



MARC D. BALDWIN

**Writing
Fabulous
Fiction**

TIPS FROM GREAT WRITERS, MOVEMENTS, & PHILOSOPHIES

Writing Fabulous Fiction:
Tips from Great Writers, Movements, and
Philosophies

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Philosophies

Marc D. Baldwin, PhD

Preface

Reading, studying and teaching literature has been a big part of my life.

I love sharing what I've learned from the great writers, movements, and philosophies. They have lots to teach us, if we listen and try to apply their lessons.

Ultimately, though, it's just you and the keyboard. You best play that instrument a lot if you want to write well.

But there's that damn "writer's block" thing. This book serves to chop the block into a thousand manageable pieces by distilling from many sources their main tips and strategies for writing good stuff.

I hope there are some good ideas here for you to use.

Happy writing! And happy trails to you...

Table of Contents

Romanticism: It's Not All Hearts and Flowers.....	1
Be a seer, a new visionary	2
Be an idealist rather than a materialist	2
It's a matter of mind over matter	3
Chill and then write	3
Take a long walk	4
Plot around contradictions	4
Grow an organic writing garden	5
Realism: Whatever That Is	7
Realism seems simple enough, but...it's not	7
Write down to earth	8
Be objective, cool, detached.....	9
Plot around complex ethical choices.....	10
Modernism: Forever Young	13
Foster and express a rebellious spirit	14
Understand, recognize, and shun decadence.....	14
Think and write like a Romantic	15
Experiment with what were then new notions of the nature of consciousness.....	16
Play with the then-new views of time itself	16
Existentialism: Nothing Except Everything Means	
Anything	19
Life is absurd.....	20
Let it be, let it be.....	21
Face the dread	22
Make conscious choices	23
Commit or be committed.....	23

Deconstruction: Are Your Words Yours or Are You Theirs?.....	25
Realize that there's nothing certain in language.....	26
Embrace the fact that <i>all</i> words are metaphors	27
You, the author, are irrelevant	28
The “not-said” matters even more.....	29
How to Write a Classic Novel: Five Elements That Will Turn Your Book into a Masterpiece.....	31
Develop a strong narrative voice.....	31
Dream up a new and interesting story—your story	32
Make it all fresh—Style, plot, characters— Everything as fresh as tomorrow's tweets ...	34
Create metaphoric magic	35
Think thematically: make it deep	35
Ralph Waldo Emerson: Transcending Down to Earth	37
Defy stereotypes.....	37
Transcend.....	38
Organicize.....	39
See and be “sublime”	39
Live a life of Self-Reliance.....	40
Nathaniel Hawthorne: Just Like You and Me	43
What's your haunted history?	44
What are your dark secrets?	44
What's your psychological tension?	45
What's your lonely and solitary disposition?	45
Your life comes down to this question: “What would happen if...?”	46
Who's the allegorical you?	47
Where's your Romantic side?	48

Herman Melville: <i>Moby Dick</i> Says It All	51
Eschatology never had a better frontman	52
Plot stories around the “inscrutable alternatives.”	52
There’s no better story than good guys vs. bad guys	54
Make your characters allegorical.....	55
Here’s a plan: Write about spiritualism vs. materialism	56
Mark Twain: It Ain’t All Fun and Games	59
Try using the vernacular and dialect you know best	59
Try satire on for size	61
Try Twain’s brand of humor	62
Joseph Conrad and <i>Heart of Darkness</i> (1899):	
“The horror. The horror.”	65
How great is <i>Heart of Darkness</i> ?.....	65
Write about Imperialism and Colonialism.....	66
Tap into your subconscious	67
Apply some epistemology	68
Tell a twice-told tale	69
Try writing an apocalyptic story—they’re always bestsellers and blockbusters.....	70
Study and work hard like Conrad did.....	71
Ernest Hemingway: The Code Hero	73
Make your writing the embodiment of your life.	74
Be as honest and accurate as you can with your pain and wounds	74
Use the Iceberg Principle.....	75
Use understatement and irony	75
Don’t talk about it.....	76
Shape your plots in a 3-stage quest	77

Violently edit your writing	77
William Faulkner: Creating a Fictional World.....	79
Set all your stories and novels in one city, county, or state populated by a recurring cast of characters	79
Infuse your fictional world with cultural depth and insight	81
Think thematically and make your story mean something.....	82
Man’s Capacity for Evil	82
Primitivism vs. civilization.....	83
Try on Faulkner’s writing style for size	83
William Butler Yeats: The Search for “There”	87
Be a Bard	87
Explore a belief system	88
Use symbolism.....	89
Ponder life’s interpenetrating opposites	90
Do you “get it”?	91
Robert Frost: Seeing the Spiritual in the Material...	93
Frost’s appeal	94
Frost has four attributes from the 19 th century	94
Frost’s theories of poetry.....	95
Frost’s style	96
Frost’s subjects and themes.....	97
Finally... ..	97
Bibliography.....	99
Picture Acknowledgments.....	105

Romanticism: It's Not All Hearts and Flowers

To say the word Romanticism is to say modern art—
that is, intimacy, spirituality, color, aspiration
towards the infinite,
expressed by every means available to the arts.

--Charles Baudelaire

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

--William Wordsworth

Romanticism was born in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Those lads could flat out write.

Though love should be romantic, *romance* is much more than just “come on baby, light my fire.” (Yes, it’s true, Jim Morrison was a Romantic, through and through. But that’s a subject for another day.)

Romanticism is larger than life—a wistful, world-weary, wise, and wonderful way of looking at ways of looking at things.

Let’s have a look at the seven main aspects of Romanticism that could inspire your imagination and

light your writing fire.

Be a seer, a new visionary

Easier said than done, but that's what the Romantics did. They innovated. They broke all the rules.

- Write about the commonplace, about the world around you: your hood, your job, your friends, your experiences.
- Write them new. Say what's never been said before.
- Listen for, as Wordsworth said, "the unheard melodies" of your imagination. You've got words inside you. You just have to listen for them, hear them, and write them.

Be an idealist rather than a materialist

Write stories about people sticking to their ideals and principles.



“The world is too much with us,” said Wordsworth. “Late and soon/Getting and spending we lay waste our powers;/Little we see in Nature that is ours. . . .”

I'd say there are probably at least 100 stories all

around you of people who fit this bill. People wasting their lives “getting and spending.”

People lost in material pursuits—empty headed, self-centered, out of touch with what’s really important in life.

By “Nature,” Wordsworth doesn’t just mean flowers and forests. He means human nature: what we think, feel, understand; how we behave, relate, cope. The basics.

Study and write about the basics. About “The human heart in conflict with itself,” as William Faulkner put it.

It’s a matter of mind over matter

The artist recreates a new reality.

Take your subject, whatever it is, and look at it upside down and sideways. It’s all just stuff. Throw it up in the air and see where it lands.

Try to rearrange the world.

Make your reader see things in a new way.

Chill and then write

On some days, you’re all fired up or pissed off. Something happened to you that would make a good story.

Chill first. Here’s Wordsworth’s writing method:

“emotion recollected in tranquility.”

You felt a strong emotion: fear, anger, embarrassment, despair. You wanted to kill somebody you were so mad.

Wait until you calm down.

Once you get into a tranquil mood, recollect that strong emotion. Bring it back inside your head. Imagine that feeling all over again.

Then write the story that triggered the feeling.

Take a long walk

The Romantics did, just about every day. Seriously. When was the last time you took a long solitary walk? It focuses you, clears your head, helps you introspect.

Take a notepad and pen with you. That’s right. No iPad or laptop. And no texting! No interruptions.

Ideas will come to you. Walking releases the imagination. It’s true. Try it.

Just walk and think. When you get ideas, stop and write them down.

Plot around contradictions

People have trouble with contradictions. They usually get all self-righteous and scream: “You’re contradicting yourself!” As if that automatically makes you wrong and them right.

Contradictions abound. Life isn't all unity and harmony.

In many cases, the contradictions are great conflicts. Great conflicts are the essence of great plots.

Look for contradictory people, topics, events, experiences. Examine them.

Maybe you'll discover there's a logic in the contradictions: the logic of multiple perspectives, of our inherent confusion over what to think and how to feel.

Contradictions, mixed up people, confused situations: They all make for good characterization and plot elements.

Grow an organic writing garden

Coleridge had an organic theory of writing: Like a seed in the imagination, the idea grows out of itself, self-originating and self-organizing.

Start with a seed and just write. See what branches take shape.

Let them grow where they go. Let your leaves sprout where they want to. Like a tree, all the branches and leaves of your writing are connected to the whole tree.

Coleridge wrote some crazy good stuff, such as “The

Rime of the Ancient Mariner” about sailors on a ship lost at sea with “water, water every where/Nor any drop to drink.”

And “Kubla Khan”:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

**What poetry!
Written by an idealistic seer
who stirred his imagination
on long walks, chillin after bad experiences,
and then writing organically
about life’s contradictions.**

Realism: Whatever That Is

We need realism to deal with reality.

--*Slick Rick*

Get your facts first,
then you can distort them as you please.

--*Mark Twain*

Realism seems simple enough, but...it's not

Everyone knows what's real, right? So why have a movement over it? Why even wonder or discuss it? It's just a natural thing, isn't it? Realism. What's the big mystery?

Well, the term *realism* itself is problematic. It depends on your conception of what's real. And that depends, as so much does, on how sane you are. And sanity is a slippery term too, isn't it? Some people are so sane it drives them insane.

If you think too much about this crazy world, you'll go nuts.

Just look at some of the radio and TV commentators and talk show hosts. They're so "sane," so rooted and obsessed with the political "realities" of life—as defined by them—that they've become ranting lunatics.

Thanks to such extremism, Realism has effectively lost its meaning.

Write down to earth

Back in the day, Realism was a revolutionary way of thinking, living, and writing. It developed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with America's rise as a superpower, thanks in large part to capitalism and industrialization.

A rather well-off middle class loved their new prosperity and having more money. They no longer wanted to read fiction unrelated to real life.

So the fiction writers—all at once almost—turned from fanciful, Romantic plots and language to real-life material and words.

Prior to Realism, most fiction writers tried their darnedest to sound more educated, distant, and aristocratic in their vocabularies and stories.

Realism made it okay to write about everyday people in everyday words. Truth be told, it's my favorite way of writing.

Today's bloggers are Neo-Realists, writing like people speak. Check out Seth Godin, Mike Stelzner, Brian Solis, and Chris Brogan, just to name a few.

They write about what exists in the world around them: careers, work, social media, making money, being successful.

They're fun and entertaining to read because they waste no words. Their writing is clean, clear, crisp.

Right to the point. And often very funny. Brevity is, indeed, the soul of wit.

This same Neo-Realist style can apply to fiction. You want to write about dragons and vampires? Okay, fine. Some of the best stories are about real life fire-breathing “loved ones” and blood-sucking friends.

Whatever your subject, say it fast and sharp.
For starters, ditch the adjectives and adverbs.
Trash the hype. Respect every word and every
second of your reader’s time.

Be objective, cool, detached

It might not be you. You might be highly subjective, emotional, and frantic. That’s fine, I guess. But try the opposite on for size.

Get yourself out of yourself. Thirty minutes before you sit down to write, pop a Xanax if you have to. Frazzled fiction grates on the nerves after a few pages.

What’s really intriguing is a story that’s tense and roller-coaster wild, yet written in ice-cold, steely-eyed prose.

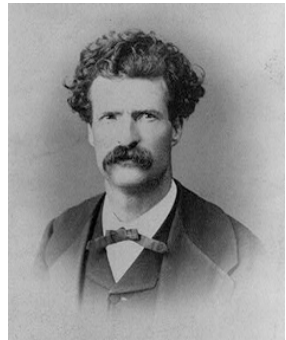
Tell just the facts, ma'am. The remarkable, amazing facts. With no expression and no hyperbole. Like Trump negotiating a deal. Or Moneymaker over a \$3m pot at the World Series of Poker.

Emotionless narration chills a reader to the bone.

Plot around complex ethical choices

One of the hardest parts of being human is making tough decisions. That's reality on hyper drive. Do I do this or do I do that? Geez. It's gut-wrenching. And riveting reading. Like these classics:

- Huck Finn was torn between helping Jim, his Black slave friend, escape to freedom, or doing what Aunt Polly and the Widow Douglas would want him to—turn Jim in. After a prolonged, agonizing fight with himself, Huck decides to side with Jim and help him escape from slavery. In his moment of decision, Huck says, “All right, I’ll go to hell then.”
- William Dean Howells’ *Silas Lapham*, who’s broke and needs money, still refuses to sell the mills.
- Earning his *Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane’s Civil War soldier, Henry Fleming,



despite formerly deserting, returns to his regiment and leads a triumphant charge against the enemy.

The real world—whatever that is—lies all around you. You're in it, my friend.

Your best stories are growing inside you right now, in the struggles you're having with difficult choices.

Be grounded, objective, cool, and detached to write your stories into existence—before they write you out.

**The stakes are high.
If you want to be a great novelist,
you have to face the present reality:
You're not one yet.
So get real before real gets you.**

Modernism: Forever Young

May you always be courageous, stand
upright and be strong.
May you stay forever young.

--Bob Dylan



The aim of every artist is to arrest motion,
which is life, by artificial means
and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later,
when a stranger looks at it,
it moves again since it is life.

--William Faulkner

Modernism was an artistic, cultural, and even philosophical period from approximately 1885-1935 or so.

Why should that matter to a writer? How could knowing a little bit about Modernism help you write a better novel or story?

Because knowing the history and lessons learned and imparted by those who came before us in any discipline or field can only make us better at what we do.

The application of knowledge and education works cumulatively and synergistically. The more we know, the better we are at what we do. Does anything make more sense than that?

Foster and express a rebellious spirit

The Victorian world was no longer. The old values were gone or exposed as false or hypocritical; the feeling was that new values must be created.



The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had a profound influence: scorning the idea of getting at truth, believing that there is no truth, no reality, no absolute. All is relative and a matter of individual perception.

He believed in “undecidables”—in life, language, and art.

Writers who rebel, creating new ways of writing or thinking about things, are always in demand. Risk takers win big. Writers who play it safe lose.

Understand, recognize, and shun decadence

When a form of something (art, lifestyle, fashion, culture, civilization, government, etc.) has gone as far as it can and no one can think of another direction for it, that’s decadence.

So much writing today is decadent. It's so derivative and redundant.

Do we really need another wizard, vampire, or dragon fantasy novel that copies the same formula of the previous 1000?

If you're going to write a wizard, vampire, or dragon fantasy novel, you better have a truly unique twist or angle to it.

Decadence stresses the invalidity of structure, believing that there can be no such thing as a coherent, truly workable design in nature or society.

Revolt by writing something absolutely fresh and radical. Don't be an imitator; be an innovator.

Think and write like a Romantic

The Modernists loved Romanticism. Study Romanticism as they did, to learn its lessons and borrow its timeless aspects for your own writing.

- Self-consciousness, self-reliance, and the imagination's power to create are almost obsessions of Romanticism.
- Though concerned with the commonplace—what's natural, simple, real—Romantics sought the absolute by transcending the actual.
- It's ironic that the Modernists, like the Romantics, searched for the "Ideal."

- Lace your story together with that paradoxical thread—characters realistically seeking what’s idealistic—and you’ll have a winner that will captivate readers.

Experiment with what were then new notions of the nature of consciousness

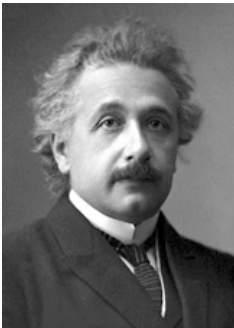
Freud and Jung were Modernists who posited

- that consciousness is multiple;
- that the past is always present and coloring one’s present reaction;
- and that people *are* their memories.

Writers developed a new kind of reality, one preoccupied with the inner life, the subjective.

In literature, these ideas were manifested in Faulkner’s “stream of consciousness” style and Hemingway’s “iceberg principle.”

Play with the then-new views of time itself



Thanks to the Modernists Einstein and Bergson, time was beginning to be seen not as a series of chronological moments in sequence, but as a continuous flow in the consciousness of the individual, with the “already” merging into the “not yet.”

- Read Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (a 1960's post-Modernist) for what can be done with time-out-of-joint writing.
- You do not have to write in a chronological order.

The Modernists were a great bunch of artists and personalities. So be rebellious and romantic, shun decadence, and play with consciousness and time. At the very least, you'll have fun experimenting.

Existentialism: Nothing Except Everything Means Anything

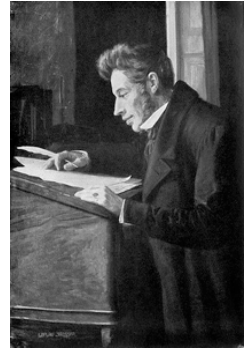
If you stare into the Abyss long enough,
the Abyss stares back at you.

--Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

There are many here among us
Who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I, we've been through that
And this is not our fate
So let us not talk falsely now,
the hour is getting late.

--Bob Dylan

Existentialism is a philosophy espoused by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, adopted in great measure by the Modernist authors—most notably Hemingway—and followed, if not fully understood, by many people throughout the 20th century and even today.



It's pretty controversial and very interesting. Its five principal aspects have comprised the personalities and driven the plots of hundreds of characters and novels.

Many writers and readers alike have found an eerie fascination with and attraction to existentialism.

You might too.

Life is absurd

Existentialists say that they believe that there is nothing lasting or real, no absolutes, no final purpose, or anything worth any effort.

This ironic and somewhat disingenuous position is undermined by their own insistence upon its absolute truth. But if nothing is real, absolute, or meaningful, then neither is that claim itself.

So, they deconstruct themselves.

- Nonetheless—petty semantics aside—believing that life is absurd is a darkly comedic place to begin fashioning your protagonist’s personality.
- Read *The Underground Man* by Dostoevsky. What a ride!

If a character believes that life is absurd, it probably is for her. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.

She may live in isolation and frustration, never satisfied or happy because nothing means anything. So why bother to try?

She could end up paralyzed by her own absurdity. A walking, talking joke.

Absurdity, after all, is the collision between the rational and irrational.

- Is it not crazily absurd to try to reason with a lunatic?
- I'm sure you've experienced such close encounters, and they make for delightfully comedic scenes—though not necessarily much fun when you're actually playing a part in them.

Let it be, let it be

The antidote for such absurdity is the character focusing on just “Being.”

Read Jerzy Kosinski's Being There. What a book. (And what a movie, starring Peter Sellers in his last role.)

Truth, with a capital *T*,
resides in striving toward, in *becoming*.
People attain meaning in their lives not in stasis,
but rather in flux.
Change energizes; movement defines.

And yes, the Beatles wrote many existentialist lyrics about many intriguing fictional characters:

- Eleanor Rigby “wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door.”
- Rocky Raccoon

- The walrus
- Mean Mr. Mustard
- The girl who came in through a bathroom window
- The taxman
- Mr. Kite
- Prudence
- Lovely Rita, the meter maid
- Lucy in the sky with her diamonds

Absurd characters, one and all. And all fascinating, all classics—all because they just focused on being themselves, living in their own worlds.

Face the dread

Is there a better word than “dread” to describe that black hole depression, those moments of awful, utter clarity that life may, indeed, be meaningless?

In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz stared into the abyss and saw “The horror. The horror.”

Existentialists believe that people must face the dread of existence, popularly known as *angst*, the German word for “anxiety or anguish.”

Dread is an awareness that anything is possible, that insecurity is infinite. If accepted, dread destroys all faith in finite ends and prepares the individual for the infinite faith of “Positive Nothingness.”

- Characters in the death grip of dread palpitate with authenticity.

- Try to author such a character.
- Authorize him with a paradoxical positivity in his nothingness.
- He knows he's nothing, but he's down with that. He can cope—that is until he implodes or explodes.

Make conscious choices

Taking charge of their meaningless existence by making deliberate, decisive choices is another strategy people employ to create a meaning in life when they believe there isn't one.

Note again the deliciously paradoxical nature of existentialism: Only through choosing do we define and construct our individuality.

Though all is absurd, meaningless, and dreadful, one must move purposely through life, not drift through it.

By choosing, we create our “selves” and our characters create themselves. When your characters are creating themselves as you write, you’ve got a potential masterpiece in the works.

Commit or be committed

Finally, the existentialist must make commitments or go utterly insane.

It's Orwell's doublethink (in 1984) that Winston Smith couldn't quite grasp, and so he was defeated and committed to a life of dreadful meaninglessness.

One simply must accept the pointlessness while refusing to be pointless himself. That's the point of life: Effort and accomplishment become the reasons to exist.

This formula for survival is Jean-Paul Sartre's "Doctrine of Engagement."

- Talk is cheap; there's no individual reality except in deeds and actions.
- That's all that means anything—that is if anything means anything. Sartre said that freedom is responsibility.

Have your characters mull that one over awhile.

When the absurdity of life is recognized, just being alive is enough, the dread has been stared down, choices made, and responsibility assumed, your existence claims a value in and of itself. In the end—our only friend, saith the Lizard King—nothing else makes sense or is real except existence itself.

Deconstruction: Are Your Words Yours or Are You Theirs?

A successful book is not made of what is in it,
but what is left out of it.

--Mark Twain

Deconstruction insists not that truth is illusory
but that it is institutional.

--Terry Eagleton

Deconstruction is a radical critical theory popularized by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He and others after him took the analysis of language and communication deeper than it had ever gone before.

In essence, they took apart words, sentences, pieces of writing—deconstructing them—showing how all our efforts to communicate with each other are constructions.

We build narratives and dialogue, erecting buildings of words.

Deconstructionists delight in making all essays, arguments, or novels—just to name a few word buildings—come tumbling down like a house of cards. How do they do that? Why do they do that?

I'll discuss their methods and motives some other time. For now, let's just discuss their tenets, their four main suppositions about language.

Learning some deconstructive theory will help you write better. Writers can never know too much critical theory.

Realize that there's nothing certain in language

All words have radically unstable histories and meanings. Go to the dictionary and you'll see at least a few definitions—known as *denotations*—for every word in there. How can that be?

If you trace the words in each definition, you'll find that they also have several definitions. And if you follow their historical trail back as far as you can go, you'll find they all started with words from other languages that also had many definitions.

So what can truly be determined by any word? You say one thing, and I hear another.

Words are signifiers that have no solid signified, no essential meaning. There is no right interpretation; there's always more, an infinite loop.

Think of great lawyers or politicians. They're consummate deconstructionists. You can never pin them down because they understand how slippery words can be.

So how can our ideas or stories or articles ever truly be “original”? They can't.

But our construction of those ideas and stories and articles can be.

Embrace the fact that *all* words are metaphors

Language doesn't work the way we think it works.

- There is no essential entity, no origin, no point "A".
- Our writing always arrives at the abyss. It's bottomless. An endless chain of signification.

You can always write more, always go in a different direction or tangent.

Your words contain a residue from the past. They're connected—just as you inherit much of your parents' DNA—to other texts, other writers, thinkers, and sources that came before them.

All of your words stand for things or feelings or events or experiences or ideas. Your words are not *the* things, feelings, events, experiences, or ideas themselves. They are metaphors.

- You can never fully re-present those entities in words.
- Your words, your essays, your novels are floating, dying, ever changing before your eyes, like the night sky.

What do we see in the heavens? Stars? No. We see ancient history. We see light that has

travelled for millions of years from stars that are likely burned out and gone. We see what isn't there anymore.

- Writing's the same way. We write, and what's written down refers to what isn't there anymore. It's either different or gone entirely.

You, the author, are irrelevant

Do you really think that some subjective, independent, fully autonomous *you* is in charge of your words?

Your writing writes you. Words constitute your thoughts. Words existed before you did. You just entered this world and landed in the middle of a swirling soup of words. Those words you write exist independently from you, the author.

It's a convention of English grammar to write in the subject-verb-object syntactic order. This structure asserts the authority of the author, the subject, you and me. We're in the first position in most of our sentences.

- This artificial construct is an ideological position we created.
- We humans put ourselves first, before action, before events, before statements, before ideas, before everything else in our spoken and written communication. That's rather pompous and pathetically blind to reality, actually.

- In reality, all else came before us.
Before we ever existed, countless trillions of ideas and actions and events existed and occurred that are similar to those we have and experience in our little lives.
- We are nothing but conduits—cables through which the collective unconscious and the continuum of history flow.

The “not-said” matters even more

When you're with someone or talking with someone, are there ever thoughts in your head that you don't express in words? Only a few million in your lifetime so far, right? The same goes for your writing.

In fact, there are the things you intentionally don't write, many more things you don't even think of writing, and
—here's the kicker—
many things in your writing that say things you never even intended to say.

The reader reads into your words also, reading meaning you never consciously meant to convey.

What it comes down to is this: There's an unconscious text inside every text.

- It's an ethics of the Other: What's excluded from the text is still in the text. It's there by the

very act of being “not there.”

- Your writing contains meanings and messages that your brain never processed. They reside in the cracks and gaps, in the connotations and traces—despite your delusion that *you* control the cognition and communication process.

Words have a life of their own—whether they’re written down or not. As Martin Heidegger contended, all writing contains the seeds of its opposite; no concept can be understood except in relation to its opposite.

**Deconstruct your own writing,
just for the heck of it.**

Gaze warily at your own words.

**Consider alternative ways of seeing and saying
what’s ostensibly the same thing.**

Trace your words’ etymological roots.

Engage yourself with yourself.

Are your words yours, or are you theirs?

How to Write a Classic Novel: Five Elements That Will Turn Your Book into a Masterpiece

In science, read by preference the newest works.

In literature, read the oldest.

The classics are always modern.

--Amy Lowell

A true classic, as I should like to hear it defined, is an author who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step.

--Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve

Want to write a novel that doesn't just sell well but is also a classic, one that people are reading 100 years from now? Who doesn't, right? Well, if you have some talent and try to include these five elements, your words—if not you yourself—might become immortal.

Develop a strong narrative voice

You've got to have a powerful, sure-footed narrative voice. Your prose must percolate with life, full of energy and drive. Easy to say and easy to spot when you read it, but how exactly does a writer pull that off? How do you develop a unique, strong voice?

- Read the classics and observe how the great ones did it. I don't necessarily mean Plato, Virgil, and Shakespeare—though they couldn't hurt you—but the more recent English language classic novelists, such as Faulkner,

Hemingway, Wharton, Melville, Fitzgerald, Hawthorne . . . the list goes on.

- Throw in some late-20th century writers who may well pass the test of time, such as Updike, Bellow, Vonnegut, Cheever, and Malamud.

Just read good, solid novels in general. If you're not sure which books are just good and which may be great, Google for lists of classics.

- Study the authors' techniques: their vocabulary, phrases, and sentences. See how they use point of view, tone, diction, figurative language, and the like.
- If you're not sure who those writers or what those literary terms are, then you have a lot of homework to do.
- Note that I said "*develop* a strong narrative voice." Don't be discouraged if you don't have it right off the bat. Not many do. It takes total dedication to your writing craft and countless hours of reading and writing before you get it.

Dream up a new and interesting story— your story

Who wants to read the same old thing over and over again? Well, some people do, I guess, but most readers want to be surprised and delighted by a story that is unlike anything they've ever read before.

All the classics broke new ground.

- How can *you* tell a story no one's ever read before?
- Why not look at your own life rather than, say, dragons and wizards and vampires? Those creatures populate some great books, but can you really tell a fresh, new story about subjects that have already been written about so often and so well?

The really amazing fantasies,
the truly wondrous stories left to be told,
are those about your own life.

You are a great story. Aren't you?

Haven't you often thought and even told people, "My life would make a really strange (or great or weird or dope) book." So . . . what are you waiting for?

- Sit down and tell some real life stories, stories about you.
- Change the names, probably.
- Do some plotting and condensing and other essential novelistic tasks.
- And shape those episodic experiences of yours into a plotted novel, one with a conflict; a beginning, middle, and end; an arc; plot points; and resolutions.

Melville went to sea for years and wrote *Moby Dick*.

Fitzgerald partied for years and wrote *The Great Gatsby*. Hemingway went to war and wrote *A Farewell to Arms*. Vonnegut was a prisoner of war and wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Almost all the classics were based on true stories—crafted, morphed, or mashed up in one fantastic new way or another.

Make it all fresh—Style, plot, characters— Everything as fresh as tomorrow’s tweets

Here’s what bores readers:

- clichés or stereotypes
- stock plots
- a feeling that we’ve read or heard this all before
- vague, lazy diction
- one-dimensional, unsurprising characters and action

Here’s what thrills and amazes readers:

- universality: a story that transcends time and place and could happen anywhere, anytime
- being surprised by what characters say and do
- defamiliarization: stories and characters that go against the grain, making the familiar seem strange.

For Milan Kundera, one of the purposes of the novel is to question the commonplace, making it seem surprising, enigmatic: “It doesn’t just represent situations—jealousy, say, or tenderness or the taste for power—it arrests them, comes to a halt by them, looks closely at them, ponders them; interrogates them, asks questions of them, understands them as enigmas.”

Create metaphoric magic

- Weave a tapestry of images, resonating motifs, tropes, and threads of figurative language throughout your novel.
- If you don’t know what these terms mean, do your homework and learn. They’re essential elements of great fiction. Without them, your novel will seem dry, stale, somehow empty and unfulfilling.
- Readers might not even notice that these elements are missing, but they’ll feel that *something* is missing as they read your work.

Think thematically: make it deep

Likewise with themes: Without them, the readers will be left with a sense of “is that all there is?” Books without rich, thematic content are like stomachs full of candy.

- What's your point, moral, meaning, lesson?
- What can the reader learn, garner, get from the book?
- How does it enrich, teach, instruct us?
- What does it say about human nature, society, culture, issues, the world, the universe, life?

Be sure to *show* the book's theme through the plot points and characters' trials.

- Don't talk about the themes; don't preach or pontificate.
- Make the story resonate with rich insights and moments of eureka-like crystallization.
- But never explain or draw blunt attention to the themes.

**Stop the readers in their tracks,
making them pause to mull over
and think about what just happened.
If you can do that,
you'll have the makings of a classic.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Transcending Down to Earth

A well-written life is almost as rare as a well-spent one.
--Thomas Carlyle

People commonly travel the world over to see rivers and mountains, new stars, garish birds, freak fish, grotesque breeds of human; they fall into an animal stupor that gapes at existence and they think they have seen something.
--Søren Kierkegaard

America's main man when it comes to philosophizing, Emerson made philosophy accessible and even fun for people. We can learn a lot from Emerson to use in our writing. He'll make you think, that's for sure. Here's five philosophical ideas to kick-start your writing.

Defy stereotypes

If you're looking through his writing for an organized manifesto, don't bother. His style is rambling, anecdotal, analogical, and allegorical. He's all over the place. But there's big fat 7-carat diamonds of ideas everywhere you look throughout his writing.

He can't be labeled or pinned down. He's much bigger than any one idea:

- A Romantic in his pursuit of the unattainable reconciliation of opposites
- A Realist in "speaking the rude truth" about life
- An Idealist in believing there's a deeper truth

behind all appearances

- A Naturalist in depicting nature as a force that determines your fate

He's all those things and so much more

Transcend

One of the key developers of Transcendentalism—a philosophy with roots in the writings of Europeans Thomas Carlyle and Søren Kierkegaard—Emerson forged its American brand. A transcendentalist

- Looks for a reality beyond materialism and reason.
- Aspires to a high idealism, transcending this world.
- Holds to a “moral law” through which man can discover the nature of God. Emerson doubted the conventionalized, formalized, fundamentalized God of his day's Christianity. He believed that God reveals himself everywhere and at all times. Nature is the revelation of God.
- Uses intuition as the primary faculty for perceiving and understanding the world.

Seek the Over-soul: the universal, collective
unconsciousness, or Spiritus Mundi.

Emerson believed we all share
common thoughts and ancient,
mythical properties that our intuition can tap into.

Organicize

By *organicism*, Emerson meant “the marriage of thought and things.” You can make use of this theory:

- Choose just the right word, “not its second cousin,” as Twain said.
- Use physical things as metaphors or images of unseen spiritual forces, loaded with extra meanings, such as Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Wordsworth’s lakes and fields of wildflowers, and Twain’s Mississippi River.
- Compose stories with a transcendent unity, where the Me and the Not-Me are joined. All of nature, including the body, is Not-Me; only the soul is Me. Sixty years or so later, W. B. Yeats called it *There*, where the opposites interpenetrate.

See and be “sublime”

Beautiful word, *sublime*. It’s a feeling you get when things aren’t just pretty or picturesque, but when they strike you as “awesome.”

I put quotation marks around *awesome* because we’ve worn that word out so badly that it’s lost its meaning. When something is truly awesome, you’re struck dumb beholding it.

Try for the Sublime in your writing through descriptions that are

- Like a child seeing something for the first time.
- Written with an “innocent eye” or a “transparent eyeball.”

- Emerson felt we all need a “general education of the eye,”
- As in movies where an innocent, helpless character wanders through a dangerous hood, looking all around with unafraid curiosity,
- As in a trusting and mellow state of mind.
- Fresh with dazzling, surprising details.
- Appreciative of the wonder of creation.

As Emerson’s protégé, Henry David Thoreau, said: “Wisdom does not inspect but behold.”

Live a life of Self-Reliance

Emerson took Calvin’s work ethic, common sense, and man’s sheer survival instincts and rolled them up into his principle of Self-Reliance. Nothing really new to human history, but new to philosophy, new for a piece of writing.

His essay by the same name is at once philosophical, witty, wise, and full of excellent advice for all people—including writers. How so?

Who doesn’t like stories about heroes, small or large, famous or anonymous? They make for great plots and compelling reading.

- Heroic characters are almost all self-reliant.
- A terrific way to get an idea for a story—a springboard or starting off point, a theme or inspiration—is to start with a great quote.

- Read these incredible Emerson quotes and tell me you couldn't write a story about any of them:

Society everywhere is a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.

Speak the rude truth.

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist.

Trust thyself.

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

To be great is to be misunderstood.

Traveling is a fool's paradise.

**Read and absorb some Emerson.
He'll inspire you to rely on yourself,
identify and break through stereotypes,
thereby transcending your environment and
organically growing your mind and senses,
your talents and strengths,
all the while seeking, appreciating,
and living the sublime life.**

Nathaniel Hawthorne: Just Like You and Me

In Token of my admiration for his genius, this book is
inscribed to NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

--Herman Melville's Dedication of Moby Dick

No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to
himself and another to the multitude, without finally
getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

--from The Scarlet Letter

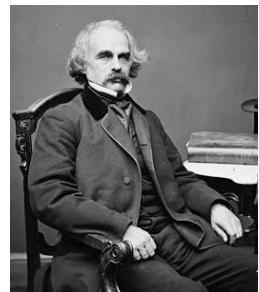
Another one of literature's great prose stylists,
Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote darkly beautiful and
haunting stories about sin, guilt, and personal
redemption earned through humiliation under the
glaring gaze of the hypocritical and self-righteous, the
“pure and innocent” accusers.

Writers have great material like that all around them.

Who hasn't “sinned”? Who doesn't have some
secret they don't want anyone to know about?

Go to any church where
congregations consider themselves
the “saved” and holy ones. Not that
they aren't. Many of those folks are
truly good. Perhaps I go to one of
those churches too.

But a closer look at everyone's life
reveals “sin” and bad stuff they're



guilty of doing that makes for universal and timeless tales.

Here's just a Hawthorne handful of ways to mine and develop great story ideas.

What's your haunted history?

Hawthorne's great-grandfather was a judge in the Salem witch trials. That connection led him to write symbolic tales about the guilt of sin as a psychological burden.

He had a Puritan heritage. So the strictures of that rigid religious sect troubled and informed his stories.

- Everyone's a haunted house.
- What ghosts and goblins haunt your mind or your family?
- How is the past still alive in you or your characters' present?

What are your dark secrets?

His friend Melville said that Hawthorne's works have the "power of blackness" about them—a dark secret past or present dominates everything.

Is there any "blackness" in your life or world?

Any conflicts of disturbed moral and
psychological conditions?

- Have you any hidden depravity?
- Any rebellious impulses?
- Any morbid thoughts?

What's your psychological tension?

Hawthorne's stories are tense and suspenseful because of the psychological forces ripping and tearing at the characters' hearts.

Read any of his books or short stories and you'll be gripped by their oppositions, their conflicts, their ambiguities

- Between wanting solitude and wanting company
- Between dependence and independence
- Between secretiveness and disclosure
- Between talking and silence
- Between forgiveness or vengeance
- Between accepting or rejecting

Try crafting characters and stories that resonate with readers because tensions are explored.

What's your lonely and solitary disposition?

Do you ever feel out of place, like a stranger in your own world?

This sense of isolation and alienation—where does it come from? Is it real or imagined? Are you actually being ignored and talked about behind your back—excluded and ostracized—or are you paranoid and delusional?

Hawthorne—and all of the mid-19th century writers—dwelt long and deep on these subjects.

- Hester and Goodman Brown lost in the forests—both real and of their own imaginings.
- Poe’s Pym in the caverns near the South Pole.



- Melville’s Ahab in his stark lunacy, madly pursuing the white whale across the Seven Seas.
- Whitman on the westward trail seeking himself.
- Twain’s Huck Finn drifting on a raft down the mighty Mississippi.
- Thoreau in self-imposed hermitage on Walden’s pond.

**Your life comes down to this question:
“What would happen if...?”**

Here’s a gem of a story-starting tip: Many of Hawthorne’s stories are plotted around an outlandish, outrageous, even bizarre event or set of circumstances.

Something happens or something is a certain way. The characters are thrust into it or create it for themselves somehow.

Then, the rest of the story takes place as a reaction to these events or circumstances. Just as if Hawthorne had dreamed it up by thinking to himself: “Hmm . . . I

wonder what would happen if . . . ?”

Have your characters

- Jump in before looking.
- Go for it when they don't even know what it is, really.
- Damn the consequences because they want something.

Who's the allegorical you?

You are an allegory. Yes, you are. Don't try to deny it.

- You have attitudes and ideas, don't you?
- You live in the material world but have some kind of spiritual side, right?
- At least occasionally, you spout off about moral truths and lessons of life, right?
- If so, you're a living, breathing allegory. And so is everyone you know.

Make your characters stand for something.

Symbols are related to allegory: They're things that stand for something else.

Back to the mid-19th century we go for classic examples:

- Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* "A"
- Melville's white whale *Moby Dick*
- Poe's Raven

- Twain’s Mississippi River
- Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*
- Thoreau’s pond at *Walden*

There are symbols all around you.

In my own dark and distant past, I sold cars. Car lots symbolize my hardcore salesman side. I also played hard rock music in hard rock bands. Despite my advancing age, even today rock bands symbolize my wild side.

- What do you do?
- Where do you hang out?
- What material objects mean something to you?

They’re all symbols you can infuse with resonant meaning.

Where’s your Romantic side?

Here’s Hawthorne’s classic definition of a Romance: “a neutral territory somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet” (from “Custom-House,” his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*).

You’ve got a room in your brain just like that. Unlock it and use it in your writing:

Explore the realm midway between the objective world and your private thoughts.

Let your imagination run wild on the page by writing fast and getting into a zone, perhaps by starting with something that really happened and letting what you wanted to happen or fantasized about happening actually happen on the page or screen.

- Live large through your writing.
- Dig deep into the depths of your characters' reasons and motivations for doing what they do.
- Show life in all its complexity and ambiguity.

**Ah, Hawthorne. What a writer:
haunted, dark, tense, alienated, wondering,
wandering, allegorical, symbolic, and romantic.
Just like you.**

Herman Melville: *Moby Dick* Says It All

Experience has shown, and a true philosophy will always show, that a vast, perhaps the larger portion of the truth arises from the seemingly irrelevant.

--Edgar Allan Poe

The thing-in-itself, the will-to-live, exists whole and undivided in every being, even in the tiniest; it is present as completely as in all that ever were, are, and will be, taken together.

--Arthur Schopenhauer

Herman Melville wrote *Moby Dick*. Think we can learn something about writing from him? May-be.

If you fancy yourself a novelist and haven't read *Moby Dick*, that's like a drummer never having listened to Keith Moon or Travis Barker, or an artist never having gazed at a Picasso or a Monet. Time to read one of the Top 5 all-time classic novels. Easily Top 5. Maybe #1.



And that's just the big *Moby*. Melville wrote lots of great fiction.

Here's a short list of some take-aways from Melville for you to dwell on. Deep stuff.

Eschatology never had a better frontman

It's all about radicality. You like radical, right? Who doesn't? Everybody does. If they say they don't, they don't know what it means.

Life, death, God. Beginnings, endings, eternity, infinity, everything, nothing. That's eschatology. That's Melville.

Only the biggest themes and subjects for him:

- A great white whale with at least 25 possible meanings (read the chapter specifically devoted to him).
- “The universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.”
- A megalomaniacal Faustian Ahab, who pursues and attacks the baddest creature on earth because he'd “strike the sun if it insulted him.”

Look around you. Find the big subjects. Match them with big characters, big action, big settings.

- Make your protagonist a cosmic seeker, for whom “Failure is the true test of greatness,” said Melville.
- “Think big,” as Donald Trump advises.
- Write big like Melville does.

Plot stories around the “inscrutable alternatives.”

Oppositions, ambiguities, ironies, and multiple

undecidable choices make for great conflicts.

- Who do you know that's a big personality or has done big, crazy things?
- Who is that person's opposite, foil, enemy, or antagonist?
- Pit them against each other on a sprawling, stage, a set with no boundaries.

In *Typee*, one of his novels before *Moby Dick*, Melville painted a vivid picture of the savage cannibals on a South Sea island. He'd actually been there. So he knew what he was talking about when he depicted them as virtuous and happy. As far better people than the "civilized" explorers who landed on their island and got themselves eaten alive.

Talk about an "inscrutable alternative"!

Where have you been? There's 8 million stories in
your own naked city. What have you done? Plenty.
But you don't want to write about it. Why not?
Afraid of spilling the beans on yourself?
Spill the damn beans.

- Empty your secret closets. Just change the names. Tweak the jobs, the setting, little details.
- You'll be all right.
- Everybody's a fine young (or old) cannibal, in one way or another.

We all have stories we don't want to tell. And those are the exact ones we should tell. Because they're damn good stories.

There's no better story than good guys vs. bad guys

In *Billy Budd*, Melville pits the innocent Billy against the evil Claggert, who wants Billy dead just because everybody likes him.

- Doesn't that ring a bell?
- I can recall a few twisted demons disguised as human beings that I've run up against in my life who wanted me dead just because others liked me. It happened in my rock bands, on the car lots, in classrooms, and in relationships.

Queequeg, a tattooed-from-head-to-toe (he makes Jesse James look like a Baptist preacher) cannibal harpooner in *Moby Dick* is the nicest guy in the book. Even nicer than the innocent White boy Ishmael, who becomes his best bud on the whaling ship.

When one after another "civilized" so-called but not-so-Christian insults, rejects, and condemns him, Ishmael defends him. But Queequeg's above their pathetic bigotry: He reacts to every curse with calm aplomb.

See, he can throw a harpoon 40 feet into a whale's eye. And kill that badass whale. Don't mess with nice guys. Or their friends. The Big Q's got Ishmael's back.

- Couple casting. That's what a novelist does.
- Cast inscrutable opposites together. *Lethal*

Weapon, Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid, Midnight Cowboy, Mutt & Jeff, Thelma & Louise, Huck & Jim, Jack & Rose, Bonnie & Clyde. The list is endless.

Make your characters allegorical

Again, think big. Create characters that stand for more than just themselves. Symbolize them.

Take Ahab. He's Faust. Who was Faust? Goethe's character who sold his soul to the devil for 24 years of power, fame, fortune, women, and fun. He wanted to be God.

Ahab played God. He went out way too far, all around the world, into unfamiliar oceans, chasing the glory and revenge of killing the whale that had bitten off his leg. Crazy dude.

Just like the crazy parts in you and me—the blind pride, the utter foolishness, the inflamed desire for revenge.

Ishmael is Everyman. Not bad, not perfect, no genius, no great shakes, but not a waste of space either.

He's drifting through life like his namesake in the Old Testament: the son of Abraham and Hagar who was driven from his home and wandered in barren lands.

Not so sure of things; a little bit lost; a little of everything but not a lot of anything.

And then there's Queequeg—the Noble Savage. The personification of the question of just what is a “civilized” human being, anyway?

You know some noble savages, don't you? If you don't, you haven't been around much. And if you haven't been around much, exactly what do you think you can write about? Not having been around much? That's exciting. Start getting around, okay?

Here's a plan: Write about spiritualism vs. materialism

We're not talking religion or going to church versus making money and living the high life, necessarily. It's beyond that.

It's eschatological: All matter exists to represent some idea. Like Plato in the cave seeing his shadow from the firelight cast upon the wall, Ahab knows that everything's an illusion, really.

“All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks Who's over me? Truth has no confines,” says Ahab.

- Even people who haven't been around much, have at least been around their own minds. It's a cosmos in there.
- And when you use that cosmos and really look for stories to tell, first do this: Turn your back to the

fire.

- Turn away from the light.
- You might find the real truth, the deep meaning, in darkness, in the shadowland that lies behind the story, the people, the events.

Look at it this way: Everything's a re-presentation of the ideal.

*What's real and what have you just made up
in that mind of yours?*

**Can you put your typing finger smack dab in the
middle of truth? Nail it? Rip off people's masks?
Expose them for what they are?
If you can, you've got yourself a novel.**

Mark Twain: It Ain't All Fun and Games

All modern American literature comes from one book by
Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.

--Ernest Hemingway

Twain is the Abraham Lincoln of literature.

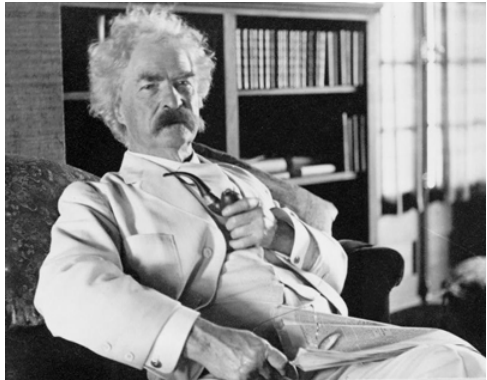
--William Dean Howells

Both of these remarkable accolades refer to freedom: Twain freed writers to do whatever they wanted—to find their own narrative voices and styles. Twain's lessons for writers are many and varied.

Try using the vernacular and dialect you know best

Twain's narration and interior monologue closely resembled the way his narrator would talk and think. His dialogue took it to another level.

In *Huck Finn*, most of the White characters are poor and largely uneducated, and the Blacks are slaves.



Twain phoneticized their conversations, making their dialogue radically authentic.

Your world, your friends and family, your hood or crew have both a vernacular and a discourse, a way of using words and a shared culture that's created its own shorthand way of speaking.

- If you're writing urban man-speak, dialogue might go like this: "Know what I'm saying? Got that? I'm down with it. But don't diss me or I mess you up. We cool? Word?"
- If you're writing businessman-speak, the same lines might sound like this: "Do you concur? Are we on the same page here? I agree with your position in principle but I'm relying on your veracity and respect for the negotiations, otherwise there may be negative repercussions. Can we agree on these fundamentals before proceeding? Do I have your word on that?"
- Use your natural speaking and thinking voice. Your vocabulary should be real and authentic to the world your characters inhabit.

A word of caution: This can be very tricky to pull off. If you go too far, you might make it too hard for your readers to decipher your phonetic spellings of the way your characters talk.

I've been teaching *Huck Finn* to high school and college students since 1975. Many like it, many don't—many because of the "N word"—which is another subject for another day. My point is, it's a difficult read—unless you're able to go with the flow of the dialogue.

I'll tell you this: It couldn't be more realistic. It's a magnificent piece of historical record keeping: That's the way they talked back then. No textbook could capture it. And there were no tape recorders.

Twain recorded the way people actually talked. It would have been lost, otherwise.

Try satire on for size

If you have a serious subject—such as slavery, for instance—try doing as Twain did: satirize it. Also known—quite ironically in the case of Huck Finn—as black humor, satire attempts to find humor in places where there is none.

Huck is about a slave attempting to escape slavery. It's full of bad words, bad people, and bad things happening, yet it's often a very funny book.

You know how sometimes you shake your head as you're laughing, or put your hand over your mouth, or turn around and try to choke back the laughter because it seems inappropriate to find the subject matter funny?

That's satire.

It's the stuff of great comedians, from Richard Pryor and Steve Martin to Chris Rock and Chelsea Handler.

Handler takes the hardest, most controversial, even

shocking and moving subjects and turns them into one big joke. What a life she's had. Lots of people condemn her for all she's done and all she is. But many people find her books and act hilarious in the way she depicts her life. Making drunkenness, promiscuity, and other assorted behavior and events seem funny.

It's not for everybody—either her lifestyle or her entire act—but it's another option for writing about tough, gritty subjects.

Try Twain's brand of humor

No Rock or Handler, Twain was “cleaner,” if you will, but no less humorous.

Here's a few bullet points about the basis of his brand:

- Detached superiority, as if saying, “Look at these fools I'm making fun of!”
- Unexpected incongruity: things just don't go together, such as a 12-year-old White boy and a 30-year-old slave discussing the meaning of life and the universe (one of the most brilliant dialogues in *Huck*).
- As Hugh Walpole put it: “Life is a comedy for those who think and a tragedy for those who feel.”
- Pathos. Said Twain: “Everything humorous is pathetic.”
- Sorrow: Said Twain: “The source of humor is sorrow. There's no humor in heaven.”
- The very subject of heaven and hell: “Heaven has climate; hell has society.”

**Write uber-real stories:
Make powerful subjects funny, by satirizing them
through genuine, spot-on dialect and discourse.**

Joseph Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* (1899): “The horror. The horror.”

Appearances to the mind are of four kinds. Things either are what they appear to be; or they neither are, nor appear to be; or they are, and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be. Rightly to aim in all these cases is the wise man's task.

--*Epictetus*

The human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.

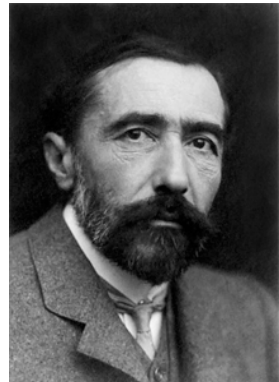
--*Francis Bacon*

How great is *Heart of Darkness*?

I don't ordinarily rate works of art. However, in my opinion, *Heart of Darkness* is the greatest novella (short novel) ever written.

Conrad was inspired by his trip to the Congo (now known as Zaire). At the time, the Congo was a Belgian colony.

Perhaps the greatest insight Conrad learned there was that the “civilized Europeans” were anything but that in their domination and enslavement of the natives.



Write about Imperialism and Colonialism

- You think you know nothing about those subjects?
- You think they're irrelevant and absent in your life?
- Think again.

Heart is an exposé of the Belgians' exploitation of the "savage races." One of its subjects is racism and the degradation and demoralization of one people at the hands of another.

Ultimately, the exploiters and degraders themselves were destroyed by their own actions and attitudes.

Now . . . doesn't that ring a bell?

- Do you know anybody who acts domineering and tries to colonize people? How about your ex-boyfriend or ex-spouse? Or, worse yet, your current "love" partner? Feeling dominated, used, or abused?
- Have you ever experienced or witnessed people or an institution wield its power and authority in a vicious, selfish, exploitative way?
- Know any pimps?
- Know any thugs?
- Know any criminals?
- Know any racists?
- Know any hypocritical, unethical, or corrupt cops, politicians, teachers, leaders, pastors, or others in positions of authority?
- Know any just plain old assholes?

If you haven't experienced any of those things or known any of those types, you've lived a charmed life. Or you don't get out much. Or maybe I've been out too much, I don't know. But I do know that all those situations and people make for great plots and characters.

Tap into your subconscious

Heart is a psychological masterpiece about the subconscious mind. Influenced by Dante, Conrad takes his readers on an *Inferno*-like descent into the underworld of human existence—searching for lost idealism, a center that holds, a meaning to life, and the essence of our existence.

Take your readers deep inside the underworld of your life. I've mentioned this before: The best stories are the ones you don't want to tell about yourself. You don't want anybody to know just how bad or twisted you really can be.

"I'm not bad or twisted," you may be saying. Okay. Have it your way. You're a veritable saint. You oughta be canonized.

Come off it. You lost your idealism somewhere along the way. Write about it.

- Your center sometimes nearly rips to shreds and flies apart.
- In your shadowy or shady moments, during your worst experiences, you've wondered if life is meaningless.
- What's the point of living?
- Maybe writing about those darkest days is exactly what you need to do to achieve some self-awareness and a catharsis.

Apply some epistemology

Conrad explored the boundaries and limits of epistemology: how it is that we know things.

How we know what we know is one of philosophy's greatest unanswered questions.

What's the exact mental and emotional process we undertake in learning and understanding "reality"?

- You could have a character always questioning things.
- A philosopher type playing off a foil—someone who's the opposite, who questions nothing or disagrees with everything or who answers with non-answers.
- Epistemological dialogue can be extremely funny.

But I'm not talking about having your characters go on and on like two boring know-it-alls. Make it short, snappy, ridiculous even.

One of Conrad's greatest achievements was his ability

to write self-aware, meta-novels—stories that call attention to the art of story-telling itself.

- You could try that by having a character who declares that he knows he's a character in a book or in God's story or that he's treated like he's not even real.
- Maybe he questions whether he's even alive or it's all a dream.
- Like Alice down the rabbit hole into Wonderland.
- Or the Whos calling out for help on their speck of dust world, with only Horton hearing them.
- Or Young Goodman Brown sneaking off into the woods late at night to consort with the devil and his crew.
- Or the entire 6 seasons of LOST—lives in limbo. Purgatory, limbo, anywhere between two dimensions is a *Twilight Zone* popular plot.

Tell a twice-told tale

Conrad's stories are often told through other people's accounts of them, which are themselves often twice-told tales passed down orally, from several conflicting viewpoints or perspectives.

Conrad employs narrators who confront themselves, both in other characters and in telling the story of their own pasts. The narrator of *Heart*, Marlow is on a spiritual voyage of self-discovery, where he meets up with his own flawed, fatalistic nature and discovers the darkness in his own heart.

Thus, the reader must take an active role in

attempting to discern among the ambiguous and competing accounts of unreliable narrators.

Making a reader wonder “What the heck is going on? Who are these people?” creates great curiosity and suspense. If you want answers and you want them now, you’re hooked on sticking with it until you get them.

- You might have a character tell a story to a group around a campfire, or stuck in an elevator, or, better yet, somewhere mysterious.
- A vague and ambiguous setting. We’re not sure where they are. We don’t know who the group is, or who the story-teller is, or why he’s telling the story—until the end of the story.

The reader is hooked into hearing this story within a story. The outside story is just as mysterious and page-turning as the inside story. Both stories are meta-stories. And I’ve never met a reader yet who isn’t fascinated by meta-stories.

Try writing an apocalyptic story—they’re always bestsellers and blockbusters

The end of the world. Earth invaded by aliens. A meteor striking New York City. Hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, tornados, tsunamis, riots, war.

They never fail to attract an audience—provided you have characters caught in the middle of them.

Apocalypse Now, the extraordinary Francis Ford Coppola Vietnam War movie, is based, in part, on *Heart*.

After reading Heart, watch the movie again, or for the first time, and you'll have an insightful and fruitful intellectual experience noting the similarities (and differences) between Heart and Coppola's masterpiece.

Study and work hard like Conrad did

Conrad was born in Poland and didn't learn English until he was 21 years old, which is a remarkable fact considering he's one of the very finest prose stylists in the history of English literature.

How did he pull that off? Hard work.

- That's the final point of this chapter: Read great books, watch great movies, and write every day.
- Study the art of storytelling. Study like you're studying for the most important final exam of your life. If you want to be a great writer, you're taking a final exam every time you sit down to write.

And you should sit down to write at least 3-4 hours every single day. Not every other day. Every day.

Ernest Hemingway: The Code Hero

What is one to think of those fools who tell one that the artist is always subordinate to nature? Art is in harmony parallel with nature.

--Paul Cezanne

Art is the elimination of the unnecessary.

--Pablo Picasso

A giant among novelists, Ernest Hemingway can teach all writers many excellent lessons on how to write fiction. Here are seven tried and true Hemingway techniques and strategies that you can apply to your own writing.

I'm not suggesting that you try to write just like Hemingway—or any of the writers I've discussed in this book. That would be impossible, derivative, and get you nowhere since they've already written in their own style better than anyone else can. But you can consider their methods and see how they might help you become a better writer in your own style, your own voice.

Make your writing the embodiment of your life

Few writers have ever made better use of their own life experiences than Hemingway.



He drank, he fought, he hunted, he fished, he partied, he worked hard, he was wounded, and he wounded others.

And it's all in his books and stories in one way or another.

He took his life and turned it into art.

As Hemingway advised: "Write the truest sentence that you know."

Be as honest and accurate as you can with your pain and wounds

"You have to hurt like hell before you can write seriously," he said. "But when you get the damned hurt, use it . . . don't cheat with it. Be as faithful to it as a scientist."

Truth truly is stranger and more powerful than fiction.

As the great critic Malcolm Cowley noted, Hemingway was—like Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville before him—a writer who was "haunted and nocturnal."

Interestingly enough, you'd be hard pressed to come up with a better foursome of American authors than this one.

Use the Iceberg Principle

Just as an iceberg is 7/8ths hidden beneath the surface, Hemingway's stories all have rich and complex backstories—just like our own lives.

So much is left unsaid or assumed because it happened and they don't talk about it. "Whatever you know, leave out," he said.

To affect this sense of an iceberg, of real lives having been led by your characters before your story begins, try these two methods:

- Begin *in medias res*, in the middle of things. Start your story in the middle, get immediately into the action, the conflict. Don't have a long wind up. Pitch the ball fast.
- Write detailed character bios for yourself. Even if none of what you write makes it into the actual story, write pages and pages of biographical information about each main character. Get to really know who your characters are. Give them lives and experiences before the story starts.

Use understatement and irony

Nothing's more boring than a person or writer who tells you everything and does so with no subtlety or indirection whatsoever.

Personality in characters, as in real people, resides to a large degree in what they say and how they say it.

- In your own narration and dialogue, don't tell us everything. Hold back.
- Tone down. Be understated.
- Be ironic. Leave things out.
- Embrace the silences.

Hemingway learned from the Impressionist painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries the paradoxical lesson that what's left out of the picture makes it stronger and more vivid.

Don't talk about it

Whatever it is—death, war, violence, sex—don't *talk* about it, show it.

- Don't fall into your own voice, going on and on about how tragic, painful, awful, or wonderful something is.
- Describe it so that readers actually feel and understand the emotion you want to evoke.



- T. S. Eliot called this the “objective correlative: A set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”

Shape your plots in a 3-stage quest

From innocence, to alienation, to aspiration; or from departure, to initiation, to return; or from rejection, to avoidance, to the quest for something new.

This 3-stage plot structure is mythically appealing to a reader.

It's the stuff of epics, bestsellers, and blockbuster movies.

Violently edit your writing

- Take an axe and chop off all sentimentality, discussion, explanation, extraneous words, hellos, goodbyes (unless they're a profound part of the plot), he saids, she saids, adjectives, clichés, and definitely any metaphors that aren't as fresh as tomorrow's tweet.
- Aim for a direct cinematic contact between the eye and the object.

As Chekov pointed out, the colder and harder a writer writes, the more deeply and movingly emotional the result is likely to be.

William Faulkner: Creating a Fictional World

Always dream and shoot higher than you know you can do. Don't bother just to be better than your contemporaries or predecessors. Try to be better than yourself.

--William Faulkner

The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.

--Bertrand Russell

William Faulkner created a massive body of work, distinguished not only for its literary qualities, but for the breadth and depth of its engagement with the human condition.

Perhaps his most impressive achievement is that he created an entire world or what Balzac called “a cosmos in miniature.”

Set all your stories and novels in one city, county, or state populated by a recurring cast of characters

Constructing one archetypal county in the American South from the days of Indian possession, through the Civil War, to the early 20th century, Faulkner populated it with over 1100 characters who mix and mingle throughout all of his stories.



Think about that for a minute.

- Pick the city, county, or even state you know best.
- Stick to it.
- Start by writing a series of short stories, all with different main characters who reappear as minor characters in other stories.
- Then write a novel.
- As the years go by, you'll have a growing body of work that's integrated, fascinating, and a world unto itself.

One great advantage of this approach is that you'll really know your characters.

Not knowing one's own characters is the major downfall of 75% of fiction writers. Their characters just don't come to life. Yours will if you live with them and write them for years.

Taken altogether, Faulkner's novels and stories transcend literature and rise to the level of cultural artifact—a living, breathing chronicle of the South's soul and soil, its socio-historical reality.

Mere history books pale in comparison to the authentic flavor and feel of Faulkner's moving, soaring saga.

- So, think big. Enlarge your scope.
- Write and keep writing.

- Ten years from now, you will have created your own world if you follow Faulkner's formula.

Infuse your fictional world with cultural depth and insight

Faulkner was born in the Bible Belt, into segregated White society. The tenets of his strict Calvinist-directed Christian faith were strained and twisted by the racism all around him. He knew this world, this culture, this heritage. He investigated it deeply and used it richly in his fiction.

What's your world like? Your culture? Your family and hood, your experiences and heritage? Write about it. Bring it to life. Explore its traditions, discourse, attitudes, and socioeconomic limits, limitations, virtues, vices, and values. Build them into your stories, plots, conflicts, and characters.

It's what you know and who you are. It's the real world—according to you.

Readers might find it strange and interesting, new and unusual—which will keep them turning pages because they're fascinated by what you know that they don't.

*Write about what you know and who you are.
It's your best material by far.*

Think thematically and make your story mean something

Some of the same themes that infuse Faulkner's work with such power, feeling, and depth—themes that are timeless and universal—can be your themes as well.

- Think again about your world and your cultural universe—the people, places, and experiences that have made your life your life.
- What do they all mean? How are they manifestations of these themes?

Man's Capacity for Evil

This Calvinistic position holds that man *is* evil.

- Look around you at the images of collapse and disintegration, of moral paralysis and spiritual desolation.
- Capture it in stark depictions and dark descriptions.

As Faulkner put it in his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he was concerned mainly with “the human heart in conflict with itself The writer's duty is to write about man's soul and his capacity for endurance and compassion and sacrifice.”

What a profound statement and guiding principle for any fiction writer to follow.

- Show your characters engaged in a constant struggle against defeatism, negativism, cynicism, and pessimism.
- Stress faith in the human heart's ability to triumph over the failings of the modern human condition: greed, injustice, fear, cowardice, and duplicity.

After all, how someone reacts to the negative forces of life is how she should be measured.

Primitivism vs. civilization

Do you hate or love modern civilization?

Has technology distanced us or brought us closer together?

Does social media makes us less social?

Have the mechanistic forces of modern technology helped destroy the environment and dehumanize the individual?

- Are your characters “primitive” or “civilized”?
- Can you see, depict, and dissect the hypocrisies of so-called civilized people?
- For example, are you writing an urban novel? If so, this should be a major theme. Who's really more “civilized”: the well-to-do or the barely getting by?

Try on Faulkner's writing style for size

As I've said before, don't try to write like Faulkner. You might get close, but that's not the point. Just learn a

few tricks and licks from him, just as young guitarists learn from Hendrix, Van Halen, The Edge, and Clapton.

- Don't narrate or report a scene; render it in an impressionistic fashion. Often referred to as "stream of consciousness," Faulkner's style is a barrage of long sentences and abstract words, illogically constructed by a free association of images and the projection of events through the memory or consciousness of characters in the form of interior monologue.
- Faulkner's vocabulary strains the bounds of the ornate Romanticism to which it constantly alludes.
- Like life, his prose is paradoxical, appearing at first glance to be rambling and unsettling—a flood of adjectives, two words merged into one, a series of negatives followed by a positive, numerous synonyms for repetition.

His style makes perfect sense as a way to represent in writing the chaotic reality of life's multiple perspectives, interminable ironies, and incorrigible resistance to simplistic terms.

Perhaps paramount and yet rarely mentioned is Faulkner's mastery of suspense through style: He narrates effects in a dizzying flow of details, invariably suspending the reader's recognition and the plot's resolution through a seemingly endless chain of signifying clues

*dropped almost randomly by various voices
from various times and places.*

**It's all part of practicing.
I'm teaching my 6-year-old baseball. I'm
encouraging him to study all the players' various
batting stances. When he's in the cage or up to
bat in practice, I remind him to try Crawford's
stance and then Damon's, Longoria's, and
Pedroia's. See what works for him.
Ways and means vary; execution is everything.**

William Butler Yeats: The Search for “There”

To teach how to live with uncertainty, yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy can do.

--Bertrand Russell

I said “a line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does seem a moment’s thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”

--William Butler Yeats

If there’s a better poet than Yeats, I don’t know him. Some as good, maybe, but none better.

“But I’m a novelist, not a poet,” you say. All the more reason to study poetry. You use words, right?

Poets use them with more concision, precision, and figurative beauty than any other human beings.

Yeats also had plenty of ideas, concepts, and thematic depth that can inspire your thoughts and get your own words flowing.

Be a Bard

- Don’t talk, do.
- Don’t say you’ll write, write.
- Make yourself into a Bard—a famous purveyor and showman of words.

“Art is but a vision of reality,” said Yeats. By the power of sheer will, you can create yourself into what you want to be.

The little lost lizard “Rango” did. (Terrific movie. More for adults than kids. Great script.) He declared himself to be a hero and, thereby, became one. He forced himself to live up to his own invention of a “self” he wanted to be.

Look at the many great rappers, hip hoppers, and DJs from the hood—guys who had two strikes against them from birth, thanks to their toxic environment.

They picked themselves up, created personas, and used words—their powerful rhymes—to turn themselves into Bards.

Their vision of the reality around them became their art.

Explore a belief system

- If you’re lost in space, with no moorings, no belief system, then write about that.
- But it’s not much of a credible or admirable sort of life—chaos and anarchy—though, admittedly, it may make for some good stories.

Let’s say you’re a Catholic. Flannery O’Conner wrote some brilliant stories incorporating Catholic theology.

Maybe you’re Jewish. Have you ever read Bernard

Malamud's astounding brand of magic realism? His novels and stories are permeated with his Judaic faith.

Maybe you're not religious at all. That could work for a writer, too. Yeats explored various traditions of esoteric thought his whole life: mysticism, folklore, spiritualism, and finally symbolism.

He was a pretty disenchanted, skeptical guy, imagining a "rough beast [that] slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."

He was always seeking what he called "There," with a capital T. That's pretty cool, isn't it? "There" is some center, some ultimate spiritual reality that made sense, that held everything together.

Where is your "There"?

Use symbolism

Yeats' first volume of poetry was *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Published in 1899, it ushered in the Modern era in poetry, characterized by a highly self-conscious use of symbolism.

Yeats believed that symbols have a mystical effect of evoking the Spiritus Mundi, the memory of Nature itself, that would allow many minds to flow together and create a single mind, a single energy.



He was a pretty heavy dude. Always exploring occult traditions; always seeking some unified explanation of the world and the soul. Symbols are his theosophy; he found belief in God through mystical insight.

- What's your heavy side?
- What deep, far out—forgive the 60's slang, but no early 20th century writer was any closer to the hippie 60's than Yeats—ideas do you have?

Ponder life's interpenetrating opposites

One of Yeats' main symbols is the gyre:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

That's the first stanza of "The Second Coming," one of the five best poems ever written. (I'll share the other four with you some other time.)

Life is a journey up a spiral staircase: The trip is both repetitious and progressive. Gyres rotate, whirl into one another's centers, merge, and separate. They come in shapes of paradoxical mysteries: time and change; growth and identity; life and art; madness and wisdom. They go together. They're interpenetrating opposites.

How can you practically apply this concept to your writing?

- Through conflicts. All consciousness is a conflict of opposites.
- Identify and set the opposites in your life—or in yourself—against one another. Show how they interpenetrate.
- Think Batman in *The Dark Knight* or Spiderman in his dark moments:
 - characters conflicted by their superpowers and their humanity,
 - their love and their hate,
 - their social consciousness and their desire to say “screw everything.”
- Those opposites merge into one being.

Do you “get it”?

All outward things take their character from being internalized. Have you ever stood under the stars, walked through a forest, or gazed at the moon and been in awe, feeling that sense of wonder and amazement at it all?

And have you ever done so with someone who couldn’t care less and thought you were nuts for being so moved by the experience of gazing, of “getting it”?

*That’s what the writer in you must do:
Get it. Find “There.”*

Be a Bard with a belief system that you set to lyrics or characters and stories that resonate with symbolism through your exploration of the paradoxically interpenetrating opposites. Get it and you'll write a masterpiece.

Robert Frost: Seeing the Spiritual in the Material

Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out... Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure.

--A. E. Housman

Everything one invents is true, you may be perfectly sure of that. Poetry is as precise as geometry.

--Gustave Flaubert

Robert Frost has written some of the most quoted poems ever.

What writer hasn't heard of "The Road Not Taken" ("Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by/And that has made all the difference")?

Or "Stopping by Woods" ("But I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep")?

Or "Mending Wall" ("Something there is that doesn't love a wall...")?

His poetry is deceptively simple: simple because he's easy to understand (on the surface) but deceptive because there's a lot of undercurrents and crosscurrents going on. Lots of irony, sarcasm, paradox, and even bitter cynicism.



He created a nice grandfatherly image for himself, but some bios suggest he was far from the “nice grandfather.” Bios aside, we’ll have a look at his attributes, ideas, and style. There’s a boatload of take-aways a writer can get from studying Frost. Here are five main ones, each with many parts.

Frost’s appeal

Work on finding an “appeal”—making your writing “appealing” in some way, to some audience.

Frost aimed, as you can, to appeal to the masses and not the esoteric few. In simple, unaffected language, he wrote of familiar objects and the “character” of New England.

His poetry paints pictures of an idyllic America of the past. It’s an escape from the overly complex, anxious, urbanized society of some of his peers, such as T. S. Eliot.

Frost has four attributes from the 19th century

It might seem strange to suggest to a 21st century writer that looking back at and modeling some 19th century strategies and ways of seeing the world would be helpful. But some ideas are timeless, some attributes universal.

As Emerson put it, Frost has “an original relation to

the universe.”

Frost stressed the benefits of physical labor. He communed with the environment. Read “Two Tramps in Mud Time” or “After Apple Picking.” For another example of communing with nature, read Whitman’s “To a Learned Astronomer.”

Use your intuition. Frost seldom proceeded from reasoning or thinking. As Melville said: “I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head!”

- Develop a sense of your own national identity in literature. Emerson had demanded that American poets seek independence. Frost *knew* he was good and knew he was carving out an American niche in his poetry.
- Be self-reliant. Emerson enthroned the complete mental and spiritual independence of each individual. Frost’s self-reliance manifests itself in a total immersion in the daily activities of country life.

Frost’s theories of poetry

Never interrupt a master when he’s speaking. I’ll just post these quotes from Frost without elaborating. They should give you plenty of food for thought about your own poetry or writing in general.

- “A poem must not begin with thought first. It begins with a lump in the throat.”

- “Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.”
- “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.”
- “Art strips life to form.”
- “Poetry makes you remember what you didn't know that you knew.”
- “A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”
- “A poem is a momentary stay against confusion.”

Frost's style

Frost composes for the ear, loving the sound of words: “They are always there, living in the cave of the mouth. They are real cave things: They were before words were. They are as definitely things as images of sight.”

- There's a taut, muscle-bound quality to his poetry. A real economy of expression.
- He doesn't write in free verse, saying that's “like playing tennis without a net.” His blank verse provides the flavor of idiomatic American speech. He transposes accents at will, adding or subtracting feet whenever he likes. Frost's blank verse is very regular and careful but appears casual.
- He usually starts with a simple concrete event or action—such as apple picking, repairing a wall, swinging in a tree, or wielding an axe—that leads

to a philosophical observation or insight.

- He's the modern master of dramatic narratives, such as "Home Burial" and "Death of the Hired Man." He's been compared to Chekov in how he captures subtle changes in emotion through dialogue.

Frost's subjects and themes

- Man in conflict with a chaotic world, searching for order while everything around him is changing and decaying.
- Frost called himself a "synechdochist": by exploring one representative corner of humanity, he was probing a sample of the larger crowd (à la Wm. Faulkner).
- The individual's relationship with himself, his fellow man, his world, and God. Man is an entity—one among many—yet alone with his fate.
- Mutability: spring and autumn; new life, dying life; everything changes: "nothing gold can stay," he wrote. And in his darkest, most troubling poem of all, "Out, Out—," an entire family brushes off a boy's death almost immediately: "And they, since they/Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs." Life goes on for those still alive.

Finally...

A Modernist to the core, Frost found new ways to be new. So should you.

- Don't approach Frost with any preconception of his system or overall vision of reality because he deconstructs himself.
- Try deconstructing yourself.
- Be unpredictable.
- Compose stories or poems with conflicting or multiple viewpoints.
- Never settle for clichés or stereotypes.

**Be fresh and original.
Period.**

The End.

Now start writing!

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