearby. Write in the margins. Talk back to the author. Mark up interesting passages. Ask questions of the text. Scholars, such as Louise Rosenblatt, argue that reading is a méénage àà trois among author, text and reader. The author may create the text, but the reader turns it into a story.

So the reader is a writer after all. Voilàà!

Workbench

1. Go to Borders or Barnes & Noble and immerse yourself in the magazine section. Drink as much coffee as you need. Look for publications that stretch your interest and challenge your standards.

2. Find an author to admire. Read several works by this writer with a pen in your hand. Mark up passages that work in special ways. Show these to a friend and try to X-ray read them together. What writing tools did you find?

3. Try a trick taught to me by Chip Scanlan. Read an interesting passage aloud. Then put it away and write freely on any topic of your choosing. Explore the kind of influence that flows from this experiment.

4. A sad little secret of the journalism world is that some reporters don't even read their own newspaper. Take the opposite approach. For a week read the paper voraciously, including the classified ads. Make a list of all the story ideas you discover.

5. If you are an editor, use a shared reading experience to inspire your writers. Swap stories you like and X-ray read them. Why do they work?

Writing Tool #42: Paragraphs

Go short or long, depending upon your purpose

Vary the length of paragraphs.

In a book review, critic David Lipsky tears into an author for including, in a book of 207 pages, "more than 400 single-sentence paragraphs -- a well-established distress signal, recognized by book readers and term-paper graders alike."

But a distress signal for what? The answer is most likely: confusion. The big parts of a story should fit together, but the small parts need some stick as well. When the big parts fit, we call that good feeling "coherence"; when sentences connect, we call it "cohesion."

"The paragraph is essentially a unit of thought, not of length," argues British grammarian H.W. Fowler. That implies that all sentences in a paragraph should be about the same thing and move in a sequence. It also means that writers can break up long, long paragraphs into parts. They should not, however, create confusion by pasting together paragraphs that are short and disconnected.

Is there, then, an ideal length for a paragraph?

Let's look at an example. Sports reporter Joanne Korth wrote this summary lead about a dramatic football game decided in overtime:

> The rookie quarterback played like a rookie. The beloved running back fumbled the ball away. And the top-seeded Steelers nearly suffered another gut-wrenching home playoff loss.
>
> Nearly.

So can a single word be a paragraph? An adverb, no less?

I found the answers in "Modern English Usage," the irreplaceable dictionary compiled by Fowler in 1926. With typical common sense he begins by telling us what the paragraph is for:

> The purpose of paragraphing is to give the reader a rest. The writer is saying to him: 'Have you got that? If so, I'll go on to the next point.'

But how much rest does a reader need? Does it depend upon subject matter? Genre or medium? The voice of the author? "There can be no general rule about the most suitable length for a paragraph," writes Fowler, "A succession of very short ones is as irritating as very long ones are wearisome."

In a long paragraph, the writer can develop an argument or build part of a narrative using lots of related examples. In "Ex Libris" by Anne Fadiman, the typical paragraph is more than a hundred words long, with some longer than a full book page. Such length gives Fadiman the space to develop interesting, quirky ideas:

> When I read about food, sometimes a single word is enough to detonate a chain reaction of associative memories. I am like the shoe fetishist who, in order to become aroused, no longer needs to see the object of his desire; merely glimpsing the phrase "spectator pump, size 6 1/2" is sufficient. Whenever I encounter the French word plein, which means "full," I am instantly transported back to age 15, when, after eating a very large portion of poulet àà l'estragon, I told my Parisian hosts that I was "pleine," an adjective that I later learned is reserved for pregnant women and cows in need of milking. The word ptarmigan catapults me back 10 years to an expedition I accompanied to the Canadian Arctic, during which a polar-bear biologist, tired of canned beans, shot a half dozen ptarmigans. We plucked them, fried them, and gnawed the bones with such ravening carnivorism that I knew on the spot I could never, ever become a vegetarian. Sometimes just the contiguous letters pt are enough to call up in me a nostalgic rush of guilt and greed. I may thus be the only person in the world who salivates when she reads the words "ptomaine poisoning."

The writer can use the short paragraph, especially after a long one, to bring the reader to a sudden, dramatic stop. Consider this passage from Jim Dwyer, in which a group of men struggle to escape from a stalled elevator in the World Trade Center, using only a window-washer's squeegee as a tool.

They did not know their lives would depend on a simple tool.

After 10 minutes, a live voice delivered a blunt message over the intercom. There had been an explosion. Then the intercom went silent. Smoke seeped into the elevator cabin. One man cursed skyscrapers. Mr. Phoenix, the tallest, a Port Authority engineer, poked for a ceiling hatch. Others pried apart the car doors, propping them open with the long wooden handle of Mr. Demczur's squeegee.

There was no exit.

This technique -- a four-word paragraph after one of 64-words -- can be abused with overuse. To surprise, it packs a strong punch. Here's another example from David Brooks in The New York Times:

Malcolm Gladwell has written a book about the power of first impressions, and every review, including this one, is going to begin with the reviewer's first impression of the book.

Mine was: Boffo.

Writers and editors adjust paragraph length to conform to column width. Book authors write longer paragraphs without having to give the reader a rest. But a book paragraph cemented into a newspaper column creates a tombstone of gray type. On the flipside, a series of telegraphic newspaper paragraphs, transplanted into a book, seems snowed in by white space.

"Paragraphing is also a matter of the eye," writes Fowler. "A reader will address himself more readily to his task if he sees from the start that he will have breathing-spaces from time to time than if what is before him looks like a marathon course."

Workbench

1. Read the paragraph above by Anne Fadiman, which contains 202 words. Could you, if necessary, divide it into two or three paragraphs? Discuss your choices with a friend.

2. Check some examples of your recent work. Look for strings of long paragraphs or short ones. Can you take some of the long paragraphs and break them into smaller units? Are the one-sentence paragraphs related enough so they can be joined?

3. In your reading of journalism and literature, pay attention to paragraph length. Look for paragraphs that are either very long or very short. Imagine the author's purpose in each case.

4. In your reading, pay attention to the ventilating effects of white space, especially surrounding the ends of paragraphs. Does the writer use that location as a point of emphasis?

Writing Tool #43: Self-criticism

Go from nice and easy to rough and tough.

Limit self-criticism at the beginning. Turn it loose during revision.

As I peruse my collection of books on writing, I find they fall into two broad categories. In one box, I find books written mostly by men, works such as "The Elements of Style" and "On Writing Well." These classics by Strunk & White and William Zinsser capture writing as a craft, so they concern themselves with toolboxes and blueprints. In the other box, I find books written more often by women, such as "Bird by Bird" and "Wild Mind." In these works by Anne Lamott and Natalie Goldberg, I'm less likely to find advice on technique than on living a life of language, of seeing a world of stories.

The standards for these great books by women go back at least to the 1930s when Dorothea Brande wrote "Becoming a Writer" (1934) and Brenda Ueland wrote "If You Want to Write" (1938). It is a blessing that both books remain in print, inviting a new generation into the community of writers.

Brande expresses her preference for coffee, a medium-soft lead pencil, and a noiseless portable typewriter. She offers advice on what writers should read and when they should write. Her concerns include meditation, imitation, practice, and recreation. But she is most powerful on the topic of self-criticism. To become a fluent writer, she argues, one must silence the critic early in the process. The critic becomes useful only when enough work has been done to warrant evaluation and revision. Influenced by Freud, she argues that, during the early stages of creation, the writer should write freely, "harnessing the unconscious":

> Up to this point it is best to resist the temptation to reread your productions. While you are training yourself into facility in writing and teaching yourself to start writing whenever and wherever opportunity offers, the less you turn a critical eye upon your own material the better -- even for a cursory survey. The excellence or triteness of your writing was not the matter under consideration. But now, turning back to see what it may reveal under a dispassionate survey, you may find those outpourings very enlightening.

Four decades later, another woman writer, Gail Godwin, would cover the same territory in an essay titled "The Watcher at the Gate" (1974). For Godwin, the watcher stands for the "restraining critic who lived inside me," and who appeared in many forms to lock the doors of her creativity.

> It is amazing the lengths a Watcher will go to keep you from pursing the flow of your imagination. Watchers are notorious pencil sharpeners, ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers and abhorrers of messy rooms or messy pages. They are compulsive looker-uppers. They cultivate self-important eccentricities they think are suitable for "writers." And they'd rather die (and kill your inspiration with them) than risk making a fool of themselves.

Like Brande, Godwin draws her central images from Freud, who quotes Schiller: "In the case of a creative mind……the intellect has withdrawn its watchers from the gates, and the ideas rush in……and only then does it review and inspect the multitude." Schiller chides a friend: "You reject too soon and discriminate too severely."

Brenda Ueland fights the battle against internal and external criticism with the passion of a warrior princess and the zeal of a suffragette. She titles one of her chapters: "Why Women who do too much housework should neglect it for their writing." Her first chapter argues, "Everybody is talented, original and has something important to say."

She notes that "all people who try to write……become anxious, timid, contracted, become perfectionists, so terribly afraid that they may put something down that is not as good as Shakespeare." That is one loud critical voice, one gargantuan watcher.

> And so no wonder you don't write and put it off month after month, decade after decade. For when you write, if it

is to be any good at all, you must feel free, -- free and not anxious. The only good teachers for you are those friends who love you, who think you are interesting, or very important, or wonderfully funny; whose attitude is:

"Tell me more. Tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you. Let more come out."

And if you have no such friend, -- and you want to write, -- well then you must imagine one.

For Godwin, weapons against the watcher include such things as deadlines, writing fast, writing at odd times, writing when you're tired, writing on cheap paper, writing in surprising forms from which no one expects excellence.

So far, I have emphasized only one side of the equation: the value of silencing the voice of the internal critic early in the process. You have a right to ask: "But when the voice speaks out during revision, what should I hope she says to me?" She will be a more useful critic, I say immodestly, after exposure to this set of tools. With exposure, the voice might say: "Do you need that adverb?" Or "Is this the place for a gold coin?" Or "Isn't it time for you to climb down the ladder of abstraction and offer a good example?"

So I end with an important lesson: That the self-conscious application of all this writing advice will paralyze you if you try to apply it too early, or if you misapply it as orthodoxy. Dorothea Brande, Brenda Ueland, Gail Godwin -- these women have the right idea. There's enough hard critical work to do, and enough criticism to face. So begin with a gift to yourself, maybe that first cup of coffee.

Workbench

1. Be more conscious now of those moments when the critical voice starts shouting in your ear. What is the voice saying? Make a list of the negative things the voice is likely to say about you. Now burn the list and flush it down the toilet.

2. Have at least one person in your circle of helpers who praises you without reservation, who is willing to tell you what works in your story, even when you know that so much work remains to be done. Can you play this role in the life of another writer?

3. Be aware of the moment in the story process when you are ready to call the critical voice on stage. Make a list of the kinds of questions you'd like the voice to ask you. Consult these writing tools to form the list.

4. Godwin writes that she fools the watcher by disguising the form of the writing. So if she is working on a draft of a short story, she may disguise it in the form of a letter. The next time you struggle with a story, put a salutation at the top ("Dear Friend") and write a message to your friend about the story. See what happens.

Writing Tool #44: Save String

Save information -- it could be used for a big project later.

To gather raw material for big projects, save scraps others would throw away.

When writers tell me stories about working on big projects, they often use one of two metaphors to describe their method. The first is composting. To grow a good garden you need to fertilize the soil. So some gardeners build a compost heap in their yards, mounds of organic material containing scraps, like banana peels, that others would throw away.

The second is saving string. Bits of twine get rolled into tiny balls that grow into bigger balls that grow, in extreme cases, into balls of civic pride. A man named Francis Johnson created a ball of twine that weighed more than 17,000 pounds, was twelve feet in diameter, and became the main roadside attraction for the town of Darwin, Minnesota.

Johnson should become patron saint of those who save little bits of stories, hoping that one day they will grow into something publishable. Here's how it works for me: I will be struck by a theme or issue in politics or culture. Right now, for example, I am fascinated by the plight of boys. As the father of three daughters, I've watched many young women succeed in education and flourish in careers, while young men seem to lag behind. I lack the time or knowledge to write about this topic now, but maybe I will someday. The chances will become greater if I begin to save string.

To save string, I need a simple file box. I prefer the plastic ones that look like milk crates. I display the box in my office and put a label on it, say: "The Plight of Boys." As soon as I declare my interest in an important topic, a number of things begin to happen. First, I notice more things about my topic. Then I have more conversations about it with friends and colleagues. They start to feed my interest. One by one, my box fills with items: an analysis of graduation rates of boys versus girls; a feature on whether video games hurt or help the development of boys; a story about decreasing participation by boys in high school sports. This is a big topic, so I take my time. Weeks and weeks pass, sometimes months and months, and one day I'll look over at my box and hear it whisper. "It's time." I'm amazed at how full the box is, and even more astonished about how much I've learned just by saving string.

This process of story growth may appear long and unproductive. Too much waiting around. The trick is to grow several crops in your garden at the same time. You can fertilize one crop, even as you harvest another. So in my office, I have several boxes with labels on them:

I have an AIDS box, which culminated in the publication of the series "Three Little Words."

I have a millennium box, which culminated in publication of a serialized newspaper novel "Ain't Done Yet."

I have a Holocaust and anti-Semitism box, which culminated in the series "Sadie's Ring." It is now a book manuscript, rejected by 25 publishers, but still looking for its place in the world.

I have a box titled "Civil Rights," which culminated in an anthology of newspaper columns from the 1960s on racial justice in the South.

I have a box titled "Formative Reading," bursting with materials on critical literacy, which I thought would become a book. It has produced several articles.

I have a box called "World War II," which produced two newspaper features, one of which might become a small book some day.

I once learned an important lesson from James W. Carey, one of the great scholars of journalism and culture. Some scholars, he said, build their careers by attaching themselves to topics of narrower and narrower interest. Carey encourages young writers and scholars to attach themselves to big topics: Religion in America, World Population, News and Democracy.

Take another look at my boxes and inventory the topics: AIDS, the Holocaust, racial justice, the millennium, World War II, literacy. These are topics of inexhaustible interest, capable of generating a lifetime of reporting, storytelling, and analysis. Each one, in fact, is so huge, so imposing, it threatens to overpower the writer's energy and imagination. Which is the reason to save string. Item by item, anecdote by anecdote, statistic by statistic, your boxes of curiosity fill up without effort, creating a literary life-cycle: planting, cultivation, and harvesting.

Here's the real value of saving string. Right now, buried in routine, you feel you lack the time and energy to undertake enterprising work. Maybe you cover the education beat for a small newspaper. Perhaps you have to produce a story, or more, every day. Let's say that you, too, are interested in the academic backsliding of boys. If you are too embarrassed to create a box, start an electronic or paper file. As you do your routine work, talk about the "plight of boys." Harvest opinions and anecdotes from parents, teachers, and editors. Scribble them down, one by one, fragment by fragment, until one day you'll look up and see a monument of persistence, ready to be mounted in the town square.

Workbench

1. Review your writing for the last couple of years. Make a list of your big categories of interest and curiosity. Which of those topics do you want to save string on?

2. What other big topics interest you that are not reflected in your current writing? Which one fascinates you the most? Create a box or a file and put a label on it.

3. If you are covering a regular beat, what topics have you been unable to get to? Create a file for one of these and begin

talking about it with your sources.

4. Do a Google search on one of your new topics. Spend a little time exploring. Add to your file some items from blogs or Web sites that connect with your new interest.

Writing Tool #45: Foreshadow

Plant important clues early in the story.

Foreshadow climactic events.

Not long ago, I saw two movies that reminded me of the power of foreshadowing. In each case, clues planted early in the narrative offered what a dictionary definition would describe as "vague advance indications" of important future events.

"The Bird Cage" opens inside a cabaret in Miami. On the stage, a chorus line of female impersonators dances and lip synchs to the disco hit "We Are Family," performed by Sister Sledge. Two hours later, in the story's climactic scene, a conservative United States Senator (played by Gene Hackman) escapes from the club and avoids media scrutiny by dressing in drag, donning a blonde wig, and dancing off the stage to the same song.

In "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban," several terrible events are reversed at the end when Hermione reveals to Harry her ability to travel back in time by means of a charm she wears around her neck, a time turner. On first viewing, the plot twist comes as a surprise. Upon watching the film a second time, I noticed how often the director makes reference to time, especially in visual images of huge pendulums and giant clockworks.

For novels and movies, it may require several readings or viewings to fully appreciate the associations pre-figured by foreshadowing. The technique becomes more transparent in works of shorter length. Consider this narrative poem, "Uncle Jim," by Peter Meinke:

What the children remember about Uncle Jim

is that on the train to Reno to get divorced

so he could marry again

he met another woman and woke up in California.

It took him seven years to untangle that dream

but a man who could sing like Uncle Jim

was bound to get in scrapes now and then:

he expected it and we expected it.

Mother said, It's because he was the middle child,

And Father said, Yeah, where there's trouble

Jim's in the middle.

When he lost his voice he lost all of it

To the surgeon's knife and refused the voice box

They wanted to insert. In fact he refused

Almost everything. Look, they said,

It's up to you. How many years

Do you want to live? And Uncle Jim

Held up one finger.

The middle one.

This is a poem with a punch line, set up by the foreshadowing in the middle stanza. Jim's the middle child, always in the middle of trouble, so why not flash that middle finger at the end?

Foreshadowing in film? Yes. In narrative poetry? Yes. In journalism? Let's see.

In 1980 a huge oil tanker collided with a tall bridge near my hometown, destroying more than 1,000 feet of the span, sending a bus and several cars to the bottom of Tampa Bay, killing more than 30 people. The great Gene Miller of the Miami Herald was in town on another assignment and managed to find the driver of a car that skidded to a stop only 24 inches from the jagged edge. Here is his memorable lead, a sidebar to the main story:

Richard Hornbuckle, auto dealer, golfer, Baptist, came within two feet Friday of driving his yellow Buick Skylark off the Sunshine Skyway Bridge into Tampa Bay.

That simple sentence takes only 25 words, but each one advances the story. First, Miller takes advantage of the protagonist's unusual name -- Hornbuckle -- with its auto-imagery. This will turn out to be the story of an auto dealer driving a used car with good brakes. And Miller, a master of detail, gets good mileage out of 'yellow Buick Skylark.' 'Yellow' goes with 'Sunshine,' and 'Skylark' goes with 'Skyway.' He's playing with words.

But the real fun comes with those three nouns in apposition to the subject, for each one foreshadows a thread of narrative down in the story. 'Auto-dealer' sets up a description of Horbuckle's work schedule and how he came to be at that spot on that day. 'Golfer' prepares us for the crazy moment when-- during his escape from the vehicle -- Hornbuckle turns back to retrieve his golf clubs from the trunk. (That man really loves his golf.) And 'Baptist' makes way for a wry quote in which the reluctant believer turned survivor swears that he'll be in church the next morning. Auto dealer. Golfer. Baptist.

In dramatic literature, this technique is sometimes referred to as Chekov's Gun. In a letter he penned in 1889, Russian playwright Anton Chekov wrote: "One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it."

Workbench:

1. Do you ever violate the principle of Chekov's Gun? Do you place elements high in your story that never come into play again?

2. Until now, you may not have noticed the technique of foreshadowing in movies, fiction and dramatic literature. Now that you have a name for it, begin to look more carefully for examples.

3. Foreshadowing can work not only in narrative forms, but in persuasive writing. A good column or essay usually has a point, which is often revealed at the end. What details can you place up high to foreshadow your conclusion?

4. In journalism, literary effects must be reported, not invented. On your next reporting assignment, see if you can begin to recognize potential endings while you are in the field. That way, you may also be able to gather details that help foreshadow your ending.

Tool #46: Storytellers, Start Your Engines

Good questions drive good stories.

Good stories need an engine, a question the story answers for the reader.

Who done it? Guilty or not guilty? Who will win the race? Which man will she marry? Will the hero escape, or die trying? Good questions drive good stories.

This narrative strategy is so powerful it needs a name, and Tom French has given it one. He calls it "the engine" of the story. French defines the engine as the question the story answers for the reader. Most newspaper reports lack an engine because they reveal the answer before the reader knows there is a question.

In my newspaper today, a reporter writes a story about a man hired as a greeter at a new Wal-Mart. It is an amiable local story:

> Charles Burns has been waiting for weeks to say three words:
>
> "Welcome to Wal-Mart!"
>
> When the doors open this morning at St. Petersburg's first Wal-Mart Supercenter, Burns' face will be one of the first that shoppers see.
>
> He is the greeter.

But because the story is written the day before the opening, we never get to see Charles Burns in action. He never greets anybody. As a result, there is no engine, not even a simple: "How did his first day of greeting go?" or "What was the response from the first customer?" or "How did the experience match the expectation?"

In the same edition, there is a much more serious international story about tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka:

> In the pediatric ward of the town hospital here, Sri Lanka's most celebrated tsunami orphan dozes, drools and, when he is in a foul mood, wails at the many visitors who crowd around his crib.

His identity is unknown. His age, according to hospital staff, is between four and five months. He is simply and famous known as Baby No. 81, the 81st admission to the ward this year.

Baby No. 81's awful burden is not in being unwanted, but in being wanted too much.

So far, nine couples have claimed him as their own son. Some among them have threatened suicide if the baby is not delivered into their arms. Countless other parents who lost their babies to the tsunami have also rushed in to see if Baby No. 81 is theirs. The national newspapers have carried almost daily narratives about his fate. The hospital has been so mobbed that for a while, the staff hid the baby in the operating theater every night for his own protection.

This story, which first appeared in The New York Times, has a supercharged engine. If you are like me, the engine took the form of questions such as these: What will happen to Baby No. 81? Will we ever learn his true name and real identity? Who will wind up with Baby 81, and why? How will they determine the true parents?

To its credit the story raises questions of its own, not just on what might happen next, but on the story's higher meaning:

Could it possibly be that nine couples honestly believe Baby No. 81 to be their flesh and blood? Could it be that childless parents are looking for a boon amid the disaster? Could it be that a photogenic baby boy has inspired a craving that a girl would not have? All these theories circulate on the streets of Kalmunai.

Tom French believes that a story, especially one with sub-plots, can have more than one engine. This certainly works in film narratives. In the movie "The Full Monty," a group of unemployed factory workers tries to make money by becoming male strippers. The engine is something like "will these odd-shaped men go all the way -- and how will their women react to them?" But here's what makes the story more special: Each man has something powerful at stake and is motivated by his own particular engine. Will the overweight guy restore the spark to his marriage? Will the skinny guy lose custody of his son? Will the old guy find a way to pay his debts?

When Jan Winburn was an editor at The Baltimore Sun, she helped her writers create a cast of characters for their stories by asking the question "Who has something at stake here?" The answer to that question can lead to the creation of a story engine: "Will the loser of the contest still get her wish?"

I think of Tom French's "story engine" as a distant cousin of what Lajos Egri calls the "premise"of a story. "Everything has a purpose, or premise," he writes. "Every second of our life has its own premise, whether or not we are conscious of it at the time. The premise may be as simple as breathing or as complex as a vital emotional decision, but it is always there."

Every play must have a premise, argues Egri. For "Romeo and Juliet" it is "Great love defies even death." For "Macbeth" it is "Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction." For "Othello" it is "Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love."

The premise, as described by Egri, takes the question of Tom's engine and turns it into a thematic statement. It can easily be converted back: "Will Othello's jealousy destroy him and the woman he loves?"

Tom French makes a distinction between the engine of the story and the theme:

To me, the engine is this raw visceral power that drives the story and keeps the reader engaged. How the writer uses that engine -- the ideas that we explore along the way, and the deeper themes we're hoping to illuminate -- is a matter of choice. A good example: "Citizen Kane." Its opening scene sets up one of the most famous story engines of all time, what is Rosebud? Yet the movie isn't about the sled, or even particularly about Kane's childhood. Still, the reporter's quest to unlock the riddle of the dying man's last word drives the story forward and keeps us watching as Orson Wells explores deeper themes of politics, democracy, America, etc. The mystery of Rosebud drives us through what's essentially a civics lesson on the real nature of power. There are other things holding our attention as well -- fabulous writing and acting, compelling characters -- but Rosebud is what gets us going and holds the whole thing together.

Finally, we should note that some stories are driven not by "what" questions, but by "how." We know before the opening credits that James Bond will conquer the villains, but we are driven to know how. We imagine that the affable Ferris Bueller will not be punished for his truancy, but we delight in knowing how he will escape detection.

Reports must anticipate the reader's questions and answer them. Editors will be on the lookout for holes in the story where key questions are left unanswered. Storytellers take these questions to a narrative level, creating in the reader a curiosity that can only be quenched by reaching the end of the story.

Workbench:

1. Review a collection of your recent stories. See if you can find some story engines, or at least potential story engines.

2. Begin looking for stories that capture your attention. Does the story have an engine? If so, what is the question that story answers for you?

3. Look for engines in films and television narratives. Does an episode of "I Love Lucy" have an engine? How about an episode of "Seinfeld," which is supposed to be about "nothing"?

4. As you read newspaper reports, look for under-developed stories that might benefit from the energy of an engine.

Tool #47: Collaboration

Help others in their crafts so they can help you.

Take an interest in all crafts that support your work.

The central act of journalism is reporting, the gathering, verifying and rendering of important information. But don't stifle your imagination. If you think of reporting as only a writer's act, you're missing the big play. A graphic artist who researches a diagram of how a new vaccine works is a reporter. A photographer who captures images from a war zone is a reporter. The designer is a reporter.

That last declaration may surprise some myopic writers who think of designers as decorators, the artistic fringe of the news or publishing operation. But consider this definition: Design is the form of journalism that renders each element of news in its most interesting and accessible form, and combines them in the most coherent way. Design frames editorial decisions about what matters on the page, on the screen, and in the world.

If you aspire to great things as a writer, begin with your self-interest: If your story is well-designed, it will look more important and more people will read it. You would be a fool to ignore or belittle that power.

In fact, you will never be able to reach your potential as a writer unless you take an interest in all the associated news and literary crafts. Cultivate this habit: ask questions about the crafts of copy-editing, photojournalism, illustration, graphics, design, and new media. You need not become an expert in these fields, but it's your duty to be curious and engaged. Eventually you will be able to talk about these crafts without an accent.

1. Copy editors: Ignore the traditional antagonism that leads writers to believe that copy editors are vampires who work at night and suck the life out of stories. Think, instead, of copy editors as the champions of standards, as invaluable test readers, as your last line of defense. I once wrote a story about two brothers with terrible physical handicaps. The boys had been separated for several years. I described the wonderful reunion of the brothers, how they watched cartoons and fed each other "Fruit Loops." A copy editor, Ed Merrick, called me to check on the story. He offered his praise for a job well done, but said he had sent a news clerk down to the supermarket (this was before the convenience of the Internet) to check on the spelling of "Fruit Loops." Sure enough, the correct spelling was "Froot Loops." Nice catch. The last thing I wanted was for the reader to notice this mistake, especially at a high point in the story. Years later, I would see Ed and give him the thumbs-up sign in gratitude for his Froot Loops fix. Talk to copy editors. Learn their names. Embrace them as fellow writers and lovers of language.

2. Never refer to a photojournalist as "my photographer." Make sure photo assignments are considered early in the process, not as an afterthought. Using television journalism as a model, look for opportunities for you and the photographer to be at a scene at the same time. Help the photographer understand your vision of the story. Ask questions about what the photographer is seeing. Use the work of the photographer to document the story. Let the photographer teach you about focus, framing, composition, and lighting. Ask the photographer what you can do to help.

3. Talk to all the visual journalists in the shop and let them know what you are working on. As a story develops, make sure they are included in the conversation early in the process. Learn from them what you need to see and bring back from a scene, material that can be converted into powerful visual and design elements. Ask your editor and visual journalists how you can help them while you are reporting or doing research.

Remember that good work takes time, not just for you. Learn to organize your time and meet your deadlines in a way that gives others time to do their jobs. Even if you lack the authority to convene conversations, encourage early planning that includes all the key players.

I learned these strategies while working on the series "Three Little Words." The story was so unusual in its conception and execution -- a month-long serial narrative with short chapters -- that it required planning and intense collaboration. Here are some of the conversations that were required:

* I worked closely with photographer Joanna Pinneo and stood beside her as we selected a signature photo of the main character that would run as a logo for the story.

* I consulted with designer Mario Garcia, who thought that each individual section could be designed to look more like a book chapter than a newspaper column.

* I spent many hours with editor Richard Bockman, reviewing language choices, copy editing changes, and writing headlines and summaries.

* I worked with editors of the St. Pete Times Web site since this would be the first series that would also be made available in an electronic archive.

* I worked with clerks at the paper to figure out how to respond to folks who missed a chapter or tuned in late.

* I was asked to help the promotion department develop in-house ads that would match in tone and language the voice of the story.

* I recorded summaries of the chapters that could be accessed via the telephone.

I did all that work in 1995 at the front edge of a media revolution in which news and information are now communicated across media platforms. Since 2001, I have written about 500 columns and essays for the Poynter Institute Web site. I am by no means an expert on how to produce a story using numerous platforms or multimedia approaches. But I am trying to adapt my writing tools and habits to a brave new world of media technology. The opportunity to write in different voices, the chance to interact with the audience, the adventure of crossing many old boundaries -- all these require a richer imagination and greater collaboration than ever before.

If you work hard at your cross-disciplinary education, supporting the marriage of words and visuals, you will be preparing yourself for a future of collaboration, innovation and creativity. And you can do this without sacrificing the enduring values of your craft and profession. This requires not just the Golden Rule, but what my old colleague Bill Boyd calls the Platinum Rule: Treat others the way that they want to be treated. How does the copy editor want to be treated? And what does the photographer need to do her best work? And what makes the designer deeply satisfied in his work? The only way to know for sure is to ask.

Workbench:

1. If you work in a news organization or for a publishing house, if you are writing a film documentary or a nonfiction narrative, if you write for a Web site or a newsletter, you are dependent upon a lot of people to get your best work accomplished. Begin by making a list of the names of these people. Make sure you have their phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

2. Develop a schedule of conversations with each of the people who are on your list. Apply the Platinum Rule. Find out what they need to do their best work.

3. Look for opportunities to praise the kind of support you desire. Do not just show up at the copy desk or the design desk with a complaint. If someone has written a good headline or saved you from a mistake, reward that good work with praise.

4. Do a little reading about the associated crafts. Find a good book on photojournalism. Read some design magazines. Start listening in to conversations about these crafts and try to develop a lexicon so that you can chime in.

Editor's Note: This essay borrows from an earlier one, "Why Designers Matter."

Writing Tool #48: Create An Editing Support Group

Create a support network of friends, colleagues, editors, experts, and coaches who can give you feedback on your work.

Create a support network of friends, colleagues, editors, experts and coaches who can give you feedback on your work.

Perhaps the most disabling myth of authorship is that writers practice a lonely craft. There is something romantic about the notion of a writer locked away in a loft overlooking the ocean, his only companions a portable typewriter, a bottle of gin and a kitty named Hemingway.

In the real world, writing is more like line dancing, a social function with many partners. Some of those partners -- a writing teacher, a producer, an assigning editor -- may be required to achieve our publishing goals. Other helpers can and should be of our choosing.

Not many writers get to choose their editors, so you may feel stuck with what you have. If you are lucky, you may benefit from a curious, nurturing editor. Unlucky, you may labor under the control of a drudge.

There are ways to train your editor, as we shall see. More important, you must create for yourself a system of support both wider and deeper than the one assigned to you. If you limit yourself to one classroom teacher or one agent or one editor, you are not getting the kind of guidance you need.

My support system changes as I change. I'm a different writer and a different person than I was 20 years ago, so I've refreshed the team I've assigned to help me. This should be a radical concept to you, especially if you are a young or inexperienced writer. You may say to yourself: I'd be happy with any editing at all. I am saying to you: Don't settle for what is given to you. Whatever it is, it is not enough. Work on developing the support system you need and deserve.

Here are the kinds of people I need:

1. A helper who keeps me going. For years, Chip Scanlan has played this role for me, especially when I am working on a long project. Chip has a rare quality as a colleague. He is capable of withholding negative judgments. He says to me, over and over again, "Keep going. Keep writing. We'll talk about that later."

2. A helper who understands my idiosyncrasies. All writers have quirks. The fleas come with the dog. I find it almost unbearable to read my own published work in the newspaper. I assume I'll find some terrible mistake. My wife, Karen Clark understands this. While I am cowering under the covers with my dog Rex, she's at the kitchen table, reading my story in the paper and making sure no unforeseen horror has appeared. "All clear," she says, to my relief.

3. A helper willing to answer my questions. For many years Donald Murray has been willing to read my drafts, and he begins by asking me the kind of response I'm looking for. In other words, "How would you like me to read this?" or "What kind of reading are you looking for?" My response might be, "Is this too Catholic?" or "Does this seem real enough to publish as a memoir?" or "Just let me know if you find this interesting." Murray is always generous, but it helps us both when he reads with a focus in mind.

4. An expert helper to match my topic. My current interest often dictates the kind of helper I need. When I was writing about the Holocaust and the history of anti-Semitism, I depended upon the wisdom and experience of a rabbi, Haim Horowitz. But when I was writing about AIDS, I turned to an oncologist, Dr. Jeffrey Paonessa. Such characters may begin as sources, but the deeper you get into a story, the more they can turn into sounding boards and confidantes.

5. A helper who runs interference. I remember the day I began writing a long series, a project that would take more than a month of daily writing. On fire with enthusiasm for the project, I'd wake up early, get into the office before daylight, and try to get a couple of hours of writing done before my other work responsibilities forced an interruption. Joyce Barrett helps me in many ways. But I especially remember the morning she came in, saw that I was writing, closed my office door, and put a motel style "Do Not Disturb" sign on the handle. That's good downfield blocking.

6. A coach who helps me figure out what works and what needs work. For more than a year, a intern named Ellen Sung edited a column I wrote for the Poynter Web site. In most ways, the two of us could not have been more different. I was older, white, male, with a print orientation. Ellen was 24 years old, Chinese-American and thrived online. She was well-read, curious, with mature sensibilities as an editor. She could articulate the strengths of a column, asked great questions that would lead to revisions and clarifications, and framed negative criticism with persuasive diplomacy. Ellen now works as a newspaper reporter, but she is still part of my network, someone willing to assume a role as a helper at a moment's notice.

So now you have a network. But how do you train the editor you're stuck with? Some writers adopt bad behaviors, forms of aversive conditioning to shut out a cruel or negative editor. One reporter avoids eye contact with his editor in the hope of side-stepping assignments. Another hands in stories as late as possible to escape an inquisition. Still another tries to work from home. Out of sight, out of mind.

These are forms of guerrilla warfare. You will do better when you hope for the best, using strategies that turn the editor from an adversary into an advocate. These include making deadlines; being prepared for story consultations; briefing and de-briefing; sending up a flare when the story changes; praising the kind of editing you want; and being candid about editing behaviors that drive you crazy. You can gripe about an editor behind his back. How much better to look him in the eye and let him know how he can do a better job of helping you? He's more likely to change if you have demonstrated a willingness to help him in a pinch. Volunteer to become part of his network of support.

Workbench:

1. Look at the six categories of helper described above. Make a list of six people who might be able to serve you in these capacities. Rehearse a conversation with each one in hopes of expanding your network.

2. Make a list of the specific ways an editor has helped you improve a story. Have you ever approached that editor to express thanks for such help? If not, go out of your way the next time it happens.

3. Admit it. An editor is driving you crazy. Rehearse a conversation in which you describe the behavior that is an obstacle to your best work. Can you find a way to communicate this with civility and diplomacy? "Jim, the last few times I've suggested a story idea to you, you've assigned it to another reporter. I find this discouraging. I'd like to work on some of these stories. Is this something we can talk about?"

4. Make a list of the people who belong to your current network of support. Next to their names, list the roles they play for you. Who else do you need to get your best work done?

Writing Tool #49: Learn from Criticism

Even severe or cynical criticism can help a writer.

Do your best to tolerate even unreasonable criticism of your work as a way of growing as a writer.

I've saved one of the hardest lessons for near the end. I don't know anyone who enjoys negative criticism, especially of creative work. But such criticism can be priceless -- if you learn how to use it. The right frame of mind can transform criticism that is nasty, petty, insincere, biased, even profane, into gold.

This alchemy requires one magic strategy: The receptive writer must convert debate into conversation. In a debate, one side listens only to find a counter-argument. In a conversation, there is give and take. A debate ends with a winner and a loser. A conversation can conclude with both sides learning, and a promise of more to come.

As hard as it is to follow, I long ago made a resolution that will sound like a Herculean impossibility: I never defend my story against criticism.

Not defend your story? That sounds as impossible as not blowing out a match as it burns toward your fingers. The reflex to defend your work against attack is a force of nature, the literary equivalent of flight or fight.

Let's take a hypothetical example. Say I've written this news lead out of a city council meeting: "Should the Seattle police be able to peep at the peepers in the peep shows?"

Now say I get this criticism from an editor. "Roy, you've got much too much peeping going on here for my taste. You've turned a serious story about privacy into a cute play on words. I was expecting Little Bo Peep to show up. Ha, ha."

Such criticism is likely to make me angry and defensive, but I've come to believe that argument is useless. I like all that peeping. My editor hates it. He prefers a lead such as, "The city council debated whether the Seattle police should be able to go undercover as part of the effort to see whether adult businesses are adhering to municipal regulations of their activities." My editor suffers from omnivorous gravity. He thinks I suffer from irreversible levity.

One of the oldest bits of wisdom about art goes like this, and please excuse the Latin: "De gustibus non est disputandum." There can be no arguing about matters of taste. I think "Moby Dick" is too long. You think abstract art is too abstract. My chili is too spicy. You reach for the Tabasco.

What, then, is the alternative to a donnybrook? If I don't fight to defend my work, won't I lose control to people who do not share my values?

Here's the alternative: Never defend your work, but explain what you were trying to accomplish. So, "Jack, I can see that all that peeping in my lead didn't work for you. I was just trying to find a way for readers to be able to see the impact of this policy. I didn't want to let the police action get lost in a lot of bureaucratic language." That response is more likely to turn a debate (one the writer is likely to lose) into a conversation (in which the editor might convert from adversary to ally).

My friend Anthea Penrose offered a negative criticism of my short, short chapters for the serial narrative "Three Little Words." She said something like, "It wasn't enough for me. Just when I was getting into it, you were finished. I wanted more."

How could I possibly change her mind? And why should I? If the chapters are too short for her, they are too short. So here was my response: "Anthea, you're not the first one to respond that way to the short chapters. They clearly do not work for some readers. By using short chapters, I was trying to lure into the story time-starved readers who say they never read any enterprise work. I've received a few messages from readers who told me they appreciate my concern for their time, that this is the first series in the Times that they have ever read."

Another critic: "I hated the way you ended that chapter after Jane was tested for HIV and didn't tell the me results of the test right away. I wanted to know now. But you made me wait until the next day's paper. I thought that was really exploitative."

My response: "You know, Jane was tested a number of times, and back then she might have to wait a couple of weeks for the results. I came to understand how excruciating it must have been to wait that long, with life and death in the balance. So I thought if I made the reader wait overnight for the results, it would get you to identify with her plight and empathize."

Such a response always softened the tone of the critic and tore down the wall between us. Knocking down the obstacle created openings for conversation, for questioning, for learning on both sides.

In summary:

* Do not fall into the trap of arguing about matters of taste.

* Do not, as a reflex, defend your work against negative criticism.

* Explain to your critic what you were attempting to do.

* Transform arguments into conversations.

Even when the attack is personal, try to deflect it in your mind back onto the work. "What was it in the story that would provoke such anger?" If you can learn to use criticism in these ways, you will continue to grow and grow as a writer throughout your career.

Workbench:

1. Remember a time when someone delivered harsh criticism of your writing. Write down the criticism. Force yourself to write down something you learned from the criticism that you can apply to your future work.

2. Using that same example of criticism, write a memo to your critic explaining what you were trying to accomplish by writing the story the way you did.

3. Be your own harshest critic. Review a batch of your stories and write down ways that each could have been better.

4. People tend to be harsher and more insensitive when they deliver criticism from a distance via e-mail. The next time you receive criticism this way, resist the urge to fire back a response. Take some time to recover. Then practice the advice offered above: explain to your critic what you were trying to accomplish.

5. Writers often know what is wrong with a story when they hand it in. Sometimes we try to hide these weaknesses from editors. What would happen if we began to express them as part of the writing and editing process? Perhaps this would change the nature of the conversation and get writers and editors working together.

Writing Tool #50: The Writing Process

Use these tools to demystify your writing.

A map of the writing process can help focus your story.

In 1983, Donald Murray wrote on a chalkboard a little diagram that changed my writing and teaching forever. It was a modest blueprint of the writing process as he understood it, five words that describe the steps toward creating a story. As I remember them now, the words were: Idea. Collect. Focus. Draft. Clarify. In other words, the writer conceives a story idea, collects things to support it, discovers what the story is really about, attempts a first draft, and revises in the quest for greater clarity.

How did this simple diagram change my life?

Until then, I thought great writing was the work of magicians. Like most readers, I encountered work perfected and published. I'd hold a book in my hand, flip through its pages, feel its weight, admire its design, and be awestruck by its seeming perfection. This was magic, the work of wizards, people different from you and me.

Murray's model of the writing process revealed a new path. Finished writing may seem magical to the reader, but it is the product of an invisible process, a series of rational steps, a set of tools. Writing teachers at The Poynter Institute have been playing with Murray's model for more than 20 years now, revising it, expanding it, adapting it to various writing and editing tasks. Here's my annotated version.

Sniff around: I got this from Don Fry. Before you get a story idea, you get a whiff of something. Journalists call this a "nose for news," but all good writers express a form of curiosity, a sense that something is going on out there, something in the air.

Explore ideas: The writers I admire most are the ones who see their world as a storehouse of story ideas. They are explorers, traveling through their communities with a special alertness, connecting seemingly unrelated details into story patterns. Only two kinds of writers exist in the world: the ones with ideas, and the ones with assignments.

Collect evidence: I love the wisdom that journalists write not with their hands, but with their legs. The great Francis X. Clines of The New York Times says he can always find a story if he can just get out of the office. Writers collect words, images, details, facts, quotes, dialogue, documents, scenes, expert testimony, eyewitness accounts, statistics, the brand of the beer, the color and make of the sports car, and, of course, the name of the dog.

Find a focus: For Chip Scanlan, who was with me when Murray unveiled his model, the process is all about focus. Finding what the story is really about requires careful reporting, sifting through evidence, experimentation, and critical thinking. The focus of a story can be expressed in a lead sentence, a summary paragraph, a headline or title, a theme

statement, a thesis, a question the story will answer for the reader, three little words.

Select the best stuff: There's one great difference between new writers and experienced ones. New writers often dump the contents of their notebook into a story. By God, I wrote it down, so it's going in. Veterans use a fraction, sometimes half, sometimes one-tenth of what they've gathered. But how do you decide what to include and, more difficult, what to leave out? A sharp focus is like a laser. It helps the writer slice material that might be tempting, but does not contribute to the central meaning of the story.

Recognize an order: Are you writing a sonnet or an epic? As Strunk & White ask, are you erecting a pup tent or a cathedral? What is the scope of your story? What shape is emerging? Working from a plan, the writer benefits from a vision of the global structure of the story. This does not require a formal outline. But it helps to have a sense of beginning, middle and ending.

Write a draft: Some writers write fast and free, accepting the inevitable imperfection of early drafts, moving toward multiple revisions. Other writers -- my friend David Finkel comes to mind -- work with meticulous precision, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, combining drafting and revising steps. One way is not better than another. But here's the key: I once believed that writing began with drafting, the moment my butt hit the chair and my hands hit the keyboard. I now recognize that step as deep in the process, a step that is more fluid when I have taken other steps first.

Revise and clarify: Murray once gave me a precious gift, a book of manuscript pages titled "Authors At Work." In it you see the poet Shelley crossing out by hand the title "To the Skylark," revising it to "To a Skylark." You see the novelist Balzac writing dozens upon dozens of revisions in the margins of a corrected proof. You can watch Henry James cross out 20 lines of a 25-line manuscript page. For these artists, writing is re-writing. And while word processors now make such revisions harder to track, they also eliminate the donkey work of re-copying, and help us improve our work with the speed of light.

Sniff. Explore. Collect. Focus. Select. Order. Draft. Revise.

Don't think of these as tools. Think of them as tool shelves or toolboxes. A well-organized garage has the gardening tools in one corner, the paint cans and brushes in another, the car repair equipment in another, the laundry helpers in another. In the same way, each of my process words describes a mode of writing and thinking that contains its own tool set.

So in my focus box I keep a set of questions the reader may ask about the story. In my order box, I have story shapes such as the chronological narrative and the gold coins. In my revision box I keep my tools for cutting useless words.

A simple blueprint for the writing process will have many uses over time. Not only will it give you confidence by demystifying the act of writing. Not only will it provide you with big boxes in which to store your tool collection. It will also help you diagnose problems in individual stories. It will help you account for your strengths and weaknesses over time. And it will build your critical vocabulary for talking about your craft, a language about language that will lead you to the next level.

Workbench:

1. With some friends, take a big piece of chart paper, and with colored markers draw a diagram of your writing process. Use words, arrows, images, anything that helps open a window on your mind and method.

2. Find one of your stories that did not work. Using either of the writing models described above, can you identify the part of the process that broke down? Did you fail to collect enough information? Did you have a problem selecting the best material?

3. Using the steps of my writing process, create for yourself a scoring grid. Reviewing a portfolio of your writing, grade yourself on each of the categories. Do you generate enough story ideas? Is your work well-ordered?

4. Using some of the categories above, interview another writer about her writing process. Turn it into a conversation in which you describe your own methods.

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