

WRITER 101

Who am I?

I am a woman. I have a dream.

I want to write and I have been writing ever since I can remember.

I grew up in Appalachia, which means I had to share my shoes and outrun the uncles. I am a woman. I have been alone in life and sat beside death at dawn. I have been mistaken, and paid the fiddler at least twice.

I want to be a writer. I display my dream like a three-year-old showing off her new underwear.

I want to be a writer.

I have made books with dittos and dreams, and held the stories of generations in my hands. I can read my heart's poem to the night and sing the songs I weave in holy places.

I don't know everything, but I know some things and I can learn more.

I want to be noticed. I want to be loved.

I am a woman. I write.

Why we write.

I write to put down my thoughts, to explore ideas and to teach. I prefer to do these things in fiction, my first and strongest love. I have read thousands of books, and experience a thrill of anticipation each time I pick up a new novel.

Lately, a few of those new novels were books I had written. I can't tell you how thrilled I was the first time I held one of my own books in my hands, curled up on the couch, and entered a dream I recorded from somewhere in time. The experience was exactly the same as if it were another author's book, and wonderfully different from a thousand other times I had settled in for a cozy read.

Sometimes I am amazed.

Sometimes I am amazed at the stories I have written. Where did they come from? What do they mean? How did they end up on paper? I have so many questions. One thing I know for sure, writing is work. I mean it. Someone once said a writer sits down and opens a vein. Maybe. Writing a book is something like giving birth. There are both pain and joy involved, and when you are down to the wire, desperate to give your literary child to the world, there is some plain labor.

If you truly love your literary child, it is well worth the labor to put it into the best possible shape you can before you manage to propel it onto some editor's desk.

I want you to write well, so while it may break your heart for the moment when you see the various marks, scribbles, and smudges your first editor will put on your manuscript, remember the law of readability. Some stuff you can fudge and others you can't. You want people to read what you write, don't you? They need to know what you know in order to understand the story, so you can't leave anything out. That is the bottom line.

University without walls.

Let me tell you what happened to me when I was working for my degree in American Studies from Skidmore College's University Without Walls. I wrote a 167-page book for my senior project. Or thought I did. Well, I wrote down everything I knew about the Adirondack Fiddlers, a preservation group I worked with during the 1970s and 80s.

I interviewed them, then wrote about their lives and recorded the tunes of old dances as played in the Adirondacks for generations. What characters those grass roots musicians were! I loved them, and I loved the process of putting their history in

book form.

Anyway, the day I was to appear before the degree panel, my writing mentor, an editor from *USA Today* brought back my manuscript dripping with red ink. We talked over coffee, I tried not to cry. There were issues with spelling, punctuation and organization. I think he might have damned his critique with some faint praise, but I am sure I didn't hear it. My ears were roaring with anger, my jaws ached, and I had shredded my napkin into a million pieces. It didn't go at all well.

Suddenly, it was time for my appointment with the degree panel. I was led to a room where a committee of PhDs waited to see what I knew. This group of professional teachers proceeded to ask me questions about everything but the topic of my book. The best thing I can say about the experience is that I made them laugh, which was a considerable feat — given my heart was bleeding from the wounds that stupid editor gave me, I was scared to death, *and* my blood sugar was low. But I passed their hurdles, and was awarded a Bachelor's of Arts degree at the age of forty-three.

The Editor-From-Hell

Oh yes, the *Editor From Hell*. This guy didn't have a clue! I was wounded, no, *destroyed* by the

sheer numbers of corrections on that first manuscript.

I cried. I threw myself around when I got home. I sniveled. I ranted.

After a while, I got busy, learned how to write readable English, turned on the grammar and spell checks on my computer, got a dictionary and set about learning how to be a writer capable of turning out publishable material.

It is all about communication.

One of the first things I learned from that experience so many years ago is that an idea is a wonderful thing, but it is not necessarily a book without some serious effort. We have to breathe life into the ideas that take over our lives, understand them, and then give them form and meaning our readers will want to share again and again. *It is all about communication.*

You have to work at the craft of writing just as you do for any other skill. There are no free rides, especially when you set out to tell a story.

Books can help you communicate.

I recommend Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* as about the best manual for written English outside of your computer's grammar check.

It cuts away the deadwood and explains in simple terms how best to present your ideas in clear, understandable language.

John Gardiner's "*The Art of Fiction*" is a close second for the rules of good writing. Gardiner offers the same old rules, and then he urges his readers to: "break them well."

I would suggest that any would-be writer buy these books and read them more than once.

**Computer tools help,
but will never replace
a good dictionary.**

Even with grammar check installed on all the computers in the world, it still helps to know why the program is showing you that same stupid phrase over and over and over again. If you don't know the rules, you can't tell the computer what to do next.

I like my spell-check, but it does not recognize every word. The program can't spell any better than you do when you try look up a word in the dictionary and you don't have a good idea of how that word is spelled. Better get a good dictionary, a big one with both common and uncommon words. You never know when you might need a trephine or a bola. For fun while you learn, cross-

word puzzles and Scrabble games can challenge spelling skills and expand vocabularies as you spend time with friends or family.

Grammar?

Your characters can have bad grammar. It don't hurt. But *you* may not. You are telling the story, and you have to use language that is as close to a common denominator for you and all your various readers as possible.

I began writing before computers were a household word. In fact, I wrote my very first book on a manual typewriter while living in a tent. I typed that book any number of times trying to get a clean copy to send to a publisher. The problem was that you couldn't just get to page 79 and decide you wanted to add a paragraph or two. Adding anything at all meant that all the following pages had to be changed, and that meant a lot of typing.

Writing was a lot harder physically back then, but the rules for writing have pretty much stayed the same. The good thing about computers is that you can make those all critical changes in grammar, punctuation and tense without typing your material over and over and over. Let's hear it for progress.

Modern tools do work.

At one point in my writing journey I scoffed at the notion books could be submitted to a publisher over a computer link. That was a pipe dream back then when the common person did not have a computer. Back in the day, you needed a ream or two of paper, at least two typewriter ribbons, a lot of correction film and liquid paper to eradicate errors, an eraser that did not tear holes in your copy, a sturdy box, outward and return postage, a dynamite query letter, a strong writing history . . . , You get the picture.

And you had to write good English.

You twenty-first century writers have got it made.

The face of publishing changed forever.

Unfortunately, progress and change are closely related. Once everyone had a computer, all the would-be writers in the world found it much easier to put their thoughts and ideas down in the form of short stories, novels and how-to books. The market was flooded with manuscripts, publishers had to tunnel through the manuscripts into their offices, and the face of publishing changed.

Today the big publishers cherish their big-name

writers who earn them millions per year, and have even less time for first-time authors and *beginning* literary giants than ever before.

Put your ego in your pocket. Writing is work and it still has to be done right.

Rejection can be a GOOD thing..

I burned a three-inch stack of rejection slips before I finally published a book. When you consider the amount of time it took to write, edit, submit, and wait for an answer from a publisher (sometimes as long as a year for one manuscript), you can understand this rather large pile of negativity represented a huge investment in time, energy and postage on my part. We aren't called starving artists for nothing.

The big pile of rejection slips also represented a lot of progress as my writing matured. Most rejections arrived with a polite "NO, thank you." However, a slim few pointed out the weaknesses or strengths in my submission.

I took these very seriously, and learned a lot as I corrected the problems and made the strong bits even stronger. I understand there are times when NO means NO, but I don't think a writer should take NO as the final word when working on a manuscript, especially if an editor took the time

to say *why* you were rejected. In that case, fix the problem and keep going.

Electronic publishing, a new experience.

Eventually, a friend called my attention to a woman who was publishing her authors on the Internet! Connie liked the way I wrote and put every book I had under contract. Publishing was in the midst of a great change and even the literary giant Stephen King experimented with selling electronic files instead of paper books at the turn of the century.

King made piles of money peddling chapters of a book he had in the closet and never finished the darn thing either! We know the system works, the question now is when we will see a pay-off. It may not be that long.

Technology is getting better all the time..

Technology has produced electronic “readers” that will allow people to download a whole vacation’s worth of beach books into a device the size of a deck of cards.

Writers who started their life’s work in the 70s and 80s are seeing the face of publishing change before their eyes, and submitting their work just as eagerly to electronic publishers today as they

did to conventional book publishers 20 years ago.

Sony has recently come out with a new device that is as clear and easy to see as newsprint. Today, people are reading e-books not just on e-book readers, but also on PDAs and Cell phones.

**Even with new technology,
the rules still apply.**

Don't get overconfident about all this change. You still have to know the rules and produce a publishable manuscript before an e-publisher will consider or accept your work. Internet publishers are busy. They have strict guidelines about what they want – and they have rules about how that material should be presented.

Some have a committee of readers to screen submissions. These readers and editors are much more likely to accept a manuscript if it is spell-checked and uses proper grammar before they see it. If they do accept your book, they will then send you a *galley* that you have to correct before publication as an e-book or in other formats. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Your success is still up to you—down to the last comma.

Keep your writing tools sharp.

Once you fill your tool box with a writer's skills,

the next thing to do is to formulate an idea. An idea without skills is still an idea, but those writer's skills I talk about so much can help you bring the idea to life.

Think about your idea. Think of it as a place, some people, and a situation. You will find that each of these elements requires a good deal of attention.

Never wake the reader from the dream.

One of my favorite writing teachers once told me, "Never wake the reader from the dream."

What does that mean? *What dream?*

Simply put, you as the writer are ultimately responsible for everything that happens in your story.

You create the landscape, plant the trees and build the houses. You rake a sandy beach and scatter it with broken shells. You raise the wind and ebb the tide. You paint a sunset and brush it away with thunderheads. You muffle this world with snow and glaze it over with sparkling ice. You bake it in the sun and chill it with sodden rain. The universe is your playground and all the clouds and stars are the decorations you hang.

With all this, you *give* the reader a place in the story as they recognize the couch with scratchy

green nylon frieze upholstery, the patent leather Mary Janes, or the tang of doggie doo on the bottom of a shoe.

These images are familiar to most of America. Our readers want to get comfortable with things they know, before they really begin enjoy the story.

So, you must write what you know.

Write what you know.

This phrase is repeated at every conference, at every writing class, and in every how-to book. *Write what you know.* Okay. Take this very seriously—even if you write fantasy. Every word in your work has to hang together as a cohesive whole.

As the writer you have to know what is going to happen next, where it will happen, and how it will affect the characters. You may research the facts, but you must *know* the facts and the landscape in order to write a believable story. If the framstaten is purple on first reference, then it better be purple every time it shows up in the story.

So, how do you get to know all the necessary bits of your story so you can write them convincingly? There are many ways. You can view a movie from another time period to get clothing detail. You can read books about other times and places. You can

play with children and listen to their conversation. You can tour factories. You can drive a car, ride on a train or bus, or fly in an airplane. You can use past life regressions if you believe in such things. You can talk to jewelers and car collectors. You can interview priests and street people. You can pay a researcher. You can call an expert or look one up on the Internet. All the things to do to make your writing richer and your stories ring true are out there. It is up to you to find creative ways to locate the truth you need for the story you want to tell.

Writing a story or book can make you the lord of all you survey, but don't let all that power go to your head. You may own everything in that world you created, but you are also responsible for every atom of it.

Stories do not take place in a vacuum.

Stories do not take place in a vacuum. The place you create should come complete with the odors of life: the tang of sweat, the sweetness of a flower, the rank stench of a long dead corpse. Things should have texture: the roughness of pine bark, the slippery luxury of silk, the dewy warmth of a young woman's cheek and the wrinkled landscape of an old man's visage.

There should be light, darkness and shadow. The air should be dry and hot, or cold and damp. Take your pick. The choices are endless.

Books do not speak, but your characters do and their words ring in the reader's ear. If you have learned your craft and use your tools well, they can hear the love in the new mother's lullaby, the pain in a grieving father's voice when he holds his murdered child, the bitter anger of the inmate's rap as he bangs his tin cup on the bars of his cell.

Give that woman's voice an Irish lilt, her husband a Scottish burr. Listen to the clash of sound as they agree to disagree. Tune the motor on that old car, or let the valves knock and the manifold rattle. It's all good.

Identify your main character and give him life. (Or her — I am not unaware of the necessity of being politically correct, but I am not going to worry about it just now.)

Show your reader this person you made. Give him dark or golden hair, choose the color of his eyes, and sculpt his form with words. Make him clumsy or agile, husky or frail. Give his temper a hair-trigger or make him mild as milk. Make him loving or hateful.

Give him a character and then set him loose. Follow him around and don't hang on too tightly.

He knows where he wants to go and what he wants to say. If you have your skills together, something very interesting could happen.

Try not to be a mother hen when it comes to your characters. Let them swear, perspire, screw-up and generally paddle their own canoes. You can decide on an outcome for your tale, but don't be surprised if your characters and their stories take on a life of their own.

Stories take on a life of their own.

Do choose one character to follow. Rhett Butler is an important character in *Gone With the Wind*, but the story is always about Scarlett, Scarlett, Scarlett.

And always, always strive to write what you know. Think about the themes various famous writers used to support their stories. Margaret Mitchell used the Civil War and the universal tale of a woman who survives. She lived in the South. She had legs so crippled she could barely walk, but she let Scarlet dance.

Charles Dickens wrote about social injustice and child labor. He lived in 19th century London. His stories changed how industry treated workers. Today John Grisham writes about the law. He is a lawyer. Patricia Cornwell writes about forensic

procedure. She holds both law and medical degrees.

The best and most popular writers still write about what they know.

Men and women. Women and men.

I have encountered the notion that a woman cannot write convincingly about a man and his life. I would argue the point. I think men and women are more alike than they would dare admit. We are all Homo Sapiens.

Then too, if the reincarnationists are right, we have all experienced alternate genders in other incarnations. Whether you believe that or not is up to you. If your character of the opposite sex acts in an appropriate manner and scratches where no gentleman ever would in public, don't worry about him. All your characters have to do is act naturally.

To outline, or not to outline.

You may ask about an outline, and I will say a number of writers I know work closely with outlines. They also agonize over their work if their characters don't do what they want them to do. I think *you have to have an idea*. I think your idea knows what it wants to be – mine always do.

I recently I attended a lecture by the famous writer John Barth. He said he learned to write by osmosis, reading all the paperback novels his father stocked at the sweet shop he worked in as a teenager. That may be.

I think if you read enough, the formula for a book becomes imbedded in your psyche, especially if you are a writer. If that is the case, you sit down with your idea and just write. So read, read, read, read. Next to learning the presentation aspects of good writing, reading may be the most important thing you can do to become a better writer.

What is a story?

Once you are immersed in your story and following your characters as they bring your idea to life, there are a few things you might want to remember:

- A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Good stories start with a hook.
- Good writers show, don't tell.
- Good writers know less is more.
- Real readers don't give up.

Many cultures honor the individuals who tell stories as very special members of the society.

Stories may teach or entertain, but they all share a common structure.

Story Structure

All stories have a beginning to introduce the *problem* the story embraces, a middle to show how the problem *affects* the characters, and an ending to illustrate how the problem is *solved*.

Some stories have morals. Some just make us laugh. The ability to tell a story well is a gift to be cherished and developed.

What is a hook? A hook is a statement that grabs your reader's attention so she can't wait to find out what happens next. It hints of all manner of things hidden and waiting to be uncovered. Personally, I would qualify the hook as the most important sentence in your story. A good hook tells the reader what the story is about and poses enough questions in to keep him or her reading until the end of the story is reached.

What does a hook look like? Try these:

- *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .*
- *Long, long ago in a galaxy far away . . .*
- *In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth."*
- *I inherited my brother's life.*

Write a good hook and you will have your reader from hello.

Using imagery.

All right, show, don't tell. What does that mean? It means that you can't just say "Tommy got run over by a train." You have to help your reader see that situation, feel Tommy's terror when he realizes he can't free his foot from the track, hear the rumble of the iron wheels, and the shriek of the engineer's whistle as the locomotive bears down on the trapped boy.

Let your reader hear the sound of the train's impact with the frail child's body and the heart-rending cry of his mother as she races toward the disaster. Don't let Tommy go down in mediocrity. He may die an untimely death, but please, please make it memorable.

Viewpoint.

One way you can make a story more meaningful is to choose a *point of view* that enhances the story you want to tell. If you write about a young girl in love, you may choose to tell that story from the author's viewpoint, the girl's viewpoint, her mother's viewpoint, her lover's viewpoint, or that of the stalker across the street. Each of these sto-

ries will be very different.

Generally, if you start a story from one point of view, you should stick with it all the way through to the end. Readers can get really confused if the point of view changes in your story.

Less is more.

Less is more. HUH? Please don't overdo the intellect when you are telling a story. In the first place most people aren't all that attracted to big words and complicated sentences. Why do you think Stephen King writes at a fifth-grade level?

He uses little words to show us the ogre in the closet, and he uses those same little words to help us survive the night. Those small, familiar words made Mr. King really rich several times over. I hope I can use small words that well some day.

Long words and complicated sentences make the author sound important. But it is the story that is important.

A writer is one who writes.

Don't give up.

I mean that with all my heart. Fifty years ago I set out to be a writer, and I have been a writer ever since—which is not to say I haven't done a lot of other hard work—from making beds to event

planning.

Some of those experiences ended up in my work. Today you may look at your manuscript and feel hurt and discouraged because it hasn't sold and allowed you to leave your day job; but remember, giving up is a choice and not all the writers we celebrate were always rich or famous.

If you want to be a writer, you can't give up. Today I have a dozen books published on-line and in paper. I earned a living as a news reporter for five years and wrote every day. I have written public relations copy and government grants for a paycheck.

Right now, I write for a magazine, I write sermons for my church and I am working on a couple of books. I write songs and poetry, and one of these days I just might write an autobiography—although I am not sure I have such a remarkable story after all. Time will tell.

Don't give up or get discouraged.

Don't give up. If you need to learn the craft, take in as many writers' conferences as you can. Enroll in creative writing classes through Adult Ed or your local community college. Form a writer's group. Talk to writers. Swap manuscripts, mark them up, critique one other's work. Get to know

your characters and let them romance you until their story belongs to the world. Submit your stories everywhere and never stop believing in yourself.

And please don't get too discouraged if you find selling your work a difficult task. It just is. Today's writers have to take responsibility for marketing their own work more than ever.

Jean Auel sent *Clan of the Cave Bear* to more than 50 publishers before a janitor read her manuscript and passed it on to a junior editor. Dr. Seuss ran out of ideas when he was trying to sell *Cat in the Hat* to the New York City publishers, and only succeeded when he crossed 5th Avenue for some shade on a hot day and bumped in to an old friend from college who finally saw his genius.

Even Stephen King had some hungry years when no one wanted his work. Edgar Allen Poe was dismally poor all his life. It happens to the best of us. Writers have to write.

Is it any good?

Do you ever worry about the quality of your work? Try this. Sit down with a nice cup of tea, your finished manuscript and a crackling fire if you can get one. Put the cares of the day aside and begin.

Look at the front page of your work and really notice how your name looks under the title you have chosen. Looks good, doesn't it? A *finished manuscript*. Not everyone gets this far. Give yourself a hug.

You are going to claim this baby, be responsible for its every step into the future. But one thing remains. How does it sound? I am not talking about how a story sounds in your mind's ear. We all have problems seeing—and hearing—our children's flaws.

The sound I am referring to is how the tale might sound if say . . . Sean Connery were reading it. Hmmm . . . Imagine that sexy, velvety voice as it carries your story onward and upward . . . That is a nice dream, isn't it?

What? He's stumbling over the words. Pausing for commas that are out of place? You can't make heads nor tails of the story? If so, it is a pretty good bet it's time for another revision? It could be.

What is “good writing?”

Good writing has cadence, it has rhythm. Good writing rings with the speech of your characters and the accuracy of your descriptions.

You may paint with a broad brush when you write, but make sure the information is all avail-

able to your readers. They can't *see* what isn't there. Your words are the triggers that turn on the TV sets in their minds. If the picture isn't clear, they are going to change the channel and look for another diversion. That is the bottom line.

Read your story aloud.

So please read your story aloud and see how it scans. If the language trips you up, it will trip your reader as well. Do you have too many quotes — or, too few? Do your descriptions go on for pages?

Can you picture the room, countryside, country, or world your characters see? Can you conjure up the sounds that accompany the story: the chirp of crickets, the squawk of a blue jay, the hum of a clock, the stutter of a coffee maker, the buzz of a razor?

Can you hear a television or CD player in the background? Can you smell the coffee?

Your job is to tell the story, and engage the senses of your reader, so go ahead and burn the pie, scorch the ironing and tell your nosy mother-in-law where to go. Let the rain turn to glare ice. Encourage jealousy between siblings and harmony between newlyweds.

Let your character pick at her cuticles and pet her cat as she plots mayhem for the drug dealer

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who sold the lethal drug to her child. Get mean, get real.

Onr last thing.

One last thing. Once you have finished your manuscript. Put it away. Let it rest and age for a while. What you see when you come back to it a few days or months later can be astounding and character building.

You may see that you are indeed the writing genius you were born to be—or you may find that your opus still needs some good old-fashioned work. It is all good. We all go through it.

And in the end, we learn the glory we seek is not so much in the reward for the work of writing, but in doing the work. Writing gives us worlds to explore and characters to meet. Learning to write well can help us change the world and find ourselves. It is well worth the journey.

Terry L. White

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Terry L. White was raised in the northern Appalachian Mountains in Pennsylvania. The eldest of eight children, she dreamed of being a writer and made up stories to amuse herself and her siblings. Of European and Native American descent, she grew up with the family legends of being related to Abraham Lincoln, of ancestors arriving in the New World as indentured servants, of a great-grandfather who sold patent medicines for a living, and of abandoned coal mines that burned forever underground on the mountain overlooking her childhood home.

Her fascination with history, folk art and ways, and

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New Age philosophy provide her with much of the material she incorporates in her work.

Editor's note:

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