

Writing Tips From Stephen King: 11 things every writer should know

There were no Stephen King novels in my home growing up. I'm not sure if this was because King's writings were deemed unsanitary (by my mother) or low-brow (by my father).

Whatever the case, over the years several of King's novels found their way into my hands. Say what you will about the subject matter of King's macabre tales, there's no denying his talent as a writer and story-teller. ([Pet Sematary](#) was so gripping I read it in a day.)

Recently, while staying at a relative's house, I came across an autobiography of sorts written by King, entitled [Stephen King On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft](#). I decided to borrow it.

The book is basically a retrospective through the lens of King's career as a writer, from precocious kid peddling his stories at school to aspiring novelist pounding away at *Carrie* on his wife's typewriter in a doublewide trailer to international sensation.

The memoir (a term to which King would object) is packed with colorful anecdotes and pragmatic wisdom helpful to any aspiring writer. It is written with great poetry and beauty, particularly passages featuring King's mother, a woman whose love for her children shines even as readers see her worn down by a nomadic life and hard-living.

Here are 11 (brutally honest) insights on writing from a man whose books have sold more than [350 million copies](#).

1. Be brief

Ernest Hemingway understood the importance of parsimony in writing. So did Jacques Barzun, Mark Twain, and Charles Bukowski. You can add Stephen King to this mix.

As a high school sophomore, King went to work for the local newspaper—Lisbon, Maine's *Weekly Enterprise*. The editor, John Gould, spiked his first story. But King's second story, a short feature on a basketball player's record-breaking scoring night, was published after Gould made a few edits, most of which involved slicing away bits of superfluous copy.

Gould's advice to King was simple. After a writer has told his story, his primary task "is taking out all the things that are not the story."

This was eye-opening instruction for the budding writer.

"I took my fair share of English Lit classes in my two remaining years at Lisbon, and my fair share of composition, fiction, and poetry classes in college, but John Gould taught me more than any of them, and in no more than ten minutes," King wrote. "Why, I wondered, didn't English teachers ever do this?"

Parsimony is a writing principal that goes back at least to Pascal, who once quipped to an acquaintance, "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." But King (and editors around the world) would likely agree it's one many writers never learn.

2. It's okay to be rejected

Humans struggle mightily with this, but writers in particular are sensitive to rejection.

But it's part of the business. And before he was a best-selling author, King was rejected *a lot*.

After submitting one of his first stories to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*—a tale called "Happy Stamps,"

involving a stamp counterfeiter destined to lick stamps for eternity—the youngster received his first rejection letter.

Instead of being discouraged, King pounded a nail into the wall and impaled the paper on it. It was a practice he continued. By the time King was 14, the nail could no longer support the weight of all the rejection letters he'd received.

“I replaced it with a spike and kept on writing,” King wrote.

The lesson? Writers who don't learn how to deal with rejection don't last long. Persevere and keep writing.

3. Don't wait for inspiration. Learn to recognize good stories.

Writers who sit around waiting for a muse to strike likely will never tell their story.

King recognized that stories are everywhere. They come at us every day from a thousand different directions. The key is not waiting to be struck by one, but learning to identify all the rich and compelling stories that surround us.

“There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, No Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere,” King wrote. “Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up.”

4. Write whenever you can

Nora Roberts, whose romance novels bring in about \$60 million a year, once dished on her secret: “Ass in the chair.”

While King doesn't use the phrase, the sentiment comes through clearly. King had his share of crummy jobs (the description of his work at the New Franklin Laundry is gag-worthy), but this never stopped him from pursuing his writing—which means actually writing. Whenever and wherever you can.

For King, this meant writing after a long shift at work. It meant writing on lunch breaks.

“I know that sounds almost impossibly Abe Lincoln, but it was no big deal,” he writes, “I was having fun.”

5. Learn the writing/publishing business

King’s talent is undeniable. But he also quickly learned that presentation matters.

The rejection letter he received from *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* was accompanied with a terse handwritten message, the only personal correspondence King received in his eight years submitting to the magazine.

“Don’t staple manuscripts,” the postscript read. *“Loose pages plus paperclip equal correct way to submit copy.”*

King, just a child at the time, found this advice pretty cold, but useful.

“I have never stapled a manuscript since,” he wrote.

To be taken seriously, writers should know and follow publishing standards. If your work looks amateurish, publishers might never read your story. (That said, King makes it pretty clear that many writers place too much emphasis on presentation.)

6. Get constructive feedback from friends, family

This advice runs counter to the conventional wisdom, King admits.

But as a general rule, King sends manuscripts to four to eight people who have reviewed his work over the years. The key is to find people who can offer actual insights and critiques, and not just tell you how marvelous your story is.

King, like the great filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, quickly

learned that he had such a person very close to him: his wife.

“There have been times when I’ve gone against her judgment on subjective matter, but when she catches me in a goof I know it,” King writes, “and thank God I’ve got someone around who’ll tell me when my fly’s unzipped before I go into public that way.”

7. Don't give up on a good idea just because it's difficult

King tells a hilarious story about how the idea for *Carrie* came to him (it involved a part-time gig he'd taken cleaning a girls locker room). Though the idea was good, the problem was he couldn't execute the story, partly because he had difficulty writing from the perspective of a teenage girl. After typing up three single-spaced pages, he decided to scrap the story, literally throwing it in the trash.

His wife Tabitha, however, convinced him he had something. He went back to work, completed the book, and sold it to

Doubleday. Months later he was told the paperback rights to the book had been purchased by another publishing house—for \$400,000 (\$2.1 million in 2017 dollars).

It was the first novel King sold and it made his career. It also taught him a lesson.

“...stopping a piece of work just because it’s hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea,” King writes. “Sometimes you have to go on when you don’t feel like it, and sometimes you’re doing good work when it feels like all you’re managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position.”

8. Write your story, and damn the naysayers and doubters

Writers need to be able to heed advice and take constructive criticism. On the other hand, one also needs to tune-out armchair critics. And there will be many of them, King writes.

“I have spent a good many years—too many, I think—being ashamed about what I write,” King says. “I think I was forty before I realized that almost every writer of fiction and poetry who has ever published a line has been accused by someone of wasting his or her God-given talent.”

The story you’re telling needs to come from you. Learning from experienced writers how to improve your craft is one thing. Allowing outside parties to steer your creativity or disrupt your journey as a writer with phrases that begin with “Practically speaking...” is something quite different.

“If you write,” King says, “someone will try to make you feel lousy about it, that’s all. I’m not editorializing, just trying to give you the facts as I see them.”

9. Don’t expect much from writing workshops

King often is asked about the value of writing workshops and seminars. His answer? Not very valuable.

The critiques writers get at these sessions tend to be “maddeningly vague,” he writes, and can actually inhibit creativity. The primary value of workshops, he says, is that they can be inspiring and help individuals feel that they really are writers.

“Still, do you really need permission and a hall-pass to go there?” he asks. “Do you need someone to make you a paper badge with the word WRITER on it before you can believe you are one? God, I hope not.”

10. Don't go into writing to make money

King is often asked if he writes for the money. “The answer is no,” he says. “Don't now and never did.”

Everyone has a story to tell, and many of us dream of sharing it. Naturally the story is interesting—it's yours, after all—so it will be read by many people. Maybe a publisher will purchase paperback rights, as was the case for King's *Carrie*, or maybe it will be optioned for the silver screen.

It's an alluring dream, but it's just that for the vast majority of writers, even talented ones: a dream.

“There are thousands of talented writers at work in America,” King writes, “and only a few of them (I think the number might be as low as five percent) can support their families and themselves with their work.”

Maybe you'll be one of the few who strike it rich. But King's story about a writer named “Frank” (a composite character made up of several writers he knows) shows how difficult the journey is.

That doesn't mean one should not write. It just means one should keep expectations realistic. If money is one's primary goal, there are probably easier ways for you to make it. Sure, King became rich by his craft, but that was incidental.

“I have written because it fulfilled me,” he wrote. “I did it for the pure joy of the thing. And if you can do it for joy, you can do it forever.”

11. If you're serious, get an agent

King sold about \$3 million in books before he realized something: many publishers “will steal the pennies off a dead man’s eyes.”

Contrary to what many might think, getting an agent is actually pretty easy for a decent fiction writer. But beware agents who offer to read your work for a fee. A few are reputable, he says, but most are “unscrupulous *expletive*.”

“I’d suggest that if you’re that anxious to get published, you skip agent-hunting or query letters to publishers and go directly to a vanity press,” King writes.

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