How to Write

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How To Write
Helen Bain, 1st Place
Essay

What does it require to become a writer of good prose and poetry?

When I was a child I thought all writing required was a pen, some clean paper, and a little time alone. After acquiring these three scarce commodities I scribbled whatever came to mind. The resulting poetry was similar to "roses smell good/and look so sweet/but the petals/ain't good to eat." My first feeble attempts were poor; I needed more education.

From grammar books I learned the necessity of correct punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and other complicated things. Instead of jotting down whatever was on my mind, I considered the intricacies of meter and rhyme scheme. I had scarcely begun to comprehend all this information when I read e.e. cumming’s poetry. He broke all the rules I had so diligently tried to copy, yet he was artistic. It was then that I developed my poetry of rebellion. I wrote, "There must be more than books or schools/written laws and moral rules/worship, prayer, attending an edifice/joining a war, being a human sacrifice." In the vernacular of the period, "I just couldn’t get it together."

By this point I had reached the height of adolescence, and throughout my late teens and beginning twenties, I thought I had the answer. Great writers must suffer. It was like an equation; the more intense suffering produced the better writing. Keats suffered; Shelley suffered; Byron suffered—hangovers if nothing else. I had many opportunities to suffer, but my writing did not improve.

My grandfather died. I wrote a poem beginning, "Death, though defying, can never be defied; if to you Death comes crying, he can never be denied." My grandmother died. I felt prompted to write, "Flowers have but a short season, soft winds soon become unkind. The only way to keep good things from ceasing/is to keep them alive in your mind." My father’s death the following year inspired me to write another poem. But three poems of mourning in three gloomy years are not a semblance of great writing. I was still seeking the proper vehicle of expression.

Edgar Allen Poe and Samuel Coleridge were great writers, despite their alcoholism. The idea flickered across my mind that perhaps they wrote well because they were drunk. This brainchild proved a breech birth. I remained a lousy poet and became a lousy drunk. The imbibed liquor didn’t enliven my brain; it numbed it. My best rhymed couplet of this period was, "The more I drink/the less I think."

I turned to the best writers of prose, in the hope of emulating their skill. Mark Twain’s writing is classic; I decided good material would be a compilation of childhood experiences. Unfortunately, I had never been on a boat, but I searched my mind for other topics.

The major events I recalled from my childhood were my brother telling me I was born with a tail, which the doctor cut off (a lie); my sister telling me a snake would bite the second person in a line walking through the woods so she would valiantly walk second and let me go first (another lie); and my father telling me to do as I was told or he would slap my ears together (probably the truth, but not sufficient material for a story).

I decided to attempt it anyway. I chose the event of my family’s acquisition of its first television set and tried to fabricate it into a humorous, dialect anecdote.

Daddy brung it home, a big square box with a liddle ole cord a-hanin’ frum it. He sez it wuz a telly-vishun. We turned the thang on, but it didn’t do nuthin’. My bruther, the smart ‘un, sez “that liddle ole cord gotta be hooked in to sum ’lectricitee.” “Wal,” daddy sez, “we ain’t got no ’lectricitee, but lemme studee on it a mite.” He finelly sez, “We’ll do what we does when the well is low a-water, we’ll barro sum. Junior, ye grab that buckit yonda an’ go fetch some ’lectricitee..."
from the nayber up th' road.” Junior laff real big and sez, “Ye cain't carry no 'lectricitee in no galveenized buckit.” Junior wuz smart, like I done tole ye. He been to school. He sez, “Medal carried 'lectricitee, afore you git to th' barn it'd crawl up the buckit and kleen up yore arm. Be best to carry a plasteek buckit.”

I decided this type of writing was regressing rather than improving my intellect. Doing a complete reversal I decided a writer must successfully exemplify his mastery of the written language. I had become a college student and was impressed by the eloquent phraseology of some of my professors, and by the elaborate word choice in some of the textbooks. I flaunted my tentatively acquired skill of expression by using such words as “imminent,” “Gargantuan,” and “repugnant.” I was almost persuaded that the usage of lengthy, sophisticated words was the secret of mature writing when I read a novel by Theodore Dreiser. Repulsed at his verbosity, I repudiated this theory.

My next inspiration was to write of my personal interactions. For years I had been falling in and out of love, and had developed a penchant for writing love poetry. For a while I wrote a poem to each of the successive suitors in my life. When inspiration and energy were low, I would change an old one a little and give it to the next unsuspecting beau. Not only did I write poetry at the beginning of the relationship, but in one case I sent a poem to terminate the association. It read: “To part is such sorrow, it makes my poor heart ache; But why should I wait ‘til tomorrow, When you are such a fruitcake?” I soon tired of oversentimentalized relationships both as a way of life and as a subject for heart-rending rhymes. My last verse of the subject opened with: “Lovers come, but mostly lovers go/Leaving only the words to echo/Forever in my ears/Always remember I love you.”

It seemed I had searched the gamut of writing technique without discovering what the magical thing is that makes a person a good writer. I was desperate enough to pray to the Muses. I looked back over several things I had written; I hoped the better writings would give me a clue. I discovered the best of the conglomeration were the result of writing about things I was very involved with. They were written in a better style, but in the same method with which I had coped as a child. I was simply taking pen, paper, and a little time alone and writing down what I felt. Perhaps I had the answer all along. □