

# On Writing Well

*An Essay by Dr. Phil Byler*

To write well is said to be a gift. Perhaps, but perhaps the actual writing is not the real gift. To imagine well—that is where the gift takes roots. To transform the mental picture, the idea, the story that lies buried in someone’s imagination, into a string of words people desire and delight to read; that, indeed, is a gift, a talent which few people ever cultivate. Talent unperfected lies fallow without the fine tuning of dedication and sharpening the skills which transform raw talent into profound artistry. Overstated? Perhaps, but anyone who is even remotely literate can put words on paper. To have one’s words convey the depth of feeling, emotion, and visual perspective from the heart and soul of the writer to the one who reads ... that, my friend, is truly art.

Good writing is much more involved than merely constructing grammatically correct sentences, maintaining proper gender and number relationships, following a planned story line, or explaining an intricate mechanical process. The real test of writing is reading. When something is difficult to read, or is practically impossible to understand, or if it is obscure to the mind of the reader, it is easy to toss aside. Some things we read are just mind-numbingly boring. Why would anyone want to continue? Yet, some of the most classic works of literary art fall prey to the pitfalls of tedium and redundancy. Even the best authors have bad days.

The responses that bring the greatest pleasure to an author’s soul are words like: "I was utterly captivated" or "I couldn’t put it down." Nothing is more gratifying to those who write than to feel a sense of appreciation and empathy with the people who read their material. As an author, such words are not always forthcoming. People seldom communicate with an author, particularly someone they don’t know personally. So, writing well must become a source of pleasure for the writer long before any` reviews come in.

It’s interesting. The very first things we put on paper usually bring us real delight. In fact, the first things we write are written long before we ever contemplate becoming

authors. Our initial attempts at writing are not words really; they are pictures, stick figures scrawled across paper in bold crayon strokes.

"Look, mommy, this is a picture of you and daddy."

"I drew our house, Daddy. This is Spot, and this is Mary, and this is Andy, and this is you."

But these are not written words. They are pictures, but they are the stuff words are made of, and soon enough we learn what specific words mean. Then we begin to verbalize what we visualized. For the remainder of our lives, we will continue that process.

Real pleasure may not be found in one's initial attempts at writing in a serious way. Those usually begin in school: writing assignments, term papers, book reports, and science projects. They are not assigned to us with the intent of producing a best-selling book. They were simply school work, required by a teacher and given a deadline for completion. Such assignments may be exciting or interesting. Often, they are more frustrating than enjoyable. The goal, apart from covering the subject matter, is approval. This is measured with a grade, hopefully something above a C. Anything greater feels good, and an A brings pure elation. A strong, affirmative comment from a teacher on top of that becomes a jewel to be placed in a crown.

It's no different for an adult author: amateur or professional, beginner or seasoned soul. Approval and acceptance lie at the heart of an author's affirmation. Everyone wants his or her work to be well received, yet, some of literature's most successful authors met stiff resistance and rejection before their stories found an audience, or a publisher for that matter.

Consider this. You have been writing in one way or another most of your life. Perhaps, as a young person, you had a pen pal. Maybe there was a love affair with someone located far away—a service person, a foreign student, or a friend in mission work. Somewhere, sometime, you put words on paper and communicated your thoughts, your ideas, your feelings, and your desires with someone. From making a grocery list to drafting a plan for a vacation, directing your thought processes to your

fingers and pushing a pen across paper or tapping keys on a computer, you were writing.

With the ever increasing world of technology, we write more and more. Today, we communicate by writing far more than we imagine. Social networking—sending text messages, generating emails, and posting to social sites—forces people to write. So, don't tell me you can't write. You can, because you do.

The art of writing is lost on those who scratch words on paper or pound phrases on a keyboard; lost on those who merely construct sentences with little or no consideration of how, or by whom they will be read. Most of our writing is done with notes, memoranda with purpose. We express our thoughts, but seldom do we think about how words convey our feelings. Simple notes are the most emotionally honest things people write; messages hastily scratched out to communicate snippets of thought with friends and family. However, there is little in those brief expressions that can truly be seen as art. Notes communicate relevant and immediate information.

"Do this."

"Go there."

"Be on time for that."

"Pick up the kids by 4:30 P.M."

They also communicate genuine emotion. "I love you."

"You're the best."

"Can we have dinner?"

"I'm so thankful I married you."

"You're a nasty beast!"

Something ... anything! Notes convey worlds of information. They might be expressions of grace, or words of care and affection, instructions, or things to remember. Sometimes they are angry outbursts, harsh and mean-spirited, meant to hurt

and tear a person down. Sometimes they are bullet points, reminders of things to do. But art? Not often.

E-mail has become the standard for the passing of memoranda by a vast number of people today. The speed and convenience of electronic communication has allowed people to by-pass the casual ambiguity of person-to-person talk. It has also taught us to ignore the rules of grammar as we hastily bang out our thoughts and ideas. In most instances, e-mail is used to communicate information that pertains either to employment or enjoyment. Plans, excuses, and forwarded opportunities are sent almost instantaneously across a complex network of electronic connections, stretching across the house, down the street, or around the world.

Social media is also a means of verbal communication. Yet social media has become offensively cluttered with inane silliness, the meaningless drivel of those who have little or nothing to say. Others simply let someone else speak (or write) for them, forwarding both the profound and the ridiculous with equal ease. Rather than draft creative concepts, many simply pass along tidbits of gossip, slander, romance, or meanness that reveal how easily a mind can be swayed.

The text message phenomenon has also served to undermine good writing. Text messaging has generated a language of its own, an encryption that must be deciphered like a secret code. **b4 u dsagre cye bfn cylv** (*Before you disagree, check your email, bye for now, see you later*). **K?**

Cute? Maybe. Art? Not so much.

On the other hand, you dear author, have taken on the task of creating verbal imagery, drafting vibrant scenes in brilliant hues of straight-forward candor and subtle undertones. You offer innuendos of suggestion or suspicion and allusions which stimulate the imagination; hints that reveal feelings buried deep within. You have decided to go beyond the mundane to the remarkable, or something resembling the remarkable. And if you do too much of what I just did, you may well lose your reader before the end of your first chapter.

Too many adjectives make reading tedious. Too many obscure adjectives make it incomprehensible. Too many wrong adjectives make it just plain silly—utterly ridiculous. No one really wants to be ridiculous.

The same can be said of adverbs. Used carelessly or needlessly, they also clutter your writing and make it wordy.

Charlotte Bronte, the famed English novelist, wrote the classic, *Jane Eyre*. In that book she directed her concepts with regard to writing toward her character, Jane. One in particular caught my attention and I recorded it in a journal. Today, I cannot even recall the context in which the statement was written, but the weight of it continues to grab me, reminding me of the dedication I need to be able to write well.

“Whether or not your writing rises to the level of true art will ultimately depend on two things, your talent and your preparation. Talent only accounts for a small portion of an author’s excellence. The rest is hard work—hard work and developed skill. So, learn your craft well. Study the work of others, especially those who have mastered the art of writing.”

This is something every author should understand. Writing, in order to be art, must be a craft. It needs to be pursued with the passion of a profession, even though you may not be professional writer. The good writer is an artist, a skilled wordsmith who creates rich scenes with word pictures that practically leap from the page. In many ways writing is a calling. It is an inner yearning that cannot be fulfilled in any other way. Empowered with such passion, words flow from the writer’s imagination in an unrestricted stream of thought and creativity.

In order to write well, you need to learn to read well. Do not read merely to enjoy what someone else has written. Read with intentionality. Study as you read. Consider the words the author has chosen. Consider also the words he or she could have chosen but did not. The best reading is often the opportunity to discover what goes unsaid, writing that allows, actually forces a reader to arrive at the intended conclusion. Learn the economy of words, to say more with less. Learn how to spend words like precious treasure, offering only what truly brings value to the end product. Be succinct without

sacrificing precision, brief without minimizing clarity. Use enough language to say what must be said but no more than is necessary. Notice how thoughts connect, how they transition from idea to idea, and how characters, concepts, and conclusions are intertwined. As you witness the work of master writers, you will develop a more masterful style of your own, and that is what you ultimately want to happen.

Writing for the pleasure of others, whether information, inspiration, or simply for enjoyment, begins with your own pleasure. When writing is good, it is a joy to read. If you don't enjoy reading what you have written, how can you expect that of anyone else? But if you only enjoy it because you wrote it, and not because it is good, you may well be fooling yourself about the quality of your work.

What will you write? Will it be a book about how to do something remarkable or unusual; or perhaps about something funny, or something tragic? Will you pen a memoir of a journey through a transition of life, or an explanation of some amazing truth you have discovered and believe? It's your choice. You may create a fictional story of love, or mystery, or adventure ... a novel that brings great pleasure to those who read it. You may research a historical event or epoch and then draft a historical novel around a cast of characters both real and imagined. Your limitations are only the boundaries of your imagination and your willingness to share what you see.

Whatever you write; make it yours. Your writing should be filled with nuances of your personality and feelings. After all, it's your story being transferred to the paper or computer screen. This will become the essence of your style, the ability to express yourself uniquely as you. That does not mean you will be writing about yourself. If you write too much about yourself, apart from a biographical sketch or an intentional autobiography, you may well lose your reader before he or she completes your book. This may be difficult, since we like to talk about ourselves, but it is necessary. Memoirs and autobiographies hold a significant status in the literary world, but they usually are about people who have shaped their world, or about people whose journey will help shape someone else's world.

Writing is fun, but writing is also hard work. It is a labor of love and conviction and determination. You can't give up. When you write well you pour your whole soul into

your work. Words have a certain quality, much like the taste of food: sweet, salty, sour, or bitter. In food, these four taste components dominate our taste buds. The unique combination of how they are experienced is the essence of flavor. Offer too much of one or the other, food becomes unpalatable and downright disgusting. Too little, and it becomes insipid, tasteless and bland. However, in the right combinations, an endless variety of pleasurable sensations draw us again and again to the table.

This same phenomenon is true of descriptive words: nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. They create a flavor of their own, the flavor of imagination and inspiration, of wisdom and wonder, of challenge and character. Sometimes words are dark and foreboding, communicating pain, frustration, or chaos. Sometimes they are light and airy, filled with whimsy and wit. With such a vast vocabulary at your disposal, choosing the right word can be a real challenge.

Use care when you enter the realm of verbal illustration. Painting a stunning portrait or a vivid landscape is not entirely different from brushing color onto canvas. The artist must understand light and shadow, perspective and dimension. Blended tones that capture the essence of a subject can make the difference between a masterpiece and a mess. Writing is like that. An improper or inaccurate word can throw an entire sentence, paragraph, or story into utter disarray. Yet, the proper word, the one which brings out the full flavor of meaning makes all the difference in the world.

Technical writing is quite a different matter. It is not meant to be experienced as pleasurable or inspirational reading. Technical writing explains the how to and the what for ... the intricacies and complexities of machines or structures, of legal contracts or judicial decisions, or of medical procedures and the like. Such writing is academic, and of necessity, bookish. But technical writing is not accomplished for personal enjoyment, *per se*. It is written to transfer specific knowledge and to define intricate detail, whether industrial, legal, theological, or scientific. Thus, technical writing is often more metallic than savory, more clinical than abstract. Instead of following a story line, it follows a schematic, a process of invariables, often complex but seldom novel.

Of course, technical writing can be considered as art. However, it is technical art, not the free-flowing thought process of the novelist, the inspiring motivator, or the victorious

overcomer whose story cries out to be told. Most assuredly, it is not the musing of a poet.

In this century, becoming an author has become quite common. More and more people are writing and publishing their written material than ever before. With the innovation of electronic publishing, anyone, and I do mean anyone, can publish a book. Digital publishing, e-books, and desktop publishing software have made it possible for everyone who chooses to do so to circulate a book. However, the means do not insure the results. Publishing a book to print or electronic media does not guarantee that it is interesting, readable, honest, or even grammatically correct. Neither does being interesting, readable, and accurate insure that someone has created a best seller. Marketing a book, especially to a broad, national, or international audience is a process completely different from writing.

Marketing your masterpiece will require a different set of skills or the services of someone who has marketing capability. Publishing houses are highly selective and generally do not base their choices on the quality of a work as much as the marketability of it. In fact, they will sometimes publish a manuscript far inferior to the one you have written, simply because of its marketability. They will gladly publish your book if you are willing to provide the up-front costs. They will even help you market it if you will embrace a demanding schedule of public appearances and the cost of traveling along with your book to whatever marketplace they deem profitable. But they will not usually be willing to invest in you until you have a proven track record that will make them money.

With so many authors and so many offerings, it is a challenge for big box publishers to separate the wheat from the chaff. What is truly good? What will actually inspire, entertain, encourage, empower, or inform the end user—the reader? The books that finally reach a broad audience are generally the ones that do these things and do them well. And even if you have a better book, you may not have the marketability to claim a place among them. Shelf space in a book store is very restricted. For every book you see, there are many more of the same genre which never make it to the shelf—no room, no market.



A much better starting place is to consider your prospective audience. Who will benefit from the message you convey? Who will enjoy your mystery? Your romance? Your historical quest? Who will buy in to your innovative idea about a new diet? Or a highly disciplined prayer life? Or a fresh way to look at a particular Biblical character or story? That is your target audience. Those are the people who will evaluate your book, and if it passes muster will encourage others to read and enjoy it.

The question is this: are you willing to do the difficult work necessary to make your book readable? Will you make your message worthwhile so your audience has a take away that warrants their expenditure of time in reading it? If not, your book might make you happy. It will not likely experience wide exposure.

### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

“Good Morning, Mister Phelps ...”

Do you remember the old TV series *Mission Impossible* and the more recent movies by the same title? They were stories about assigning hopeless tasks to a superior team of operatives who would never be recognized or acknowledged. If they failed at accomplishing their task, they would be disavowed and relegated to obscurity. This is the situation in which you find yourself. You face this daunting challenge into which you will need to pour enormous energy. If you fail, if you fall short of creating a readable, informative, and/or enjoyable book, you will not be acknowledged or recognized by anyone other than yourself, and perhaps a few close associates.

“Your mission, should you decide to accept it ...” is to translate your story; your idea, your inspiration, your vision, and your conviction into a readable narrative that will grasp people’s attention, be convincing, entertaining, informative, imaginative, inspiring, encouraging, or challenging. You face formidable odds. You will be launching your personal perspective into a fickle marketplace, one that is informed and selective about what they purchase and read. If you succeed, you will touch that vast and wonderful audience your heart yearns to reach. You will enjoy the success of knowing your message has achieved its goal, and that is a wonderful thing. But, if you fail ...

If you fail, you will still have accomplished something that the vast majority of humans never even attempt. In fact, most people do not believe they truly have the capacity to make an attempt. But even if you fall short of your ultimate goal, you will have written a book. You will have articulated your ideas and offered them to the vast audience of the world. That, in itself is a notable achievement worthy of your effort. And to be perfectly honest, your friends and associates will almost certainly desire to read your book, because it is yours.

You may never become a Charlotte Bronte, an Earnest Hemingway, a Tom Clancy, or a Debbie Macomber. You are only you—the unique, inspired and determined, fledgling author who has a story to tell and a desire to get it done.

Unlike the plot in the movie, this message will not self-destruct in ten seconds. It will play on in your thoughts again and again, never far from your consciousness. It will reach deep into your soul, beyond the words written here, to the passion that lies within you. Hopefully it will continue to resonate on the inside until you respond, and in your determination to achieve the near impossible, you will. You will write. Not only that, you will write well.