

Some Reflections on the Art of Writing



BY LAURIE MEINTJES

When asked to develop a course in advanced English writing several years ago, I began by trawling through an armful of books on writing that I plucked from the library shelves.

The books gave reasonably good advice on the craft of writing, but – except for some common-sense basics – there was little consensus among them because each came to the topic with its own perspective.

This prompted me to think more deeply about my own writing, about my own perspective, and to draw lessons from that. These I distilled into ten principles of writing. Let me share these in an abbreviated form.

PRINCIPLE 1: WRITING BEGINS WITH, AND IS SUSTAINED BY, MUCH READING

- If you have not yet developed the habit of reading, then do so as soon as possible and feed it heartily.
- Read widely as this exposes you to different styles of writing, some of which will modify your own style.
- Reading enlarges your vocabulary and your understanding of syntax because you are constantly being exposed to words at work. *One of your chief aims in reading will be to develop a keen sensitivity to words, to their nuances of meaning, to their correct usage.*
- Reading expands your knowledge and gives you more options for writing, and more threads to work into the tapestry of your own writing.

PRINCIPLE 2: WRITING EMERGES FROM LIFE

- Learn to observe life. Be sensitive to people and their circumstances. Listen to the *dialogue* of life. What do I mean by the ‘dialogue’ of life? It is more than simply the words that people speak; it is the whole ebb and flow of life. I remember seeing a teen-aged girl at Nandi Airport, Fiji, sitting with an open diary on her knees into which she constantly wrote down her observations of the people and scenes about her. She filled several pages in the space of an hour. That attentive girl was listening to the dialogue of life, and I would not be surprised if she is now a published author or well on her way to becoming one. Perhaps she is the brains behind the TV series, *Airport*.

PRINCIPLE 3: WRITING THRIVES ON PRACTICE

- Writing, as with any skill, improves with practice. A useful strategy is to keep a personal diary and to write something every day. Remember the girl at Nandi Airport!

- Make sure your writing practice is qualitative rather than simply quantitative. In other words, you should be conscious of *how* you write. Be sensitive to your choice of words and how you use them. Learn to convey emotion, to paint a scene, to arouse interest, to drive home a point, or to execute any of the various duties of words on the run, and to do each so well, so *engagingly*, that your reader is drawn into the page as though it were the most natural place to be. And you will be more successful in this if your writing *is seen to be natural*, and not forced in any way. In culinary terms, don't overcook it!

PRINCIPLE 4: WRITING IS INHERENTLY PERSONAL

- Develop your own style which draws on your strengths.
- However, there is also much eclecticism (or borrowing) in writing styles, and your own style will be influenced by the styles of others. Be adaptive.

PRINCIPLE 5: WRITING SHOULD BE ENJOYABLE

- If you do not enjoy your writing, the chances are that your readers will not enjoy reading it. Anyone can learn to enjoy writing. For the past several years I have been working with first-year university students who have difficulty with essay writing. Many of these students tell me that they do not like writing, that it is something they never liked. And yet, after a little encouragement and a few successes, these same students discover that they actually enjoy writing. They have put in the effort, they have reaped a reward for that effort, and they come away with a new appreciation of their ability to write.

PRINCIPLE 6: WRITING SHOULD SOUND RIGHT

- Writing is meant to be read and all reading, even the silent in-your-head kind, is based on phonetics. If the writing jars in your head, it will jar on the page. You should always read what you write, silently to yourself, and as you read be sensitive to the combinations of words, to how they sound together and how they flow together. If you find yourself stumbling over what you have written, then re-phrase it. In time you will develop the capacity to *listen* to your words as you write them and to adjust their sound and flow automatically.

PRINCIPLE 7: WRITING IS ABOUT WORDS

- Words are like spices and, like spices, should be used according to the recipe. Don't throw them into the mix in the hope that they will sit well with all the other words and contribute to a fine result. Use the *right* word at the *right* time and in the *right* way. There is no substitute for this.
- Obtain and use a good dictionary.
- Obtain and use a good thesaurus. I use two: The *Longman Synonym Dictionary* and *Roget's Thesaurus*. While each is good, I prefer *Roget's Thesaurus* because it presents words in categories and links these via

a comprehensive index. It might take a little extra time to find a particular word, but it generally turns out to be the very word I am seeking. (*Always check the dictionary meaning of any word you turn up in a thesaurus if you are not completely familiar with that word.*)

PRINCIPLE 8: WRITING MUST ADHERE TO APPROPRIATE STANDARDS

- I was fortunate to come through a school system whose English teachers appreciated the rules of grammar and sentence structure and mercilessly drilled us in them. In particular, we learned to analyse sentences and this taught us how words work together with other words. It was an invaluable introduction to English and how English is written. If you are to write well, you must have a good understanding of the rules of grammar and sentence structure (or syntax). One of the best ways to develop and feed this understanding is to read and read and read (Principle 1). And read in a mindful and deliberate way. Be aware of how the words flow and work together, how sentences make their point, and how paragraphs develop their theme.
- Obtain and use a good guide on English usage. There are several available, including *The Penguin Working Words* and *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide*. I like to use at least two guides as I find it useful to compare the different approaches.

PRINCIPLE 9: WRITING MUST CONNECT WITH THE READER

- This might seem obvious, but it is one that is often overlooked by writers, perhaps in the mistaken belief that if *they* are impressed with the writing, perhaps others will also be impressed. In a sense, such a belief is excusable because it arises from a sense of confidence, and confidence in one's own writing is a good thing. *But that confidence must be earned, never assumed*, and to do this you must connect with your readers through writing that is not only well expressed (so that its meaning is immediately apparent) but also absorbing (so that your reader is drawn into your story and finds it a happy place to be). One of the best ways to produce writing that connects with your readers is to conjure up an image of a typical reader (and this typical reader will vary according to your writing purpose) and then 'to get into the head' of that reader so that you can write specifically for that person. What does that reader expect of you? Why would he or she want to read your work? What level of understanding about your topic does the reader enjoy? How well read is that reader?
- However, when speculating about your readers' ability to understand your writing, you should never underestimate them; always respect their capacity to think for themselves.

PRINCIPLE 10: WRITING SHOULD BE CLOSELY EDITED

- Never assume that what you have written is error free. This is even more critical when you have written a longer piece. Errors might creep in singly, others might gallop in with their friends (especially if you have been long at your desk), but come they will. The only

antidote is careful and frequent editing.

- When using a word-processor, it is generally better to edit your work from the hard copy, and not on-screen.
- When editing your work, do so with specific purpose. Some writers like to edit their work in stages. They might first edit for spelling mistakes (on NO ACCOUNT should you rely solely on your spell-checker to handle this task), then they might edit for syntax, and finally they might edit for the overall flow of the piece. Whatever method you favour, ensure that you bring real purpose to your editing. A vague reading of your work in the hope of catching a mistake here and there is almost worthless.

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