

About Writing

By



Michael LaRocca

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About Writing

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Introduction

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Here's everything I know about improving your writing, publishing it electronically and in print, and promoting it after the sale.

Two questions you should ask:

1. What will it cost me?
2. What does this Michael LaRocca guy know about it?

Answer #1 — It won't cost you a thing. The single most important bit of advice I can give you, and I say it often, is don't pay for publication.

My successes have come from investing time. Some of it was well spent, but most of it was wasted. It costs me nothing to share what I've learned. It costs you nothing to read it except some of your time.

Answer #2 — "Michael LaRocca has been researching the publishing field for over 10 years."

This quote from Authors Wordsmith was a kind way of saying I've received hundreds of rejections. Also, my "research" required 20 years.

But in my "breakout" year (2000), I finished writing four books and scheduled them all for publication in 2001. I also began editing for one of my publishers, a job I've been enjoying ever since.

After my first book was published, both my publishers closed. Two weeks and three publishers later, I was back on track.

See how much faster it was the second time around? That's because I learned a lot.

Also, I found more editing jobs. That's what I do when I'm not writing, doing legal transcription, or doing English consulting work in Thailand (my new home). But the thing is, if I'd become an editor before learning how to write, I'd have stunk.

(Some readers say I still stink. Ignore them.)

2005 EPPIE Award finalist. 2004 EPPIE Award finalist. 2002 EPPIE Award finalist. Listed by Writers Digest as one of The Best 101 Websites For Writers in 2001 and 2002. Sime-Gen Readers Choice Awards for favorite Author (Nonfiction & Writing) and Favorite Book (Nonfiction & Writing). 1982 Who's Who In American Writing.

Excuse me for bragging, but it beats having you think I'm unqualified.

I'll tell you what's missing from this monologue. What to write about, where I get my ideas from, stuff like that. Maybe I don't answer this question because I think you should do it your way, not mine. Or maybe because I don't know how I do it. Or maybe both. Once you've done your writing, this essay should help you with the other stuff involved in being a writer. Writing involves wearing at least four different hats. Writer, editor, publication seeker, post-sale self-promoter.

Here's what I can tell you about my writing.

Sometimes an idea just comes to me out of nowhere and refuses to leave me alone until I write about it. So, I do.

And, whenever I read a book that really fires me up, I think, "I wish I could write like that." So, I just keep trying. I'll never write THE best, but I'll always write MY best. And get better every time. That's the "secret" of the writing "business," same as any other business. Always deliver the goods.

I read voraciously, a habit I recommend to any author who doesn't already have it. You'll subconsciously pick up on what does and doesn't work. Characterization, dialogue, pacing, plot, story, setting, description, etc. But more importantly, someone who doesn't enjoy reading will never write something that someone else will enjoy reading.

I don't write "for the market." I know I can't, so I just write for me and then try to find readers who like what I like. I'm not trying to whip up the next bestseller and get rich. Not that I'd complain. But I have to write what's in my heart, then find a market later. It makes marketing a challenge at times, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

When you write, be a dreamer. Go nuts. Know that you're writing pure gold. That fire is why we write.

An author I greatly admire, Kurt Vonnegut, sweated out each individual sentence. He wrote it, rewrote it, and didn't leave it alone until it was perfect. Then he wrote the next sentence the same way, etc., and when he reached the end of the book, it was done.

But I doubt most of us write like that. I don't. I let it fly as fast as my fingers can move across the paper or keyboard, rushing to capture my ideas before they get away. Later, I change and shuffle and slice.

James Michener writes his last sentence first, then has his goal before him as he writes his way to it.

Then there's me. No outline whatsoever. I create characters and conflict, spending weeks and months on that task, until the first chapter leaves me wondering "How will this end?" Then my characters take over, and I'm as surprised as the reader when I finish my story.

Some authors set aside a certain number of hours every day for writing, or a certain number of words. In short, a writing schedule.

Then there's me. No writing for three or six months, then a flurry of activity where I forget to eat, sleep, bathe, change the cat's litter... I'm a walking stereotype. To assuage the guilt, I tell myself that my unconscious is hard at work. As Hemingway would say, long periods of thinking and short periods of writing.

I've shown you the extremes in writing styles. I think most authors fall in the middle somewhere. But my point is, find out what works for you. You can read about how other writers do it, and if that works for you, great. But in the end, find your own way. That's what writers do.

Just don't do it halfway.

If you're doing what I do, writing a story that entertains and moves you, you'll find readers who share your tastes. For some of us that means a niche market and for others it means regular appearances on the bestseller list.

Writing is a calling, but publishing is a business. Remember that *AFTER* you've written your manuscript. Not during.

I've told you how I write. For me.

Editing

The next step is self-editing. Fixing the mistakes I made in my rush to write it before my Muse took a holiday. Several rewrites. Running through it repeatedly with a fine-toothed comb and eliminating clichés like "fine-toothed comb."

Then what?

There are stories that get rejected because the potential publisher hates them, or feels they won't *sell* (as if he knows), but more are shot down for other reasons. Stilted dialogue. Boring descriptions. Weak characters. Underdeveloped story. Unbelievable or inconsistent plot. Sloppy writing.

That's what you have to fix.

I started by using free online creative writing workshops. What I needed most was input from strangers. After all, once you're published, your readers will be strangers. Every publisher or agent you submit to will be a stranger. What will they think? I always get too close to my writing to answer that. So do you.

Whenever I got some advice, I considered it. Some I just threw out as wrong, or because I couldn't make the changes without abandoning part of what made the story special to me. Some I embraced. But the point is, I decided. It's my writing. My name on the spine, not yours, and I want people reading it centuries after I die. Aim high.

After a time, I didn't feel the need for the workshops anymore. I'm fortunate enough to have a wife whose advice I will always treasure, and after a while that was all I needed. But early on, it would've been unfair to ask her to read my drivel. (I did anyway, but she married me in spite of it.)

Your goal when you self-edit is to get your book as close to "ready to read" as you possibly can. Do not be lazy and do not rush. You want your editor to find what you overlooked, not what you didn't know about, and you want it to be easy for him/her. EASY! Easy to edit, easy to read. It's a novel, not a blog.

Your story is your story. You write it from your heart, and when it looks like something you'd enjoy reading, you set out to find a publisher who shares your tastes. What you don't want is for that first reader to lose sight of what makes your story special because you've bogged it down with silly mistakes.

Authors don't pay to be published. They are paid for publication. Always. It's just that simple. Publishers are paid by readers, not authors. That's why they help you find those readers.

Your publisher should also give you some free editing. But there's a limit to how much editing you can get without paying for it. Do you need more than that? I don't know because I've never read your writing. But if you evaluate it honestly, I think you'll know the answer.

As an editor, I've worked with some authors who simply couldn't self-edit. Non-native English speakers, diagnosed dyslexics, blind authors, guys who slept through English class, whatever. To them, paying for editing was an option. This isn't paying for publication. This is paying for a service, training. Just like paying to take a Creative Writing class at the local community college.

By the way, I don't believe creativity can be taught. Writing, certainly. I took a Creative Writing class in high school, free, and treasure what I can remember of the experience. (It's been a while.) But I already had the creativity, or else it would've been a waste of the teacher's time and mine. (Later I taught Creative Writing in China. We call this irony.)

If you hire an editor worthy of the name, you should learn from that editor how to self-edit in the future. In my case it took two tries, because my first "editor" was a rip-off artist charging over ten times market value for incomplete advice.

That editor, incidentally, is named Edit Ink, and they're listed on many "scam warning" sites. They take kickbacks from every fake agent who sends them a client. Avoid such places at all costs, and I will stress the word "costs." Ouch!

If you choose to hire an editor, check price and reputation. For a ballpark figure, I charge a penny a word. Consider that you might never make enough selling your books to get back what you pay that editor. Do you care? That's your decision.

Your first, most important step on the road to publication is to make your writing the best it can be.

Publication

My goal is to be published in both mediums, ebook and print. There are some readers who prefer ebooks, and some who prefer print books. The latter group is larger, but those publishers are harder to sell your writing to. I want to be published in both mediums, because I want all the readers I can get.

Before you epublish, check the contract to be sure you can publish the EDITED work in print later. I'm aware of only one e-publisher whose contract specified "no," but my information on this is very much out of date.

Also, you might want to make sure your targeted print publisher will accept something that's been previously published electronically. That's a nasty little change that's taken place over the past few years. Will I have to choose between the "big publishers" and epublication? I shouldn't be forced to, but it's possible. Check on this with someone more knowledgeable than I am.

If you know your book just plain won't ever make it into traditional print, print-on-demand (POD) is an option. Some of my books fall into this category. The best epublishers will simultaneously publish your work electronically and in POD format, at no cost to you.

A lot of authors swear by self-publication, but the prospect just plain scares me. All that promo, all that self-editing, maybe driving around the countryside with a back seat full of books. I'm a writer, not a salesman. Maybe you're different.

(And did I mention that I live in Thailand? And don't have a car?)

I self-published once, in the pre-POD days. Mom handled the sales. I had fun and broke even. With POD, at least it's easier (and probably cheaper) to self-

publish than it was in 1989, because you'll never get stuck with a large unsold inventory.

POD setup fees can range anywhere from US\$100 to well over \$1000. Don't pay the higher price! Price shop. Also, remember that POD places publish any author who pays, giving them a real credibility problem with some reviewers and readers, and that they do no editing or marketing.

Promoting Your Published Writing

It doesn't matter how you publish your book. Self-published, epublished, POD, or traditional print from a small press or an absolute powerhouse. Marketing falls largely on you, and the same things always work. Book signings, book reviews and interviews in the local newspapers and on radio. (Or Oprah, but what are our chances?) Start with <http://www.kidon.com/media-link/index.shtml>. It will allow you to look up all the local media outlets in your area that have websites.

If you write to them all, you're a spammer. Plus, it'll take ages. Look for the ones with a legitimate interest and fire away.

If you find a stale URL, and I think you will, look for the name of that media outlet at some place like Google. Spend some time looking for the right press contacts, spend some time writing your press release, and do what you can.

Most of these sites list email, snail mail, and phone numbers. Since I live in Asia, I've only used email.

Book reviews, author interviews, book listing sites, and book contests are something we can all do, regardless of where we live. My list is at <http://www.chinarice.org/find-somereaders.html> and there are many other lists.

Aside from two radio interviews and a seminar in Hong Kong, and some emailed press releases to the *local* media back in the US which may or may not have succeeded in anything, my marketing has come from the Internet.

I have a website. I have a newsletter. I write free articles such as this one. You found me somehow, right?

Here's the type of message I receive often in email. To be more precise, in spam.

"If a million people see your ad, and you get 1% of them, that's 10,000 readers and therefore \$15,000 profit and you only paid 1000 for those million addresses."

NO!! It doesn't work that way.

My website is free. My newsletter is free. I don't buy mailing lists, I don't harvest email addresses, and I don't spam. I want interested traffic, not just sheer numbers.

Do you think the Phoenicians tried to sell sails to people a thousand miles from water? Internet marketing isn't a replacement for the methods mentioned above, but a complement to them. And by using it, I got you here. Hi!

Your goal in marketing is this. There are people in the world who like what you like. And since you like your book, they probably will too. You have to find those readers and make them interested, without spamming them and without "playing the numbers game." If you're an e-author, let me state the obvious. Nobody buys ebooks who doesn't have Internet access. Do they? So you definitely need a website.

Traditional print authors need websites too. Even blockbuster authors like Joanne Rowling and Stephen King, who I doubt could garner any more name recognition, have websites. So does every long-established inescapable monstro-business from hell like McDonalds and Coke.

Okay, those folks pay web designers. I'm not doing that. I can't generate sales like that. And yes, I've been employed as an HTML programmer. But you can write your own website without learning HTML if you want. It's no harder than writing a manuscript with a word processor. It won't be super-flashy like the big boys, but it'll communicate the information. Remember, you can communicate. You're an author! That's what keeps people coming back to a website after the thrill of the flash wears off. Information. Content. Your specialty. Not a ticket to massive overnight traffic, but slow steady growth.

Closing Thoughts

Here's something you've heard before. When your manuscript is rejected — and it will be — remember that you aren't being rejected. Your manuscript is.

Did you ever hang up the phone on a telemarketer, delete spam, or close the door in the face of a salesman? Of course, and yet that salesman just moves on to the next potential customer. He knows you're rejecting his product, not him.

Okay, in my case I'm rejecting both, but I'd never do that to an author. Neither will a publisher or an agent. All authors tell other authors not to take rejection personally, and yet we all do. Consider it a target to shoot for, then. Just keep submitting, and just keep writing.

The best way to cope with waiting times is to "submit and forget," writing or editing other stuff while the time passes.

And finally, feel free to send an e-mail to me anytime.
larocca.michael@gmail.com. I'll gladly share what I know with you, and it won't cost you a cent.

I would wish you luck in your publishing endeavors, but I know there's no luck involved. It's all skill and diligence.

Congratulations on completing the course! No ceremonies, no degrees, and no diplomas. But on the bright side, no student loan to repay.

Common Writing Mistakes

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Most books aren't rejected because the stories are "bad." They're rejected because they're not "ready to read." In short, minor stuff like typos, grammar, spelling, etc.

I don't mean places where we, as authors, deliberately break the rules. Those are fine. They're our job. Language always changes with use, and we can help it on its way. No, I'm referring to places where someone just plain didn't learn the rule or got confused or overlooked it during the self-edits.

I've been editing novels since early 2000. Tech manuals since 1990. Looking back at my experiences, I feel like sharing the most common mistakes I've seen. If you'll go through your manuscript and fix these before you submit it to a publisher, your odds of publication will increase dramatically.

Once you've found a publisher who publishes what you write, you want to present yourself in the best way possible. Submitting an unedited manuscript is a bit like going to a job interview wearing a purple Mohawk, no shoes, torn jeans, and a T-shirt. With B.O. that wilts the flowers. Your resume may be perfect, and your qualifications impeccable, but something tells me you won't get the job.

The publisher invests a lot of time and money in every book it accepts. Why ask them to invest hours and days of editing time as well? If the publisher gets two or three or ten nearly identical submissions, you want yours to be the one requiring the least editing.

The first thing you need to do, and I hope you've already done it, is use the spelling and grammar checkers in your word processor. They're not perfect, but they'll catch many of the "common mistakes" on my list. I've been asked to edit many books where the author obviously didn't do this, and I confess that I may have been lazy and let a couple of mine get to my editors unchecked. Bad Michael!

Here's a list of the mistakes I see most often.

- Dialogue where everyone speaks in perfect English and never violates any of the points below. Okay, that's not really a *common* problem. But I have seen it, and it's a terrible thing.
- It's is a contraction for "it is" and its is possessive.
- Who's is a contraction for "who is" and whose is possessive.

- You're is a contraction for "you are" and your is possessive.
- They're is a contraction for "they are," there is a place, their is possessive.
- There's is a contraction for "there is" and theirs is possessive.
- If you've been paying attention to the above examples, you've noticed that possessive pronouns never use apostrophes. Its, whose, your, yours, their, theirs...
- Let's is a contraction for "let us."
- When making a word plural by adding an s, don't use an apostrophe. (The cats are asleep.)
- When making a word possessive by adding an s, use an apostrophe. (The cat's bowl is empty.)
- A bath is a noun, what you take. Bathe is a verb, the action you do when taking or giving a bath.
- A breath is a noun, what you take. Breathe is a verb, the action you do when taking a breath.
- You wear clothes. When you put them on, you clothe yourself. They are made of cloth.
- Whenever you read a sentence with the word "that," ask yourself if you can delete that word and still achieve clarity. If so, kill it. The same can be said of all sentences. If you can delete a word without changing the meaning or sacrificing clarity, do it. "And then" is a phrase worth using your word processor's search feature to look for.
- Keep an eye on verb tenses. "He pulled the pin and throws the grenade" is not a good sentence. When I'm writing, I begin by focusing when "now" is. "Now" could be now, or if I'm writing about an event in the past, "now" could be then. But from that "now," all verb tenses unfold naturally. When the "now" keeps switching, that confuses the reader.
- Keep an eye on making everything agree regarding singular and plural. "My cat and my wife is sleeping," "My cat sleep on the sofa," and "My wife is a beautiful women" are not good sentences. (I exaggerate in these examples, but you know what I mean.) MSWord is especially bad at catching these for you, because it always assumes the verb belongs with the closest noun in front of it, and that's not always your subject.

- I and me, he and him, etc. I hope no editor is rejecting any novels for this one, because I suspect that most people get confused at times. In dialogue, do whatever the heck you want because it sounds more "natural." But for the sake of your narrative, I'll try to explain the rule and the cheat. The rule involves knowing whether your pronoun is the subject or object. When Jim Morrison of The Doors sang, "Til the stars fall from the sky for you and I," he made a good rhyme which was written by Robby Krieger, but they probably both knew he was using bad grammar. According to the rule, "you and I" is the object of the preposition "for," thus it should be "for you and me." The cheat involves pretending "you and" isn't there, and instinctively knowing "for I" just doesn't sound right. (I think only native English speakers can use my cheat. For the record, I have great admiration for anyone who's writing in a language that isn't their native tongue.)
- Should of, would of, could of. This one can make me throw things. It's wrong! What you mean is should have, would have, could have. Or maybe you mean the contractions. Should've, would've, could've. And maybe 've sounds a bit like of. But it's not! "Of" is not a verb. Not now, not ever.
- More, shorter sentences are better. Always. Don't ask a single sentence to do too much work or advance the action too much, because then you've got lots of words scattered about like "that" and "however" and "because" and "or" and "as" and "and" and "while," much like this rather pathetic excuse for a sentence right here.
- On a similar (exaggerated) note: "He laughed a wicked laugh as he kicked Ralphie in the face while he aimed the gun at Lerod and pulled the trigger and then laughed maniacally as Lerod twisted in agony because of the bullet that burned through his face and splattered his brains against the wall and made the wall look like an overcooked lasagna or an abstract painting." Now tell me this sentence isn't trying to do too much.
- Too means also or very, two is a number, to is a preposition.
- He said/she said. Use those only when necessary to establish who's speaking. They distract the reader, pulling him out of the story and saying, "Hey look, you're reading a book." Ideally, within the context of the dialogue, we know who's talking just by the style or the ideas. When a new speaker arrives on the scene, identify him or her immediately. Beyond that keep it to a minimum. Especially with only two people. I don't mean delete them all, because it's really frustrating counting backward to see who is speaking because you forgot. Just don't go overboard with them. Oh yeah, and give every speaker his/her own paragraph. Please.

- Billy-Bob smiled his most winning smile and said, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" I don't like this. Use two shorter sentences in the same paragraph. Billy-Bob smiled his most winning smile. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" Same effect, fewer words, no dialogue tag (he said).
- In the previous example, I don't like "smiled his most winning smile," because it's redundant. If you find yourself writing something like that, try to find a better way to express it before you just give up and leave it like it is. During the self-edit, I mean, not during the initial writing.
- "The glow-in-the-dark poster of Jesus glowed in the dark." This editor won't let that one go. Much too redundant, and it appeared in a published novel. The author probably made more royalties than me, too.
- Lie is what you do when you lie down on the bed, lay is what you do to another object that you lay on the table. Just to confuse matters, the past tense of lie is lay. Whenever I hit a lay/lie word in reading, I stop and think. Do that when you self-edit. (Note: Don't fix this one in dialogue unless your character is quite well-educated, because most people say it wrong. I do.)
- Beware of the dangling modifier. "Rushing into the room, the exploding bombs dropped seven of the soldiers." Wait a minute. The bombs didn't rush into the room. The soldiers did. To get all technical about it, the first part is the "dependent clause," and it must have the same subject as the "independent clause" which follows. Otherwise it's amateur, distracting, and a real pain for your poor overworked editor.
- When something dark gets lighter, that is lightening. Them things that flash through the skies during a thunderstorm are called lightning bolts. No e, okay?

If you are able (many readers are not), keep an eye out for missing periods, weird commas, closing quotes, opening quotes, etc. When I read a book, be it an e-book or a printed book, I can't help but spot every single one that's missing. They slap me upside the head, which makes me a great editor but a lousy reader. If you're like me, use that to your advantage. If not, that's what editors are for.

I've been asked how to punctuate dialogue but I'm too lazy to write my own article, so I'll just refer you to <http://www.authorinresidence.ecsd.net/Dialogue%20Punctuation.htm> and hope it's still there.

From The Mailbag

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Dear Michael,

My life was a disaster. My husband left me for another man and took my truck. With four-wheel drive. My dog bit me. The bank repossessed my house. I was illiterate and unemployable. My husband had always been my sole source of income before. What oh what could I do?

I lived in a cardboard box in an alley, my only friend a rusty battered shopping cart with one wheel missing. When I could, I slept in the lobby of the local library, but only on shifts when the old lady with no sense of smell was working. No one else could stand to be in my presence. I ate leftovers from dumpsters. I learned how to make a lovely drink by swishing tap water around in an empty bottle of HP Sauce.

One day I walked into the library for a nice long nap, but there were winos on every couch. So I walked over to a computer terminal, resigned to sleeping in a chair. Again. But there on the screen was NO EDIT FOR YOU. I like food.

It was like a revelation to me. Writing? I'd never thought of it before. But I gave it a shot, following your advice and clinging onto every precious word. I learned about spelling, grammar and punctuation. I learned the difference between verbs and verbiage. I learned about dialogue, plot, dangling modifiers, misplaced modifiers, characterization, descriptive passages, narrative, exposition, active voice, and Tom Swifties. And adverbs. I like adverbs.

Writing and publishing were my tickets out of the cardboard box in the alley. A way to quit pushing that squeaky shopping cart. To sleep in an honest-to-goodness bed again. To bathe. To buy new clothes. To learn how to live again! I got a better husband, a bigger truck, a new dog, and a mansion.

This is all because of your unparalleled generosity in writing such a wonderful newsletter, and I will be forever in your debt. Not financially — these billions are mine — but in my heart.

With warmest regards,
££ Rowling

VERY

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Very is an adverb, yet it cannot modify a verb. Why the hell not? Let's look at some Chinese, shall we?

Wo ai ni.
I love you.
Wo hen ai ni.
I very love you.

That makes perfect sense to me. I love many things, such as bicycling, nature, literature, humor, food, or good music. But I very love Jan. Some cats run, but Miss Picasso very runs. Sometimes she purrs and sometimes she very purrs.

I greatly love Jan, I deeply love Jan, I sincerely love Jan, I quite love Jan, I passionately love Jan, and I wholeheartedly love Jan. Why can't I very love Jan if I want to?

This is just one question you'll face if you teach your language to someone with a different native language. And in this case, I have no good answer. "We just don't." How lame.

This is getting very silly. I very should very stop now before you very stop reading.

ADVICE FOR WRITERS

Assembled by Michael LaRocca

<http://www.chinarice.org>

Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them. —Flannery O'Connor

I write fiction because it's a way of making statements I can disown, and I write plays because dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting myself. —Tom Stoppard

It is always a good idea, in any type of writing, to imagine what it's like to be the reader. —Carl Dickson

Don't worry about people stealing your ideas. If your ideas are any good, you'll have to ram them down people's throats. —Howard Aiken

An editor is someone who separates the wheat from the chaff and then prints the chaff. —Adlai Stevenson

Some editors are failed writers, but so are most writers. —T.S. Eliot

It has been said that there is no great writing, only great rewriting. Perhaps that's why it's taken me 20 years to write this book. —Michael LaRocca

Few people think more than two or three times a year; I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once a week. —George Bernard Shaw

It is impossible to discourage the real writers - they don't give a damn what you say, they're going to write. —Sinclair Lewis

When something can be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing. —Enrique Jardiel Poncela

Easy reading is damn hard writing. —Nathaniel Hawthorne

I try to leave out the parts that people skip. —Elmore Leonard

Writing comes more easily if you have something to say. —Sholem Asch

I'm all in favor of keeping dangerous weapons out of the hands of fools. Let's start with typewriters. —Frank Lloyd Wright

I can't understand why a person will take a year or two to write a novel when he can easily buy one for a few dollars. —Fred Allen

I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter.

—James Michener

Writers have a rare power not given to anyone else; we can bore people long after we are dead.

—Sinclair Lewis

Whoever said the pen is mightier than the sword obviously never encountered automatic weapons.

—Douglas McArthur

How To Break Into Print Publishing

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The big question. Do you submit directly to publishers, or do you find an agent who will do that for you? It can work either way. Many publishers refuse to read unagented submissions, but on the other hand Tom Clancy and John Grisham sold their first books without an agent.

The bottom line is, if a publisher reads what he can sell, he'll buy it. It doesn't matter if it comes from an author or an agent. The trick is getting him to read it. That's always your focus.

The most important step is to get your presentation looking as professional as possible. No mistakes. None. Zero. Nada. The vast majority of rejections aren't because the story is "bad," but because the Acquisitions Editor concludes that it'll be too much work to make it "ready to read." With new authors, publishers usually lose money. Advertising, print inventory... Don't ask them to invest a great deal of editing time as well. They won't do it. It's just that simple.

The Selection Process

The most important part of getting your error-free manuscript published is choosing the right market. The best way to do this is to read books that are aimed at the same target audience as your own. If you want to approach publishers directly, look at who published those books. Their marketing machine is already positioned to announce your manuscript to your target audience, and they want more books of the type that you write. They're your best bet.

Some authors thank their editors. If you're going straight to the publishers, note the editors' names and use those, preferably after a phone call to ensure the editor still works there. If you can, just phone the publisher and tell whoever answers the phone something like "I'm writing a letter to so-and-so, and I want to be sure I'm spelling the name correctly." I used to be a secretary. I liked quick, easy questions.

If you want to approach an agent first, look in the acknowledgements sections of those books. Some authors thank their agents. Look up those agents and start with them. Tell them how you found them. This might impress them because it makes you look professional. You know they've got a track record in your genre. They know how to sell to publishers who are aimed at your target audience, so let them do it.

Whichever method you use, go in fully prepared. Meaning, work through all the steps below before you submit anything.

Overview

Your aim is to convince someone who not only does not know you, but does not want to know you, and has read too many bad books, that your book is different. For this you need a cover letter, bio, synopsis, and sample chapter of such wit, wisdom and genius that even the most jaded and cynical editor can take pleasure in it.

Take your time. Don't just whip up something in a day and send it out. You're probably looking at a one- or two-year gap between acceptance and publication. So in the grand scheme of things, taking the time to make your presentation really shine won't matter. EXCEPT, it'll ensure you get published in the first place.

Every publisher should have writers' guidelines. Get them. Read them. Follow them. They're using the process of elimination to get out of reading these submissions. The first step in that process is to bump off every author who can't follow the guidelines. Don't be one of them.

Preparing Your Query Letter

This will be the first impression they get of you. Make it a good one. Edit that letter as hard as you would a manuscript, and make the damn thing perfect. Make it good writing. Sum up your book in such a way as to make the recipient of the letter say, "Wow, I want to read this book."

The first page of your book, along with the jacket text, are what usually determines whether a browser buys your book or puts it back on the shelf. As you write your query letter, think of what you'd put on that book jacket, and work that concept into your letter.

Never address your query letter To Whom It May Concern, Dear Editor, or any of that. Get a name. When you find the books that you really like, and are searching them for potential publishers, call those publishers. Ask who edited those books. If you want to approach the publisher directly, write to those editors.

You can find more excellent information on the submission and publication process at:

<http://www.absolutewrite.com/>

<http://www.caderbooks.com/pubfaq.html>

<http://www.dsmagency.com/published.html>

<http://www.fictionfactor.com/guests/findagent.html>

<http://www.fictionfactor.com/children/chances.html>

<http://www.jkelman.com/publish/>

<http://www.sff.net/people/justinvs/howtopub.html>

With a simple bit of good writing, and we all know you can do that since you've already written and polished your manuscript, you'll make it past this first hurdle. The editor reads your letter, sees nothing in it to stop him from continuing, and has no choice.

What would stop him? Typos. Grammar. Spelling. Boredom. Or anything that says "I write so much better than Stephen King that he's not fit to hold my jock strap. Buy my book and we'll both get rich."

Writing Your Bio

Don't lie. That's the first rule. The second rule is, don't forget any writing credits. List everything relevant you've got. Publications in decent magazines or newspapers. Credits in TV, films, theaters. Any literary prize you've managed to get in adulthood. The fact that you're a professor of English or an editor of a sports journal.

If you have no literary background, no education, and no respectable publications, but you spent fifteen years in solitary confinement in a Siberian work camp, that might indicate that you have a story to tell. But if you're writing about cuddly wombats to entertain the under-five crowd, this piece of information may be more than anyone needs to know.

You can list your credits either chronologically or from most impressive to least impressive. Just whichever puts you in the best light. You want to look like you're already a successful author. You don't want to sound arrogant, but you do want to sound confident. Keep it to a single page. You don't want to waste anybody's time. They don't have enough. (Who does?)

If your bio is so bare of details that it's more of a liability than an asset, forget about it. Maybe your "bio" equals a sentence or two, in which case you can work it into your query letter instead of a separate document.

Your goal, remember, is to get that editor to read your synopsis or manuscript. To judge it on its own merits. If he reads your writing and rejects it, you gave it your best shot. Try a few more editors, and if they all reject it, think about improving your writing. But you don't want that editor to stop reading your submission before he gets to your writing. So, take the time to do your query letter and bio correctly.

Writing Your Synopsis

To quote at least one agent, "There is no such thing as a good synopsis." And how can there be? How do you sum up 50,000 or 100,000 words in a page or two? I'll tell you how I do it. Very badly.

Having said that, this is your first chance to show the publisher that you can write. Some publishers want a minimal amount of information on first contact (query letter, bio, synopsis). Others want to see the first chapter or two as well. Nobody wants to see the whole manuscript at first, except those who say so in their writers' guidelines. If you include sample chapters, the chance of them being read depends largely on the quality of your query letter and synopsis.

Keep your synopsis short, two pages maximum unless the writers' guidelines say differently. Shorter is better. Pick out the theme and the strengths of your book and, in as clever a fashion as possible, relay these qualities in a brief chronology. The chronology is less important than the theme because, in truth, your only hope with a synopsis is that your theme or concept will strike a chord with the editor or agent reading it.

If your story is funny, your synopsis should be funny. If it's a romantic story, then your synopsis should be a romantic synopsis. You are a writer, and here is where you can be creative.

Many great works of literature don't have easily defined stories, just fine writing and good characters. If you have no story, then you have to sell your idea. Your synopsis must have fine, clear writing. Say how your book starts, how it ends, and the interest in the middle. This isn't the time for cliffhangers.

Your sample chapter should do the main talking, but your synopsis should offer up those clever memorable sound bites that will linger in the editor's mind and convince him to read the sample chapter.

Preparing Your Manuscript

Did I mention that your manuscript must be flawless? I'll mention it again. Your manuscript must be flawless. Especially be sure that the first chapter(s), the "hook" that you submit, will be the type that grabs the reader and makes him/her/it wonder what happens next.

For questions of paper size, margins, etc., consult the writers' guidelines for your prospective publisher(s) and follow them precisely. Do what they say and they'll read your manuscript. Fail to do so and they'll set it down unread, even if you're the next Joanne Rowling.

Remember, they're budgeting their time and trying to get out of reading this stuff. Once they read it, they'll be fair. (If not, you don't want them.) If it's good solid writing, you're in. But until they get to your writing, they always expect the worst. If you'd seen some of the crap that comes their way, you'd be just as pessimistic. But in the end they do love good writing or else they'd quit that job.

Literary Agents Revisited

Here's some advice from the [Agent Research and Evaluation](#) website. They define an agent as:

"...someone who makes a living selling real books to real publishers. No one representing himself as an agent should also claim to be a book doctor, an editor-for-hire, a book 'consultant' of any kind. They shouldn't charge any type of 'upfront' reading fee, marketing fee, evaluation fee or any other fee apart from a commission on work sold.

"With the possible exception of certain MINIMAL office expenses, legitimate agents NEVER handle [the expenses connected with submitting manuscripts] as an upfront cost. Only as a billable expense after being shown to have been incurred.

"Remember, real agents live off the commissions they make from selling their clients' projects. Scammers live off up-front fees for unnecessary, inadequate, or non-existent services."

This is excellent advice. Anyone can call himself an agent, get himself listed somewhere, and tell every author who sends him a manuscript "This is excellent. Send me some money and I'll sell it." Then he can pocket the author's money and do absolutely nothing, or send the manuscript to the same publishers who reject everything else he sends them.

Agents work for a percentage of your sales. It's usually 15%. An agent's source of income must be the books he sells. If the author pays him before he closes a sale, where is his incentive to close the sale?

Insist that your agent send you copies of all rejection letters. A great agent should offer this without you asking, and those rejection letters shouldn't *all* be *undated* "Dear author" or "Dear agent" letters that don't mention you or your agent or your manuscript by name.

Your agent should also involve you in the selection process without you asking, even if that just means telling you "I'm sending to this, that, and the other place." Don't let him/her send your gothic romance to a children's publisher, etc.

If you've been reading my other advice, you're already talking to other authors. If you know one who's made it into print, especially one who writes in your genre, ask which agent (and which publisher and editor) he used.

If your agent is sending your stuff to the right places and it's still getting rejected, you've done all you can do, except write better.

FAQ, Not Fack

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<http://www.chinarice.org>

Q: How long does it take to write a book?

A: That depends on how good you make it.

Q: Where can I read free samples of your writing?

A: Why would you want to?

Q: What's the hardest thing about catching an editor's eye?

A: Getting someone to throw it to you.

Q: How can I stop people from stealing my ideas?

A: Don't worry, nobody wants them. Or perhaps more seriously, ideas are the easy part. You can do that in a day. Writing takes months. Maybe years. There are no new ideas.

Q: Where do you get your ideas from?

A: I steal them. Got a book for me to edit?

Q: Why don't women blink during foreplay?

A: They don't have time.

Q: Did your mother have any children that lived?

A: Nope. Did yours?

Q: Why don't senators use bookmarks?

A: They just bend over the page.

Q: How much do you have to pay to get published?

A: Freeze! Time for me to stop joking. Please, please, please don't pay to get published. Publishers pay you. Anyone who says different wants to part you from your money faster than a Bangkok bar girl.

Q: What's the worst part about seeing five lawyers in Cadillac go over a cliff?

A: A Cadillac seats six.

Q: Does Britney Spears have a brain?

A: Only when she's pregnant.

Q: Why does Mike Tyson cry during sex?

A: Mace will do that to you.

- Q: Where can I see more Picasso photos?
A: You're obviously a person of discriminating taste.
<http://www.chinarice.org/photo-album.html>.
- Q: Where can I read free samples of your writing?
A: What are you, an idiot?
- Q: How many years do you have to write before you can quit your "day job"?
A: 42. (At last, the question to match Douglas Adams' answer.)
- Q: Who's your agent?
A: Huh?
- Q: Who's your publicist?
A: Huh?
- Q: Who's your editor?
A: Huh?
- Q: What's the difference between an editor and God?
A: God doesn't think he's an editor.
- Q: What's the difference between a golf ball and a woman's G spot?
A: A man will spend 10 minutes looking for a golf ball.
- Q: What does a Ziploc bag have in common with a walrus?
A: They're both looking for a tight seal.
- Q: What's does it mean when they fly the U.S. flag at half mast at the post office?
A: They're hiring.
- Q: Why do you have this website?
A: Nobody knows.
- Q: How much do you pay your web designer?
A: Look at the place. Would you pay someone to write this crap?
- Q: Why do you publish this newsletter?
A: Why does a dog lick his balls?
- Q: Were you born that ugly or did you have to work at it?
A: It takes both to excel to this degree.
- Q: What's the difference between a PhD in English and a large pizza?
A: The pizza can feed a family of four.

Q: Why did you start writing?

A: Why not?

Q: When did you start writing?

A: When I discovered I couldn't lick my balls.

Q: Where can I read free samples of your writing?

A: Are you still here? Oh, okay. <http://www.chinarice.org/michael-larocca.html> but you'll hate yourself in the morning.

VOICE IN NARRATIVE AND DIALOGUE

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<http://www.chinarice.org>

One of the nice things about being an author is that we can break any rule we want. (I just did.) It's part of our job description. Language changes through usage — definitions, spelling, grammar — and authors can help it do this. But on the other hand, we have to have some sort of agreement on the language or we won't be able to talk to each other.

Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.

When we as authors break a rule or two, it's not because we're ignorant. It's because we have reasons to break them. That's one of the joys of writing. Having said that, now I'm going to explain some rules. There are two types of writing in your novel. There is your narrative and there is your dialogue. The rules for the two are not the same.

NARRATIVE

A cop thriller like VIGILANTE JUSTICE has a simple set of rules for the narrative portion. Third person, straightforward writing, light on adjectives and adverbs, easy to read and grammatically correct.

To a degree the genre will help you identify what's appropriate. For a cop drama, write in the dry style of a journalist. For horror, a bit of hyperbole may be acceptable in the most dramatic sections. For romance (not my genre), you can probably use lots more adjectives (swollen, heaving, throbbing) than you'd normally dare.

Sentence fragments are acceptable if communication is achieved, and you'll note that I use them often in this article. Why? Simply because it's more effective that way.

When I wrote RISING FROM THE ASHES, the true story of Mom raising my brother and me alone, I tried to adopt a "childlike voice" early in the narrative. As the character of Michael the storyteller grew older, I abandoned that childlike quality. (An entire book of that would get old fast anyway.)

When I wrote REDNECK GOES TO CHINA, the humorous sequel, I once again used first person narrative. But the narrative of RISING is first person only in that it uses "I" instead of "Michael." Michael is a camera. RISING still follows all the rules of "conventional" narrative.

In REDNECK, I threw most of the rules out the window. I used what one author referred to my as "conversational" tone to maximum effect in REDNECK. He felt

like he wasn't so much reading my book as just listening to me tell some stories over a few beers. That's exactly what I wanted.

When I wrote the sequel to REDNECK, another bit of humor called WHO MOVED MY RICE?, I chose to keep that same narrative style, which I'd spent three years perfecting in my newsletter.

In RISING, while I was the "first person" character, I wasn't really the book's focus. In REDNECK and RICE, I am. Center stage, in the spotlight. Using more of a "dialogue" style in what should have been "narrative" allowed me to focus the reader's attention on the first person to a greater degree than simply describing him (me) ever could. You may love me or you may hate me, but you'll know me and you'll laugh at me. Or, in the case of RICE, you'll feel my frequent confusion. I had to write that book from "my perspective" because it was often the only one I understood.

If you're going to use a more conversational tone in your narrative, don't think that means you just write something down and don't have to edit it. You still have to organize your thoughts, and that means rewriting. While your style may be unconventional, you have to make the ideas easy for the reader to follow.

In the case of narrative, you have the choice. If you want to spotlight the storyteller to maximum effect, you can go with first person and let the storyteller's narrative and his dialogue read the same. If you'd prefer to "move the camera" back a bit, make the narrative conventional in contrast to the dialogue. As a rule, this reader likes contrast, because he gets bored reading the same thing over and over again unless the style is really special. Or perhaps you can find a point somewhere in between.

Every story has a way that it should be told for maximum effect. Maximum effect in the author's eyes, of course, since it's a subjective thing. Keep it in mind as you write. Make the call, stick to it, change it if it's not working. It might even be okay to be inconsistent, but only if you do so deliberately. Just keep stuff like "ease of reading" and "maximum effect" in mind and be creative.

DIALOGUE

Have you ever read a book where the dialogue reads like narrative? I hope you haven't. But as an editor I've seen such things, and they're very ugly.

Do you know why they're so ugly? Because they remind the reader of the one thing an author does not want to remind the reader of. Namely, that every character on the page is a puppet under the author's control.

As readers, we put that thought aside so we can enjoy reading. "Willing suspension of disbelief." If the author ensures that the reader can't suspend

disbelief, the book will not be read. Stilted dialogue is one of the quickest ways to make that happen.

I've decided that writing dialogue is the hardest thing we do. It's certainly not something we can go look up in a style manual or a grammar textbook.

What are the rules? "Make it sound real." But with the corollary, "not too real because people always say um and er and crap like that." Oh yeah. That explains everything. End of my article, right? Nope. I'm still writing it.

Ideally, the greatest of the great creators of dialogue will have every character speaking in a voice so distinctive that he/she need never identify the speaker. Okay, that's enough fiction. Snap back to reality. None of us are writing dialogue that well, are we?

People use a lot more contractions in speech than in writing. They're faster. More sentence fragments, too. People very often use the wrong version of lie/lay or who/whom in speaking. I do.

The dialogue portion of VIGILANTE JUSTICE isn't difficult to describe. The hero is a self-destructive cop named Gary Drake. He's based on a real-life cop, my little brother. So his dialogue was easy because, in my mind, I always heard Gary speaking in Barry's voice.

For my other characters, I had to find some other voices. For example, the voice of Doctor Garrett Allison is, to me, that of Michael Jordan.

That's right, people. When I write, I literally hear voices in my head.

As a beginning writer, and not a very good one, I read some advice somewhere saying you might want to cut photos out of magazines and use them when writing your physical description, in case you can't form a mental picture of your characters. I've done that, and with some modification I've extended it to voices.

As an author, you should always play to your strengths while working to improve your weaknesses. I know many authors who think visually, and I envy them. One author told me that when he writes, he literally sees movies in his head, then just has to type them really fast because that's how they're playing. Lucky him. My novels first come to me in snippets of dialogue. Every character has the same voice at that stage. (My voice, of course.)

Tight dialogue is one thing I enjoy when I read. Here are the characters at some sort of verbal showdown. I know them, I know their motives, I can read between the lines and know what's being left unsaid. I can just feel the tension in the air. I'm not so much mentally picturing bulging veins and angry glares as I am just feeling the spoken words.

I also have an excellent memory of voices. Like a dog remembers scents or an artist colors, it seems, I can remember voices. But just hearing the voices (if you're able) isn't enough. The words themselves will be different depending on who's speaking them, even if they're relaying the same information.

In *VIGILANTE JUSTICE*, Gary Drake doesn't use a lot of words. He almost never describes his own feelings, and if he does he feels guilty about having them. He speaks with a Southern drawl. He tends to use a single swear word, and that word is "fuck." Marjorie Brooks, on the other hand, mentions feelings and uses whichever swear word is the most appropriate, except that she never says "fuck." Doctor Allison doesn't use as many contractions as the rest of us do. These are things I kept in mind as I wrote their dialogue.

Mr. Spock's speech sounds like written language, very grammatical and correct, and that's deliberate. He's a scientist, he's logical, and for him language is a tool to be used with as much precision as possible. That isn't just a different style of dialogue; it helps define his character.

In *THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN*, Ahriman used fewer contractions than the rest of us and he avoided sentence fragments. (He speaks in the voice of Andreas Katsulas.) He probably even knew the difference between who and whom or lie and lay. That's because he's intelligent, you see. It kinds of goes with the territory when one is evil incarnate.

During an edit I did of a sci-fi book, I saw that the author wasn't using contractions in dialogue. I suggested changing his humans' dialogue in many places to use more contractions, except when military officers were giving orders, because order-giving officers tend to be more "serious" and "thoughtful" than folks just being regular folks.

I also suggested to this author that he change nothing about the "stilted" speech patterns of his aliens. English isn't their native language, you see, and one thing I noticed from living in China is that the locals didn't use nearly as many contractions as I do. So I thought that added realism. Plus, the contrast should help the readers keep everybody straight even if they aren't consciously aware of why.

I remember in one edit where I read some character saying, "I am an historian." Oh, I hate that phrase. I hate anyone putting "an" in front of a word that begins with the consonant "h." It's terribly pretentious and arrhythmic. As I kept reading the book, I quickly learned that the character in question was terribly pretentious. Nobody else in the book was throwing "an" in front of "h" words. It was a deliberate contrast on the author's part, and it worked quite nicely.

CONCLUSION

I suppose the point of all this is, remember the difference between narrative and dialogue.

In the case of narrative, you're simply trying to describe what happens. According to George Orwell, "Great writing is like a window pane." Stick to that maxim unless you feel you have a good reason not to. If you've got what it takes to make your writing style superior to the conventional, and if your story allows it, let that style be an asset of your writing. Otherwise, just stick to the rules until you master them.

In the case of dialogue, you're trying to write something that sounds like what the characters would actually say, but a bit more organized because "real" speech can be boring. Give every character his/her/its own voice.

Am I joking when I say "its?" Not entirely. THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN contains a short story written in first person from my dog's viewpoint. I would never call Daisy an "it."

There's a stylistic decision you can make in narrative, by the way. I always refer to animals as "he" or "she." Some authors always use "it." In dialogue, you can let some characters always say he or she, and let others always say it, to contrast the feeling with the unfeeling. (My heroes never call an animal "it.")

In the end, the goal is always the same. Make your writing as easy to read as you can. Keep that in mind, and always keep learning, and you won't go wrong.

THE ONE-PLOT WONDER

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Back in the mid to late 1980s I was a security guard. The pay was lousy, but it gave me many hours in seclusion to write short stories and novels. However, I usually worked over 80 hours a week. No one can write that much unless his name is Isaac Asimov. Thus I discovered the joys of my local libraries. Recently, I decided to look up an author who gave me great pleasure in those days. Most of his books are now out of print, I've learned, even the one that became a movie.

I found that two of his books were available, so I ordered them. One I'd enjoyed before. The other was a straight thriller from the days before he created the "Appleton Porter" spy spoofs, re-released in 2001 in POD. I didn't know this before they arrived at my home in China.

Since I'm giving away THE plot spoiler, I won't identify the author or title. A man who deeply loves his wife buys her a hotel outside London. She is very happy there, at first. This is a fine suspenseful read as she notes oddities and eventually appears to be losing her mind and such. Suicides, an eventual murder. Finally, her husband pays a doctor to kill her.

Her husband arranged all this, we learn at the end, because she was dying of a horrible and incurable illness. Rather than let her suffer the indignity, he tries to give this lover of mystery novels some final days filled with clever puzzles and wonderful memories. He never realizes that he ended her days with a living hell.

The writing was fine, aside from some stupid typos of the sort common in unedited POD titles. He's obviously a sincere, hard-working, talented author. The plot was wholly consistent and everything "worked." So why is it a weak book? Because the plot I described is all there is. It's a one-plot wonder.

As an author, if you find yourself floundering, if you find your work-in-progress failing to make progress, ask yourself. Is it a one-plot wonder?

Here are some best sellers I've read over the past 30 years.

During the Cold War, a Soviet commander steals a top-secret submarine and tries to defect to the US with it. A good and idealistic young law graduate accepts a job too good to be true, only to eventually learn he's working for the Mafia. An alcoholic author and his family become caretakers at an old Maine hotel, alone during the winter, and he eventually goes nuts. A US President declares war on drug dealers, a "clear and present danger" to national security. A crippled author is kidnapped by the ultimate fan.

I've chosen these titles because I've read the books and seen the movies. None of my plot summaries are wrong. But with some of those novels, there are many more plots and subplots at work. These are the novels that didn't always translate well to the big screen due to time constraints and/or loss of nonobjective voice.

I love a well-conceived "what if" scenario, and none of these books lack that. But more importantly, I love a novel that's rich with the fabric of life. That's where multiple plots come into play. Very rarely will a movie capture this as well as a novel can.

A one-plot wonder is a boring read. It's a boring write. It's not realistic. And, it's a hard sell. All your eggs are in one basket. If the editor isn't enthralled with that sole plot, you aren't published. If the reviewer isn't enthralled with that sole plot, he pans you. If the potential reader isn't enthralled with that sole plot, he doesn't buy your book. Or if he does, maybe you don't get any repeat business from him. You don't get mine.

Plus, we should be setting the bar a bit higher for ourselves anyway. We entertain, but we also enlighten and educate. Or at the very least, provide needed escape. But it's hard to escape to a one-plot wonder. I keep taking coffee breaks between chapters.

I single out no writing medium with this. All are guilty. Come on, TERMINATOR 2 has more subplots than many successful books these days. And it's not just "these days," incidentally. The title I reviewed early in this article is from 1979. Published, successful, well-written, flat.

Craftsmanship is fine. Craftsmanship is wonderful to behold. Craftsmanship is a necessity. But it's not enough. Do you want to build a horse barn that never leaks or do you want to build a two-story A-frame home that survives five hurricanes undamaged? My carpenter did the latter and I can't do the former. But if I had the ability to build a leak-proof barn, I certainly wouldn't limit myself to barns. I'd try to build houses. Just like the sheriff (Gene Hackman) in UNFORGIVEN.

I'm not talking about weighty tomes. Times change, readers change, and most people don't read those tomes any more. What was once considered gripping is now considered boring.

But one-plot wonders also bore readers. They read it, enjoy it moderately, then go look for something else to do. There's little satisfaction at the end. Rarely the big "wow" that made you start writing in the first place.

I'm talking about shooting for five stars instead of two or three. I'm talking about richness of story, raising the standard, writing your absolute best instead of settling for adequate.

I risk oversimplification here, but I'm seeing far too many one-plot wonders. People are buying them, too. But it's time for us, the authors, to quit writing them.

CAR HORNS

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Let's pretend that you live in China. Let's also pretend that, unlike me, you own a car. A Volkswagen Santana, of course. Who do you honk the horn at?

Well, you honk at everyone who's in your way, and who you think is in your way, and who you are passing, and who you think is trying to pass you. Every bicycle needs a honk in case the driver can't see you. Every pedestrian, most definitely, because they're not looking at anything except their feet as they float out in front of you, or the text messages they're sending on their cell phones.

Every car does this, and the roads become a constant cacophony of car horns. The noise is such that everybody tunes it out in order to function, so the horns are pointless. Nobody is listening to the horns. Some of us wear MP3 players cranked up to full volume specifically to block the noise, which is why we're deaf. But honking is a habit the Chinese driver can't break. It's like breathing.

Okay, now here comes a legitimate reason to honk the horn, an emergency, perhaps some fool walking right in front of your car. What do you do? Flick the headlights. Just how stupid is that? If he can't hear your horn, he sure can't hear your headlights. Of course he can't see your headlights, because he's not looking at you. That's what caused the crisis in the first place. Plus, it's daytime. Nobody can see headlights in the daytime when he's facing the other direction.

I offer this little tale for authors who wonder why I prefer understatement. Superlatives are your car horns. Save them until you actually need them.

WRITER SCHOOL?

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Here's something from my mailbag. "Dear Michael, do you need to do good in school if you want to be a writer? I stink at school and all my friends laugh at me when I tell them I want to write, but I'm serious." Followed by a sentence or two of "I need your words to encourage me" or some such nonsense.

Fortunately, a writing sample is rarely attached. If it is, either it's excellent or it stinks like rancid yak butter. There's a lot of middle ground in the writing world, of course, but for some reason it never seems to accompany these emails.

The message is usually (but not always) so filled with errors that I'm not gonna reprint them here or correct them when I reply lest I destroy some sensitive soul like a jackhammer to an eggshell. It's ridiculous that I should even have such power, being a stranger and all. Let's move on to the relevant part, the question, which actually contains several. This writer gets bonus points for brevity.

Do you have to be good in school? Given what's passing for English in some places, I'd certainly like to see more effort given to school.

If you aspire to be an author and you did poorly in school, or if you're just plain uneducated, don't let it stop you. What we do as authors isn't taught in school. They teach grammar, and bless them. I can't teach that subject. If you're very fortunate, as I was, you'll stumble across some teachers who also encourage you to think. But thinking is the beginning of writing, not the end, and grammar can be fixed later if you find some long-suffering editor (like me) willing to do it.

In other words, school can help you with the first step or two of your journey to be an author. Considering how many steps come after those, don't be discouraged by test results and report cards.

To distill what you think, feel and believe from all the trash floating around in your head, and then to actually put that on paper the way you mean to put it, is a skill that only comes from years of practice. I struggled at this for 20 years or so after I graduated from college. I didn't learn to write in a classroom.

In my travels through the Intergoogle, I've met blind authors, deaf authors, dyslexic authors, authors writing in a second or third language, authors suffering partial paralysis, authors with various psychoses, authors who deal with more than one of these obstacles. What they overcome makes my complaint, that I'm too left-brained to be in this business, seem absolutely pathetic. And yours, about doing poorly in school.

I could cite you a VERY long list of authors who did poorly in school. If I did my job as an editor, you'll never know who they are unless I call them out by name. And I won't. Probably because I can't remember them.

(I'm joking. Editor/author confidentiality protects them, even if it exists only in my imagination.)

Our emailer then mentions that her friends laugh at her when she tells them she intends to write. Why does she care? I've lost count of how many projects I've undertaken despite criticism. Not just writing, either. Life. But let me narrow my focus just so I can end this rant.

You have a reason for writing. You know what it is, even if you can't put it into words. I can't put it into words. ("It" can mean your reason or mine in that sentence.) But it's there. Why do you give a rat's ass how many people tell you not to even try? People who I doubt have even read your writing, I might add. Your classmates won't understand why you write. Nor your friends. Nor your family. You're lucky if you find ten non-writers in your lifetime who have a clue. And you don't care. You just write.

If you're ever lucky enough to "arrive," then all the doubters will claim to understand why you write. And they'll all be wrong.

Also, by the time someone out there is embracing your work, you'll already be three books beyond it and sick of hearing about your old trash. No, it won't be trash, but you'll think of it that way. There's a big time lapse between creation and that Oprah interview.

What I never write to those emailers is this.

I shouldn't have to tell you why you write. You don't need my vindication or anyone else's. If those who haven't even read your work can discourage you, give up. Or do an Emily Dickinson and leave it all for people to find after you die. But if you'll let something as silly as your grades in school stop you from even beginning to write in the first place, nothing you have to write is worth finding after you die.

And if you're angry at me for saying that, good. Prove me wrong. Write a book.

THE WORST ANALOGIES IN HIGH SCHOOL WRITING

Assembled by Michael LaRocca

<http://www.chinarice.org>

- He spoke with the wisdom that can only come from experience, like a guy who went blind because he looked at a solar eclipse without one of those boxes with a pinhole in it and now goes around the country speaking at high schools about the dangers of looking at a solar eclipse without one of those boxes with a pinhole in it.
- She caught your eye like one of those pointy hook latches that used to dangle from screen doors and would fly up whenever you banged the door open again.
- The little boat gently drifted across the pond exactly the way a bowling ball wouldn't.
- McBride fell 12 stories, hitting the pavement like a Hefty Bag filled with vegetable soup.
- Her eyes were like two brown circles with big black dots in the center.
- Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever.
- He was as tall as a six-foot-three-inch tree.
- The hailstones leaped from the pavement, just like maggots when you fry them in hot grease.
- Her date was pleasant enough, but she knew that if her life was a movie this guy would be buried in the credits as something like "Second Tall Man."
- Long separated by cruel fate, the star-crossed lovers raced across the grassy field toward each other like two freight trains, one having left Cleveland at 6:36 p.m. traveling at 55 mph, the other from Topeka at 4:19 p.m. at a speed of 35 mph.
- They lived in a typical suburban neighborhood with picket fences that resembled Nancy Kerrigan's teeth.
- The red brick wall was the color of a brick-red Crayola crayon.
- John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.

- The thunder was ominous-sounding, much like the sound of a thin sheet of metal being shaken backstage during the storm scene in a play.
- His thoughts tumbled in his head, making and breaking alliances like underpants in a dryer without Cling Free.
- Even in his last years, Granddad had a mind like a steel trap, only one that had been left out so long it had rusted shut.
- Shots rang out, as shots are wont to do.
- The plan was simple, like my brother Phil. But unlike Phil, this plan just might work.
- The young fighter had a hungry look, the kind you get from not eating for a while.
- The dandelion swayed in the gentle breeze like an oscillating electric fan set on medium.
- It came down the stairs looking very much like something no one had ever seen before.
- It hurt the way your tongue hurts after you accidentally staple it to the wall.
- The ballerina rose gracefully en pointe and extended one slender leg behind her, like a dog at a lamppost.
- The revelation that his marriage had disintegrated because of his wife's infidelity came as a rude shock, like a surcharge at a formerly surcharge-free cashpoint.
- He was as lame as a duck. Not the metaphorical lame duck either, but a real duck that was actually lame. Maybe from stepping on a land mine or something.
- She grew on him like she was a colony of E. coli and he was room-temperature British beef.

GET RICH WRITING FICTION

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Some of us write simply because we can't not write. Ideas grab us, move us, and demand to be written. We strive to make it as real as we possibly can, to improve at our craft every day, hopefully to make it into the realm of literature as well as entertainment. We want to craft an entire world where the places and people are so real that the reader doesn't feel like he's reading a book as much as he is going to another place.

In the lofty world of literature that we strive for, the reader will still think about the book after reading that last page. It's our gift to the reader, something to take with him. Given sufficient skill, this can even happen long after we are dead.

Then we learn that doesn't sell. Oh, there are exceptions. Some novelists make a living by consistently writing quality literature. But there are quite a few best sellers who have no such goals. They write for money, and they make it. Even the writer who has written great literature has trouble marketing it that way.

We have to look at our "target audience." Who will buy this book? Let me see, our heroine survived spousal abuse, so there's an audience. There's a suicide, so we can get the bereavement crowd. Where's the setting? We can get a local audience. The hero's a cop. Maybe the teen boys will go for that. Nah, too light on action. But there's a romance. Maybe we'll market to the romance readers. Give the hero bedroom eyes and pass him off as a romantic hero. Yeah, that might work.

But if you want to write to get rich, even that's not enough. Nah, the time to think about your reader is before you write the book, not after.

Throw in lots of gratuitous sex, preferably extramarital. One (and only one) character who flirts and is sorely tempted and walks away from "love" to remain true to his wife.

Use taboo words for shock value. Ram, hump, scream, oral sex, voluptuous, female orgasm (the great revelation). Make sure a lot of your leads enjoy sex. Horny women are a good way to pull in the readers you want. We all know men are horny, but most of your readers haven't discovered that some women enjoy sex too. Tell them this. Give the female readers a balm for their consciences and the male readers someone to dream about.

Your heroine should be tough, sweet, sensitive, and very horny, and has to think she's not attractive even though every guy in the book except her husband falls off his chair with a tent in his pants.

Don't let the length of a novel faze you. Just throw some people on the stage, move them around a bit, and get them into bed. Then change the rules so they switch around a bit and get them back into bed. It doesn't always have to be a bed. Office desks and car seats work too. Hammocks, not so much. When the book's long enough, stop. Don't worry about the "climax," because people are climaxing all over the place.

Exotic locales. Foreign countries with beaches. Lots of rich people. Remember that you're writing for the lowest common denominator, because they spend most of the money that you're trying to reel in. Make it sleazy. No one ever went broke underestimating the public.

How to publish? To do it right, write the sales pitch before you write the book. Make sure the book follows the pitch and the formula. If your cover letter alone has eight typos, no problem. Nobody cares. The publisher will wanna rush this baby to print and get you, or an attractive stand-in, doing as many TV appearances as possible before the book reviewers have time to draw breath.

Heck, your target market doesn't read book reviews anyway. Also keep in mind that once that reader buys your book, you've won. They won't get a refund just because you're illiterate. So don't worry about hiring an editor. Hire a publicist!

Think Hollywood. You want your book to become a movie. It doesn't have to be a good movie, because most of them aren't. It just has to sell, baby, sell! Write parts for all the hottest stars. True, today's hottest stars will have faded by the time they start filming your movie, but no matter. Someone just like them will replace them.

I've been doing it wrong for all these years. I started writing over 20 years ago, and the seven books I have on the shelves are enough to make it a hobby that barely pays for itself. Meanwhile, I work at a job for my money. But if you follow my advice, you won't make the same mistakes I have. You'll get rich!

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Back when I taught Advanced English Writing classes, I'd write "There are no new ideas" on the board and attribute it to Plato, and then say in my lecture that he probably stole that quote. Are we allowed to do plagiarism humor in China? They forgot to comment on that in my contract.

Anyway, dig this. Michael LaRocca, age 17, is crafting his award-winning THE BARGAIN in 1980, which I hype far too much. Somehow he stumbles upon something he will write in 2003. CAMEL BUTT. The total lack of anything redeeming depresses him so much that he never writes again. Thus, he doesn't write CAMEL BUTT.

Is this "time travel paradox" original? Yes and no. I believe this is why the US Copyright Office says you can copyright your words but not your ideas. I've never read a time travel paradox featuring a camel butt, but otherwise my little tale is far from original. If you were working in the Copyright Office, would you want to be the one deciding which ideas are and aren't new? Is it even possible?

This is my latest answer to every aspiring author who asks me, "How can I protect my idea?" Don't write it. Take it to your grave. Otherwise, it's fair game. Your words are always protected, but your ideas never are. And, since there really are no new ideas, not even death will protect "your" ideas. Learn to live with it.

Put another way, the ideating is the easy part. The hard part is publishing and marketing. This is also why I've never seen an idea worth stealing. It's too damn much work. Pick up something by your favorite author, and in my case that would be Shakespeare. Ignore the words and look at the ideas. How many will you see that are original? Zero, baby.

To be or not to be. To thine own self be true. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. A coward dies many times before his death, a brave man dies but once. Ideas I fully agree with, but they aren't original. And, in this day and age, a damn hard sell. That's right, I can't even get rich ripping off Shakespeare, so what makes you think I can get rich ripping off YOUR ideas? Try ripping off my ideas and see how much cat food that'll get you.

Put yet another way, if you want to steal what I just wrote, you can't take my words. They're mine. Copyrighted the moment I clicked "send." But if you change CAMEL BUTT to WHOMPING THE YAK, then it might work. But be careful. I stole the words WHOMPING THE YAK from Dave Barry. If he decides to sue you, you're on your own.

LEARNING HOW TO WRITE

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As a student of Spanish, my goal was to think in Spanish. Skip the word-by-word translation so I'd have the necessary speed to speak and listen. I know words in Spanish that I'd be hard pressed to translate. Usually profanity, I confess. Chingow!

For years my students here in China have studied grammar, and know it better than you or I. They read. They write. But speaking involves moving faster than that. In conversation, we don't have time to write it first and make sure it's all grammatically flawless, then read it aloud, perhaps after a bit of rehearsal.

So, I try to give them a chance to practice putting words together on the fly, rules be damned. The rules they've internalized will kick in and keep them comprehensible, which will build their confidence in their ability to keep creating conversation that way.

This is not unlike what we go through as authors. First we study rulebooks, perhaps take some classes, and conclude just about everything we're doing is wrong. So many rules to memorize. We might dread sitting down to write with all those constraints.

But really, it's not about memorizing rules at all. It's about internalizing the rules, following them (or not if you prefer) without being consciously aware of what they are. They're there, but in the background.

The story's what matters. You're supposed to be having fun, not "working." At least not during the creation phase.

We don't always take the time to say, "I've written ten active sentences in a row so maybe I'll whip in a passive one now" or "I need a beat for every X lines of dialogue." I published four novels and edited dozens more before I learned what a beat was. (It's a pause so the reader can catch his/her breath.)

And, of course, since it is writing and not speaking, we can always go back and revise later. Then rely on editors to catch what we missed, or at least make us wonder why we wrote it this way instead of that way.

Some authors aren't even consciously aware of "the rules." They've never taken a class, never read a book about writing. They're simply avid readers who one day decided to write. But they've internalized the rules as well. It comes from reading.

I've said it before and I'll say it again. If you want to write, you must read. If you don't like reading, maybe writing isn't for you. It's not about writing because you want to say, "I am a writer." It's about writing because you enjoy writing.

And, it's really nice when you've been writing for a long time to go back and read a book about how to write. You might find one or two things to tweak in your technique, as opposed to a daunting laundry list of flaws. It's much easier to internalize one or two new rules than 50 or 100.

CENSOR THIS!

Assembled by Michael LaRocca

<http://www.chinarice.org>

We do not have censorship. What we have is a limitation on what newspapers can report. —Louis Nel, Deputy Minister of Information for South Africa

The only valid censorship of ideas is the right of people not to listen. —Tommy Smothers

Everyone is in favor of free speech. Hardly a day passes without its being extolled, but some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone else says anything back, that is an outrage. —Winston Churchill

Books won't stay banned. They won't burn. Ideas won't go to jail. In the long run of history, the censor and the inquisitor have always lost. The only weapon against bad ideas is better ideas. —Alfred Whitney Griswold

A censor is a man who knows more than he thinks you ought to. —Dr. Laurence J. Peter

Censorship is telling a man he can't have a steak just because a baby can't chew it. —Mark Twain

If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all. —Noam Chomsky

Censorship reflects a society's lack of confidence in itself. It is a hallmark of an authoritarian regime. —Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart

You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them. —Ray Bradbury

Rejected Slogans for Calico Consulting

<http://www.chinarice.org>

Calico Consulting...because I'm American and you're not

Let us fix your broken English

The Doctor Is In (since I lecture at a medical college)

We write it right

Abso-fragging-lutely

What you talkin' 'bout Michael?

You write so good my big big honey

I pity da fool who don't use Calico

My English is reel gud

I'll buy that for a dollar

Doing for literature what Bubby Brister did for football

Dy-no-MITE!

Calico Consulting – Unfriendly Service Since 1863

Better than a skunk sandwich with no bread

Who moved my tuna?

Understanding isn't required, only obedience

Show me the money

More brilliant than Norman Einstein

Just like your mamma used to write

Crikey!

Whoomp, there it is

Will Edit For Food (I haven't rejected that one yet)

You Can't Eat Grits With Chopsticks (or that one)

More Rejected Slogans for Calico Consulting

Absolute Writer Water Cooler

<http://www.absolutewrite.com/forums/showthread.php?t=68646>

{The link will take you to the uncensored version}

Maryn

Calico Consulting: Now, More Than Ever

Calico Consulting: May cause anal leakage

Calico Consulting: Relief is just a swallow away

Kate Thornton:

Calico Consulting: Why Not?

Calico Consulting: We're Here When You Don't Care

BenPanced:

Calico Consulting - Just pay me when the bill's due and everybody'll be happy

Siddow:

Calico Consulting: If you don't care, why should we?

Calico Consulting: We take out your commas.

Williebee:

Calico Consulting: Wait'll we get our claws on you.

Calico Consulting: Ain't no fleas on us.

Calico Consulting: What? Look at the picture. You'll get it when we feel like it.

JoeEkaitis:

Calico Consulting: Why find a solution when we can make more money by prolonging the problem?

Midnight Muse:

Calico Consulting - We didn't just hack this up.

Calico Consulting - Clawing our way to the top.

Calico Consulting - Flea Free for 5 years running.

Calico Consulting - When A Tabby Just Won't Do.

MISCELLANEOUS QUOTES

Assembled by Michael LaRocca

<http://www.chinarice.org>

Nature does not hurry, but everything is accomplished. —Lao Tzu

It is not the strongest of species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change. —Charles Darwin

There is no man, however wise, who has not at some period of his youth said things, or lived in a way the consciousness of which is so unpleasant to him in later life that he would gladly, if he could, expunge it from his memory. —Marcel Proust

One cannot too soon forget his errors and misdemeanors. To dwell long upon them is to add to the offense. —Henry David Thoreau

The latter part of a wise person's life is occupied with curing the follies, prejudices and false opinions they contracted earlier. —Jonathan Swift

We have enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another. —Jonathan Swift

Man is not rational — merely capable of it. —Jonathan Swift

It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into. —Jonathan Swift

You can't change the wind but you can adjust the direction of your sails. —Jonathan Swift

It is never too late to become what you might have been. —George Eliot

Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact. —George Eliot

The Church says that the Earth is flat, but I know that it is round. For I have seen the shadow on the moon and I have more faith in the Shadow than in the Church. —Ferdinand Magellan

There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home. —John Stuart Mill

Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear.
—Thomas Jefferson

Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.
—Scott Adams

No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another.
—Charles Dickens

Everything can be taken from a man but ...the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.
—Viktor Frankl

We should not only use all the brains we have, but all that we can borrow.
—Woodrow Wilson

Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than in the one they where they sprang up.
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal: my strength lies solely in my tenacity.
—Louis Pasteur

Be, and not seem.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

If you want a quality, act as if you already had it.
—William James

Forgive many things in others; nothing in yourself.
—Ausonius

There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophies. My brain and my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness.
—Dalai Lama

I've had many problems in my life, most of which never happened.
—Mark Twain

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.
—Oscar Wilde

Nothing is a waste of time if you use the experience wisely.
—Rodin

Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.
—Soren Kierkegaard

We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves.
—Eric Hoffer

If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange those apples, then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange those ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.

—George Bernard Shaw

A government which robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul.

—George Bernard Shaw

The secret of success is to offend the greatest number of people.

—George Bernard Shaw

He who joyfully marches in rank and file has already earned my contempt. He has been given a large brain by mistake, since for him the spinal cord would suffice.

—Albert Einstein

Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens.

—Jimi Hendrix

The bad news: there is no key to the universe. The good news: it was never locked.

—Swami Beyondananda

Sometimes I think we're alone in the universe, and sometimes I think we're not. In either case the idea is quite staggering.

—Arthur C. Clarke

I don't believe in astrology. I'm Sagittarius, and we're skeptical.

—Arthur C. Clarke

Where the needs of the world and your talents cross, there lies your vocation.

—Aristotle

Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.

—John Kenneth Galbraith

Being miserable is a habit; being happy is a habit; and the choice is yours.

—Tom Hopkins

Nothing is so exhausting as indecision, and nothing is so futile.

—Bertrand Russell

Only after the last tree has been cut down,
Only after the last river has been poisoned,
Only after the last fish has been caught,
Only then will you find money cannot be eaten.

—Cree Prophecy

Speak the truth but leave immediately after.

—Slovenian Proverb

We are all born ignorant, but one must work hard to remain stupid.
—Benjamin Franklin

Whatever is begun in anger, ends in shame.
—Benjamin Franklin

He that falls in love with himself will have no rivals.
—Benjamin Franklin

Constantly talking isn't necessarily communicating.
—Jim Carrey

Every moment of one's existence one is growing into more or retreating into less.
—Norman Mailer

Men freely believe that which they wish to be the truth.
—Lord Byron

I am a slow walker, but I never walk backwards.
—Abraham Lincoln

Wise people talk because they have something to say, fools because they have to say something.
—Plato

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.
—Plato

Only the dead have seen the end of war.
—Plato

The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts.
—Bertrand Russell

The supernatural is the natural not yet understood.
—Elbert Hubbard

To avoid criticism do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.
—Elbert Hubbard

Life is tough, but it's tougher when you're stupid.
—John Wayne

The only reason some people get lost in thought is because it's unfamiliar territory.
—Paul Fix

We forfeit three-fourths of ourselves in order to be like other people.
—Arthur Schopenhauer

When one teaches, two learn.
—Robert Heinlein

In the absence of clearly-defined goals, we become strangely loyal to performing daily trivia until ultimately we become enslaved by it.
—Robert Heinlein

Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.
—George S. Patton

If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn't thinking. —George S. Patton

Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon. —Susan Ertz

Motivation is the art of getting people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it. —Dwight Eisenhower

Custom will reconcile people to any atrocity; and fashion will drive them to acquire any custom. —William Shakespeare

Life is 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. —William Shakespeare

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god! —William Shakespeare

The miserable have no other medicine but only hope. —William Shakespeare

Make not your thoughts your prisons. —William Shakespeare

Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none. —William Shakespeare

Brevity is the soul of wit. —William Shakespeare

Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot that it do singe yourself. —William Shakespeare

It is one thing to be tempted, another thing to fall. —William Shakespeare

Let them obey that know not how to rule. —William Shakespeare

There's small choice in rotten apples. —William Shakespeare

How much easier it is to be critical than to be correct. —Benjamin Disraeli

You've got to do your own growing, no matter how tall your grandfather was. —Irish Proverb

And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music. —Friedrich Nietzsche

'I have done that,' says my memory. 'I cannot have done that' - says my pride,
and remains adamant. At last memory yields. Friedrich Nietzsche

It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Love at first sight is easy to understand; it's when two people have been
looking at each other for a lifetime that it becomes a miracle. —Amy Bloom

There is no greater excitement than to support an intellectual wife and have her
support you. Marriage is a partnership in which each inspires the other, and
brings fruition to both of you. —Millicent Carey McIntosh

Do not bite the bait of pleasure till you know there is no hook beneath it.
—Thomas Jefferson

Art is never finished, only abandoned. —Leonardo da Vinci

In the small matters trust the mind, in the large ones the heart.
—Sigmund Freud

The first human who hurled an insult instead of a stone was the founder of
civilization. —Sigmund Freud

Be wiser than other people, if you can, but do not tell them so.
—Lord Chesterfield

We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another - until
we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices.
—Richard M. Nixon

The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my
religion. —Thomas Paine

It is better to confess ignorance than provide it. —Homer Hickam

Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle
will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.
—The Buddha

The greatest crime is hatred. —The Buddha

The thought manifests as the word. The word manifests as the deed. The deed develops into habit. And the habit hardens into character. So watch the thought and its ways with care...let it spring from love. —The Buddha

Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone: you are the one who gets burned. —The Buddha

Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense. —The Buddha

All we are is the result of what we have thought. —The Buddha

The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, nor to worry about the future, but to live the present moment wisely and earnestly. —The Buddha

Laughter is the language of the Gods. —Buddhist saying

I got some new underwear the other day. Well, new to me. —Emo Philips

Opera is where a guy gets stabbed in the back, and instead of dying, he sings. —Robert Benchley

Nobody in the game of football should be called a genius. A genius is somebody like Norman Einstein. —Joe Theismann

The most completely lost of all days is that on which one has not laughed. —Nicolas Chamfort

My mother said to me, "If you become a soldier, you'll be a general; if you become a monk, you'll end up as the Pope." Instead, I became a painter and wound up as Picasso. —Pablo Picasso

Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone. —Picasso

The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night. —Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, "Where have I gone wrong?" Then a voice says to me, "This is going to take more than one night." —Charles Schulz

The only difference between Hitler and Bush is that Hitler was elected.
—Kurt Vonnegut

The real problem is not whether machines think but whether men do.
—B.F. Skinner

There are two ways of exerting one's strength, one is pushing down, the other is pulling up.
—Booker T. Washington

Those human beings who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.
—Douglas Adams

In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and has been widely regarded as a bad move.
—Douglas Adams

There is a theory which states that if ever anybody discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.
—Douglas Adams

Where any one body of educated men, of whatever denomination, are condemned indiscriminately, there must be a deficiency of information, or...of something else.
—Jane Austen

Those who seek revenge must remember to dig two graves.
—Chinese proverb

It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.
—Chinese proverb

I have never killed a man, but I have read many obituaries with great pleasure.
—Clarence Darrow

He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.
—Albert Einstein

Hell is other people.
—Jean-Paul Sartre

Compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake.
—William James

Great minds have purpose. Others have wishes.
—Washington Irving

Complaining about things we can't control is a very effective way to avoid facing up to the things we can do something about.
—Dennis Gaskill

If you don't think for yourself, who is thinking for you?
—Dennis Gaskill

We would worry less about what others think of us if we realized how seldom they do. —Ethel Barrett

Just because you don't take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you. —Pericles (430 B.C.)

After all is said and done, more is said than done. —Aesop

We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office. —Aesop

It's not God's job to make the world a better place. It's yours. —Sara Robinson

It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment. —Ansel Adams

It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it. —Upton Sinclair

The measure of a person's real character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out. —Thomas Macauley

Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be. —Thomas Kempis

There is nothing noble in being superior to some other person. True nobility is being superior to your former self. —Hindu proverb

Capitalism must have prisons to protect itself from the criminals it has created. —Eugene Victor Debs

We are better at preparing for the future than living in the moment. —Thich Nhat Hanh

We are never living, but only hoping to live; and, looking forward always to being happy, it is inevitable that we never are so. —Blaise Pascal

All mankind's troubles are caused by one single thing, which is their inability to sit quietly in a room. —Blaise Pascal

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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<http://www.chinarice.org>

When Mamie Jo Hill was a young virgin, a doctor assured her she could never get pregnant. After seeing her firstborn son, she wished he'd been right. Little Michael was dumb as a brick, and he had a face that could sink 1000 ships, a face that could make a freight train take a dirt road. A quick peek at <http://www.chinarice.org> will establish that, unlike a fine wine, I have not improved with age.

As I got older, I learned to compensate for my lack of ability by BSing my way through life. 1982 WHO'S WHO IN AMERICAN WRITING. Four books published in 2002, one in 2004, another in 2005. Three EPPIE finalists. Won some Reviewer's Choice Awards at Sime~Gen. One of WRITERS DIGEST's Top 101 Websites For Writers. And all without a lick of talent.

Now I teach English in China, where I can BS to my heart's content.

But I'm not all bad. My cat really loves me. My wife loves me too, but she doesn't know any better because she's Australian.

{Update: We moved to Thailand in 2006 and I quit teaching, but I still BS to my heart's content.}