
Aphorisms for a Writer

by

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The following aphorisms have two sources, one noble, the other less so. On the noble side, I have modeled these Writing Tips, as I call them, on *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. *The Meditations* has long been a favorite book of mine. I consult it often and, apart from the wisdom I invariably receive, I marvel at the simplicity of its form and style. It is short and to the point. If the following aphorisms are successful, it is in no small measure due to the voice I borrowed from *The Meditations*.

The less noble source has to do with age and the rather overwhelming parade of students I face as an instructor. Each year twenty to fifty students pass through my classes, many of them eager to find out how to get an agent, where to send a story, an essay, or an article. They also need to know how to construct dialogue, where to break for exposition, how to avoid clichés. These aphorisms are, on one hand, a way to head them off at the pass. I hand out this list at the beginning of each class, knowing full well that few students will refer to them. Over the course of the semester, however, many of them find that the list is more useful than they first thought. It provides a "how-to" in some instances, and in other instances simply points them in a new, more serious direction. It reminds them that people have struggled with writing for centuries, and, I hope, makes them feel less alone at the computer keyboard.

Finally, the list has provided me with an opportunity to write down, in a haphazard way, notes and ideas I

have about writing. It prevents me from forgetting to mention something that might be useful to a student. It deliberately employs a shotgun approach, because it's impossible for me to know what will strike one student and help her or him in writing a short story, or even in contemplating a writing career. Originally the list included eighty items. Now, after two years, the list is approaching three hundred bits of advice, suggestions, and admonitions. Here are one hundred.

The rest of the list is included on the R:½ file in Frost House under my name. Students are free to go and see any revisions or additions whenever they like.

1. Write regularly. Write every day, if possible. You wouldn't expect to improve on the piano without practicing. The more you write, the better you become.
2. Learn to count words, especially in the beginning. Hold yourself to a certain number of words per day. Jack London was said to have written 1,000 a day. Stephen King writes 2,000. Don't fool yourself by writing letters, postcards, and shopping lists. Words count only if applied to stories, novels, or essays.
3. Don't pretend you must be inspired to write. Inspiration, Muses, et. al., are the inventions of people who have never written. You can be inspired, it's true, but the inspiration will probably come from what you are writing that day. For example, you may be stuck in a story when, presto, the inspiration comes. You suddenly know how to solve the problem. Entire story ideas do not generally come in flashes. Indeed, you may need to mistrust story ideas that come too quickly.
4. Write fiction and non-fiction if you are able to do both. One is not a higher calling. Non-fiction, in almost all cases, pays better.

5. Writing regularly will inform you what your voice might be--you will know your range and pitch. It will also allow you to switch voices, much like an actor switching something deliberately for a new role. In short, you will come to be in writing shape.
6. Read everything you can get your hands on. Read the classics, read your contemporaries, read non-fiction, read books about bees, dogs, whales. Become a magpie for small bits of information.
7. Decide whether you want to mention current products in your fiction. It seems to be in vogue at present to mention, for instance, the girl going to a prom wore a Laura Ashley gown. Fair enough. But does everyone know what a Laura Ashley gown looks like? What it represents? What comment it makes about the character? How about in ten years? Twenty years?
8. Ask yourself what you like to read and then ask yourself if you'd like to read what you're writing. Be honest.
9. "The contemporary American writer is in no way a part of the social and political scene. He is therefore not muzzled, for no one fears his bite; nor is he called upon to compose. Whatever work he does must proceed from a reckless inner need. The world does not beckon, nor does it greatly reward. This is not a boast or complaint. It is a fact. Serious writing must nowadays be written for the sake of the art. The condition I describe is not extraordinary. Certain scientists, philosophers, historians, and many mathematicians do the same, advancing their causes as they can. One must be satisfied with that."
--William Gass
10. Decide, as Mr. Gass has apparently decided, what you intend to do about the non-specific third person pronoun. Him, her, one?

11. Ask yourself as you read a writer you admire: how did she or he do that? How did he or she handle time? Point of view? Take the pieces apart and learn the tricks inside.
12. Be prepared to have some of the oddest reactions to your work come from those closest to you. I don't know why this is true, but it is.
13. When writing a dramatic scene, do not, under most circumstances, go into exposition to explain something that happened in the past. Stay with the scene. Pick another place for exposition.
14. Be careful of adverbial endings when writing dialogue. "Give me my ring!" she said pleadingly. "I shall not!" he answered unbendingly. In general, dialogue should be written with simple he said/she saids. A friend who writes says the "he said/she saids in a narrative should be like the white lines at the side of a country road. You notice them only when you need them."
15. Another point about using adverbial endings in dialogue. Ask yourself if you aren't using the -ly endings in attempt to add character to a character. If you have a fellow in jodhpurs replying "jauntily," then he better be jaunty in a hundred ways besides how he speaks. Don't rely on adverbial endings to make the reader see the mood of the conversation. The mood should be clear from tone, implication, and precise wording.
16. When writing dialogue, be sure to give movement to the speakers. "Business" is the theater term for it. Don't have them standing or sitting woodenly speaking to one another. Movement while speaking can be an excellent way to give depth to a character.
17. Good people write bad things. The reverse is also true.

18. If you can find one person who will give you an honest and frank reaction to your writing, you are a lucky duck.
19. Ask yourself repeatedly how do things look, how do they smell, how do they feel?
20. You do not have to know how a story will end in order to begin one. More often than not, writers write to find out what's going on themselves. If you're not intrigued by the story's ending, why should anyone else be?
21. Truman Capote wrote the end of his novels and stories, then figured out how the characters arrived there.
22. I find it helpful, when trying to begin a new work, to write as many as three hundred first paragraphs. That may sound like an exaggeration, but I assure you it isn't. The initial sentences of a novel, for example, establish tone, narration, point of view, sex and age of narrator, geographical location, and so on. You cannot spend too much time making a solid beginning.
23. A short anecdote: A man sat with his female lover on his lap when his wife entered the room. His wife said, "Jeffery, I'm surprised at you!" Whereupon, Jeffery answered: "No, my dear, I am surprised, you are amazed." I use this story to illustrate the various nuances of words. (If you don't get the point of the example above, or if you don't know the genuine meaning of "surprise," you should.) Know what a word means, then be precise in your wording. In the simplest sense, ask yourself: Did the character step, creep, hop, skip, or jump across the braided carpet? On a more complex note, study words to discover their true meanings. To use "since" as a coordinating conjunction, when you actually mean "because," is laziness. ("Since" infers a time consideration, not a

- causality.) Understand that words have meanings, implied and otherwise, which you must take into account if your prose is to be powerful.
24. Be precise, also, in your description and understanding of a technique or function. For instance, I once wrote that a character fixed his arrow to the bow string, then let it go. In describing the action in such a manner, I proved myself an amateur and lost authority with the reader. Properly described, the character should have "knocked" his arrow--the correct way to fix an arrow to a bow string, as every archer (and less lazy writers) know.
 25. Make yourself finish the projects you begin. It's important to learn how to end something as well as to begin it.
 26. Remember Dickens when describing a character. He frequently exaggerated one feature of the character, which made it easier for the reader to recall the character when he was reintroduced later in the narrative. Although you may not wish to exaggerate to the degree Dickens did, it's nevertheless something to keep in mind.
 27. Action scenes generally require shorter sentences, choppiest paragraphs.
 28. Be generous to other writers. Every writer faces criticism and, more painful, indifference. Why gossip or grind someone's writing into the mud? If you don't like his or her writing, fine. Remember, however, that somewhere someone might like it a great deal. If it gives that reader a few hours satisfaction, is that such a deplorable thing?
 29. The same thing goes for commercial writing. Be very careful about looking down your nose at commercial writing. First, ask yourself if you can do better. Second, ask yourself where is the harm in it? Remember, commercial writing, along with

calendars, Garfield books, and so on, provides the money for some publishing houses to publish serious fiction.

30. Always show your work in as near perfect form as you can get it. Don't expect to be allowed to look over the shoulder of the reader and say, "Oh, I intended to change that." It won't fly.
31. If you confuse a reader, he or she is lost and will have to back up to figure out what is going on. Once that occurs, you no longer have the reader's confidence. Once you no longer have the reader's confidence, you no longer have a reader.
32. "Write a dream, lose a reader."--Doris Lessing. Dreams are seldom interesting to anyone but the dreamer.
33. Read your work aloud. You'll hear things you can't see by simply reading your work silently. If you can get someone to listen, all the better.
34. Just a word on an American myth. Drinking, drugs, etc. will not enhance your prose style. It may be romantic to think it, but it just isn't so.
35. On the same point: If you think Poe was a drunk and Lewis Carroll a drug addict, you never spent much time at a writing table. It's a wonderful protective device to fashion yourself too drunk, too pained, too sensitive to write. Stop trying to build a romance around yourself and write.
36. In some respects, at least, treat writing as a job. If you intend to do it seriously, you must punch in on time, get to the table, allow yourself few vacations. Time is your ally or enemy, depending on how you treat it.
37. The average published writer in America earns less than \$5,000 a year.
38. Do you buy books? How do you expect authors to live if you don't? When you take a book out of a

- library, at least a book written by a living author, you've deprived that writer of his or her livelihood.
39. Pay attention to your manuscripts. Do they look as clean and neat as possible? They represent all your work and labor. Make them presentable, perhaps even things of beauty in and of themselves.
 40. "Style is the man himself."--George-Louis De Buffon 1707-1788.
 41. When someone gives you a piece of writing, be prompt and even-handed in your response. Remember what it is like to wait for a reaction from someone else. If you don't have the time to read a manuscript, say so before you receive it. Do not accept it, then allow it to sit around untouched. If you begin to read it and hate it...tough luck. You must read it once you accept it.
 42. Pay yourself first. Write your own material first. Write it before balancing the checkbook, before writing a letter to a friend, before shoveling snow.
 43. Some people find it helpful to listen to music before, during, or after they write. Steinbeck apparently listened to a washing machine for certain cadences of *The Grapes of Wrath*.
 44. Get rid of your TV. It consumes enormous blocks of time better devoted to writing or reading.
 45. Examine your own writing preferences--time of day, with coffee, without coffee, with chewing gum, etc.--then be constant in your efforts.
 46. Train yourself, as a journalist must, to write under various conditions. The world is hardly ever quiet and calm. People slam doors, children cry, and spouses shout and want you to join them for dinner. You have to write through it and around it.
 47. Remember the writing life is exactly that: a life. It will go on a long time. Pace yourself. Be patient with yourself. Judge your success in small

- increments, and only occasionally in an overall assessment.
48. Putting the conversation within the paragraph, as Joseph Conrad was fond of doing, makes it difficult for a reader to plow through the text. You may want that effect. It worked for Conrad.
 49. Conversation, when handled properly, can be an effective way to introduce exposition. One character can say to another, "Is that why you returned from France so soon?" It clues the reader in that one character returned from France early, without the author having to tell his audience directly. Watch for this technique. Poor writers are clumsy at it; good writers are smooth.
 50. If you are inclined to cut something from your work, chances are you should.
 51. Learn the rules of punctuation and grammar. A carpenter must know how to use a hammer in order to build a house.
 52. Is there a part of your day which is exclusively yours? Morning? Night? If it doesn't already exist, you may have to make a time of your own.
 53. You will probably want to stay up with several publications. *Writer's Market*, *Writer's Digest*, *AWP*, *LMP*, and so on. All these publications remind you of contests, places to contribute, and will keep you involved in your profession.
 54. Subscriptions to magazines are usually tax deductible. If you're serious about writing for money, learn the tax rules. Keep a record of your purchases and expenses. Be regular in this and you will save yourself hassles with the IRS.
 55. If you write and keep your manuscripts in your desk drawer, don't be astonished if you don't get published.

56. What do you owe a writer whose book you've enjoyed? Isn't it fair to write him or her a letter in response? Write it care of the publisher. You would be amazed how even big name authors enjoy hearing an honest, warm reaction to their novels.
57. The *Paris Review* interviews are often inspiring. Writers talking about writing.
58. Don't be afraid to be playful. Describe a stomach ache as the feeling one gets from swallowing a cat covered in Crisco. Loosen up. Trust your inventiveness.
59. Provide images in your writing.
60. Think of what you are asking a reader to do when you ask him or her to read your work. Reading your work means he or she will ignore his or her own pleasure, his or her own work, his or her own relatives, in order to spend time with your book or story. The simple fact is that many working adults will not spend time with a book if it is about a depressed bag lady living in the sewers of Brooklyn. They don't want to read about that stuff, which is not to say you shouldn't write about it if you feel it's what you have to contribute to the world. Understand, however, how difficult it might be to get such a work published.
61. It is sometimes necessary to remind authors that publishing houses attempt to be a "for-profit" business.
62. Point of view is a never ending source of interest to writers. How do you tell a story? What's the best way inside it? How does a first person narrator describe him or herself? Point of view also seems to have national implications. (I know that sounds odd.) Think, for example, how naturally the Russians write in omniscient, while Americans seem to concentrate on closely observed third person.

63. You save yourself time if you learn to use a word processor. Read the "Merchandise Mart" section in your local newspaper. Ask at local schools for second hand computers. You can often get a deal on a used word processor. It doesn't need to be fancy. If you don't use one be prepared, in some cases, to spend as much as two or three months simply re-typing material.
64. Be careful, as you write, about reading authors whose style influences you. If you don't want Hemingway creeping into your prose, keep away from Hemingway.
65. If you are ever stuck in a serious fashion, feel you can't approach the keyboard, can't bring yourself to write, lower your expectations.
66. "A first draft is a discovery draft."--Donald Murray
67. Although shorter novels are currently in vogue, 60,000 words is generally the minimum length for a novel.
68. With the exception of the little magazines, the short story market is not nearly what it once was in this country. *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Harper's*, *Yankee*, the ladies magazines, and a few more still publish short stories. Short stories are a noble form, and one that may be undergoing a revival right now, but they are difficult to publish. Little magazines, though they talk about respect for writers, often take months to respond. Slicks, big magazines, and international journals can take even longer. This is not meant to dissuade you from writing short stories. I am simply pointing out the difficulty of having a satisfactory relationship with a magazine.
69. My advice to all writers starting out: find an agent. If you've ever had anything published, xerox it, clip it to a cover letter, and approach agents in the same

manner you approach a job search. Hundreds of agents do business in New York and elsewhere and many of them are willing to take on a young writer. They don't have anything to lose except the time it takes to read your manuscript. Agents are, however, far more interested in novel manuscripts and non-fiction book length manuscripts than they are in short stories. Most agents represent authors' short stories only as a courtesy.

70. More words of advice about agents. 1) Not all agents are good or honest. Be careful. Remember, while a potential agent has many books to represent, you have only one novel every year or two. Check an agent with an established writer, ask to see a client list, find out if the agent is represented in London, California, etc. Most agents ask for a ten to fifteen percent cut on everything. If an agent wants more, something is fishy. 2) Out of courtesy to the agents who, in most cases are hard working, honest people with a genuine love of literature, don't approach them if you aren't serious about writing. You should have a good start on a manuscript or two, be writing regularly, have had at least some positive reactions to your work, before you approach an agent.
71. Beware if you go into writing to make money. Chances are you won't make much. It is easy to become infested with notions of the big kill--a book contract, movie contract, TV mini series and low-cal lunches at the Polo Club. Wonderful things happen, of course, but it is the rare occurrence. Also, you may start thinking your books are less than successful unless they earn a godzillion dollars. Accept your post at the keyboard. The rest is largely out of your control.

72. Most national magazines pay a dollar a word for non-fiction. Most national magazine non-fiction pieces are approximately 1,500 words.
73. Don't tell other people your story ideas. Keep them to yourself.
74. Don't ask people to read things unless you are sure you are willing to hear criticism. Also, be certain that a negative reaction will not kill your enthusiasm for the project.
75. "When one finds a natural style, one is amazed and delighted, for where one expected to see an author, one discovers a man."--Blaise Pascal 1623-1662
76. Occasionally it is better to stop short on a day's writing so you can pick up the next day that much easier. Your subconscious will work on the material overnight, or during the course of the day, so that when you return you have a different perspective.
77. I like to take a manuscript with me to a bar, or a park bench, and read it in unfamiliar surroundings. I don't know why this works, but it often allows me to "see" my own novel as something new.
78. If you are writing 1,000 words a day, you can write a novel in two months. Be steady and you'll be astonished at what you can accomplish.
79. Don't trick yourself into believing you'll write in the summer when you're at the beach house, or when you have a month's vacation at a ski resort...any future time when supposedly you will have peace and quiet. More often than not you arrive at the beach house, try to settle down to work, and find you're flabby and out of writing shape. Write all the time. Don't think someday everything is going to be perfect. Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks while working as a night watchman.
80. Be extremely conscious of time. You want to go to a dinner party, the movies, a ball game? Fine, but it is

- time you're not writing. Make any choices you like, but be aware you are making choices.
81. Is writing fun? I find it fun. Many people don't. The old line is that it's easy to find "having written" fun. If you write regularly, however, you may find it very much like jogging. If you don't do it, you miss it. Perhaps that's as close to fun as it gets.
 82. Don't be amazed if you can't read your published work, or if your published work looks good in places, terrible in others, and generally disgusts you. Many authors find it painful to pick up one of their books after it's published. It's ironic that you can't appreciate your own books, but it seems to be a writer's fate.
 83. Work to encourage literacy, library programs, book mobiles. If writing is a gift, and reading is a gift, work to share the wealth.
 84. Consider recording your stories on a tape and exchanging them with a fellow writer or trusted critic. It can make a long drive pass quickly for the listener, and you will learn a great deal about your stories from recording them and playing them back.
 85. Take some solace in this: If you love to write, you cannot not write. In other words, whether successful or not, the process is an abiding benefit. Writing can reveal a great deal to you about your own life.
 86. Most writers must choose a second career. I read somewhere that the two secondary careers that produce the most novelists are journalism and homemaking--whatever homemaking means today.
 87. Cliches are a scourge to any good writer. Recognize them in your own work and abolish them.
 88. Be aware, too, that "cliched situations" also exist. The mid-life crisis executive who buys a motorcycle and runs off with his twenty-two-year-old paramour is an example.

89. "Three hours a day will produce as much as man ought to write." --Anthony Trollope 1815-1882
90. Many writers have this experience: He or she receives a rave review in the *Washington Post*, but then is guillotined in the *New York Times*. What does that say about the book, about criticism in general? A book means something to you, and that's as much as you can win in this world. Remember that only you had the pleasure of writing the novel.
91. It makes sense to keep yourself in fairly good physical shape if possible. Clean body, clean mind, etc.
92. Be current. Don't write about Johnny Carson on television late at night. Use Letterman or Whoopie Goldberg or whomever holds the late night throne. It is dangerously easy to get trapped in your past. For a long time I described women as wearing "Peter Pan" collars, when, in fact, no one had seen a genuine "Peter Pan" collar since the 1950s.
93. Along the same lines, learn the price of things. Don't say a gallon of gasoline costs seventy-three cents when the cost is much higher. Mucking up prices is an extremely rapid way to lose credibility with the reader.
94. Many writers stick to familiar occupations for their characters. As a result, we have a plethora of teachers, unemployed people attending funerals, and so on. Mark how rarely you read a novel wherein the character is solidly employed and employment solidly described. That's an unfortunate situation in American fiction.
95. Don't be afraid to trick yourself into sitting down at the writing table. For years I kept tropical fish for the sole purpose of getting me to the desk. I made certain I only fed them once a day, immediately after dinner. I sat in my chair and watched them eat, then figured, what the heck, I'm here, why don't I write? I

- got rid of the fish when I bought a computer. Now I play chess or some sort of space war, then gradually slip into writing.
96. "It's dogged as does it. It ain't thinking about it."--Anthony Trollop 1815-1882
 97. Get into the habit of thinking of stories. What makes a good story? Why might it be interesting? Whatever the new novelists pretend about the plot (hating it, discarding it, etc.), most of us read to see a story revealed. Tolstoy, I think, said literature is like peeping through a key hole.
 98. When describing a meal, describe it!
 99. Invent. Take a stab at it. Trust your instinct. If there is anything inspirational about writing, it is that sometimes you are better than you thought you could be.
 100. Rejection of your work is not rejection of you.