

ON BECOMING A BETTER WRITER

BY PAUL MYERS

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THE ORIGINAL VERSION APPEARED IN THE JULY 13TH ISSUE OF TALKBIZ NEWS. IF YOU DON'T ALREADY GET IT, YOU CAN SUBSCRIBE AT [HTTP://TALKBIZ.COM](http://talkbiz.com)

INTRODUCTION

I spoke with a lady recently who asked me an interesting question. It's one I've heard a few times before, but it stretches beyond what most people will admit to wanting to know.

*"Your last few newsletters were about writing well.
What about us who want to do better than that? I mean,
you always say you won't teach people to become Hemingway
or whatever, but what if we want to write at that level?
Or at least get into the bigger leagues?"*

I told her I'd write the next issue to answer her question. So, Jill, this one's for you.

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Note: If you want to take your writing up a few notches, maybe even very quickly, this report will show you how. There's stuff here I don't think I've ever taught before, other than privately to individuals. I've never seen anyone else teach what's in the second part. *(Doesn't mean no-one else has, of course, but I haven't seen it.)*

That said, you may be more interested in finding out how to sell more of what you create, or learning to create what will sell. For that, I recommend Marlon Sanders' "Writer's Secret."

<http://talkbiz.com/needtoknow/writerssecret>

An impressive and detailed explanation of creating a business based on the simple act of writing.

Marlon's been at the biz for 16 years and done quite well with it. He'll show you how to put all the pieces in the right place, right from the start.

THE ART OF THE THING...

First things first: Let's face it. I'm no Hemingway. For one thing, I don't do fiction. I've also never felt the need to be that kind of writer. Just so we're clear that I don't pretend to be a "Master" of the form.

If you want to move in that direction, though, I can give you some solid pointers.

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We've talked a fair bit in recent issues about how to become a decent writer. It basically boils down to the old adage that **good writing is simply clear thinking, in print.**

That goes well beyond just the written word. It's the basis for any clear and compelling content. Audio, video, slide presentations... even software specifications.

There's another stage beyond that, though. The step that takes you from good to occasionally (and sometimes consistently) very good. Or even great. There are things you can do to step up to that next level, and a few tricks that can speed up the process.

The first thing you need to do is read. Devour books or articles or editorials, or whatever you want to create, that are written at the level you want to reach. This applies to any sort of content. Sales copy, stage presentations, podcasts, webinars, all of it. Get the best you can find. You cannot hit a target you can't see, and you won't "see" the best by settling for second.

The next thing writing coaches often tell their students is to write, write, and write some more. That's good advice, except that it's not going to help most people. Not by itself.

There's a story about a guy who pulled into a gas station in Topeka, Kansas at the same time as a motivational speaker. As he was checking out, he said to the cashier, "I've been driving for a couple of days and don't feel like I'm getting any closer to my destination."

The motivational speaker chimed in with, "Don't dawdle, son. Put the pedal to the metal, and put wings on your ride. Take off the restrictions and let yourself fly!" The speaker walked out, feeling like he'd done his good deed for the day.

The cashier asked the man where he was headed. "Los Angeles," the man replied.

"Where you coming from?"

"Seattle."

The moral of the story: If someone is going in the wrong direction, "go faster" (or the proverbial "take massive action") ain't the best advice they could get.

If all you do is keep writing, with no real plan for improvement, you'll get a little better. But will you really do more than smooth out your current level of skill? Will you get closer to your real goal?

Probably not.

The idea behind the standard "Read more, write more" formula is that reading will make you aware of good writing, which will hopefully start to show in your own work. And, sometimes, that's enough. It's a slow, roundabout way to get there, but it can happen. For a very, very few people.

Here's how you start to speed things up.

Take part of your writing time and use it to emulate what you've been reading. Mimic the author's style, sentence structure, and choice of words. Pay attention to how you feel as you write, and how what you've said is different from or similar to the original's approach.

It really helps to do this with two or more authors with very different styles. Write the same message twice. Once in each "voice." Then go back and say it again, your own way.

This conscious focus on the various elements in the piece will move you along much more quickly than hammering out a lot of words with no direction.

Doesn't have to be a novel in each style. 3 or 4 paragraphs will be enough for starters.

Do this a few times and your awareness of the structure and pacing of your work will improve in noticeable ways in very little time.

That's the first step. It's an easy one.

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The second step is going to sound a little like that motivational speaker. Bear with me, please. It works.

In her classic book, "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain," Betty Edwards describes a physically perceptible shift that occurs when you're sketching or painting well. Your awareness changes, and you literally see things in a different way. A good part of the book involves teaching art students how to access that state at will.

The first step we just covered will help you start to master the technical aspects of writing well. The mechanics, as it were.

Learning the writer's equivalent of that altered perception is where the art will come from. It's the literary equivalent of what athletes call "being in the zone." The good news is, it's something you can learn.

You've experienced it many times already. The trick is making it happen on demand.

Think about the last time you wrote or said something which just flowed, and you experienced a sense of direct connection with the words, the message, and the intended audience, all at once. It was probably accompanied by a feeling of "rightness."

An even more common example of the experience is when you change a single word and the whole thing is suddenly clearer and more satisfying. Not in the emotional sense that you might experience after getting something off your chest or expressing some anger or frustration. It's an aesthetic feeling.

It's summed up nicely in Twain's saying that "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

You can argue whether getting every word perfect every time is critical (it isn't), but the right word or turn of phrase at just the right time can have a profound aesthetic effect. That sense of "rightness" is the thing we're looking for.

Even if you haven't written anything in ages, think of the last time you were talking with someone, or joking around, and said something so clever that you surprised yourself. That's the same feeling.

It isn't a critical approval after the fact. The expression and the feeling happen at the same time.

In the beginning it feels like flashes of inspiration. As you develop it, it becomes a working state in which everything flows, and your only struggle is to keep up with what it's releasing.

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How do you go from occasional flashes to more common and extended access?

First, be aware when it hits. Later, take note of how it felt and what your state of mind was at the time. Being aware of it makes it easier to connect with the things that cause it.

Second, when it does hit, don't analyze what you're doing. Let it take over, and go with the flow. That won't always be easy, even after you gain some "control" over it. In fact, many aspiring writers become scared by it, thinking that rigorous attention is the key and the pure awareness of the "zone" will somehow lead to lesser work.

The third thing is to be as congruent as possible while writing. Your purpose, your style, and your emotional state must all be focused in the same direction and with the same intent. When all your energies are aligned, you will find it very easy to get into the rhythm.

Depending on who you believe, either Ernest Hemingway or Peter De Vries once said, "Write drunk, edit sober." (I could believe either as the source.)

The feeling is similar to a mild intoxication, except there's no hangover. Just a clear euphoria in which everything is pure and plain. Very much in the way that an angry drunk will be 100% angry and a happy drunk will exhibit uninhibited cheer.

There's no conflict between their words and the emotions behind them.

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Sometimes the feeling will be a small sense of "Yes. That's good." Other times you'll feel like you're being driven to get the thoughts out, and they'll run off your fingertips like they have a life of their own.

And, if you're really lucky, it will occasionally feel like you're playing a magnificent piece of music, except that "you" are just along for the ride.

The simple fact of being aware of this state will help a lot. Encouraging it and giving in to it will push you forward faster than almost anything else.

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You won't always be able to get there.

If you find yourself struggling to get a point across, that's okay. It happens to everyone at times. When that happens, go back to your outline and just follow it. Say what you need to say, in the order in which you need to say it.

Note: There are some types of writing for which "art" can be counter-productive. A simple how-to piece or description of a process may become less effective if the reader is distracted by the way you say things. For that kind of work, just following the outline is often exactly the right course.

Don't outsmart yourself.

Later, after letting it sit for a while, go back in and polish it up. Think of that part as play. You want to make it more fun, or add impact or focus. You need to be totally centered on the goal of making the writing itself better at this point.

Here's an exercise to help you do this.

When you rewrite or edit your own work, you can sometimes find yourself falling back into the same mental state you were in when you wrote the thing. That's great if you were in the zone, but if you were having trouble finding the right way to say what you wanted to say, it may not be the most desirable outcome.

To speed up the development of the state, punch up someone else's writing. Find an article on something you're interested in, and paste it into a text editor. This way, you start out with something you have no ego invested in, and which doesn't have any past associations.

Now, show yourself how you can improve it. You may just change a few words, to make the thing clearer or to add zip. Or you may find yourself rewording entire paragraphs, cutting and adding sentences, and moving things around. Or you may change the style, so it reads more like you wrote it.

Throw yourself into the process. Let go of everything but making it better. Be aware of the words and the meanings and the connotations. Text and sub-text. Grace and flow.

Keep in mind that this isn't something you're going to publish. No-one else ever needs to see what you're doing, you won't be graded on it, and even the original author wouldn't mind. It's an exercise, not plagiarism.

An hour of this kind of practice is worth weeks of plain old "write, write, write."

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If you really want to be able to see the difference, paste it into a word processor. Turn on the change tracking feature, and turn off the display of changes. In Microsoft Word, the feature is called, appropriately, "Track Changes."

In Open Office, it's called "Changes," and is found on the Edit menu. Turn "Record" on and "Show" off.

Then go to it. When you're done, go back and turn the "Show" option back on. You'll see any text you changed displayed with a line through it, and the new text highlighted next to the original.

The reason for turning the display of changes off while doing the rewrite is to eliminate the visual distraction. The value of the process is precisely in the ability to later look at the changes visually. It switches you to editor mode, and allows you to evaluate the thing in an objective way.

It also brings the process you used when making the changes into conscious thought.

That is the key to this exercise.

It puts your mindset on display. You can actually see the differences in structure,

and feel the change in connotations and intent represented by each word or phrase. It's even more clear when you're editing someone else's work this way.

I don't often feel the need to do much in the way of art in my writing. My ability to do so when needed, however, improved more in the month after I discovered that feature than in the preceding 3 years.

Powerful stuff.

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There's no getting around the fact that becoming a good writer takes work. Becoming a great writer takes work and awareness.

The return on that effort is huge, and will last your entire lifetime. It will make you look as intelligent as you are, command more respect and credibility for your thinking, and make it easier for you to connect with others. It will show in your speech and your interactions with others.

Writing is just the easiest form to sell.

Do the exercises. Be aware of what you're doing. Pay attention.

Watch what happens. It's a lot of fun.

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This is a small, but admittedly critical, part of the process of crafting content that works. If you'd like the full system, grab a copy of "Creating Killer Content." The main manual is over 150 pages, much more entertainingly written. (And there are bonuses! ;)

<http://talkbiz.com/killercontent/>

And for a really detailed and easy to follow explanation of how to sell what you write, check out Marlon's "Writer's Secret."

<http://talkbiz.com/needtoknow/writerssecret>

Enjoy!

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*"100% of the shots you don't take don't go in."
- Wayne Gretzky*