

Do you find yourself searching for the right image to portray what you want to say?



Is it a struggle to find the time to write, and then, when you finally do put something down you wonder how it sounds?

If so, then these Ten Tips for Effective Writing will help.

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PROFESSIONAL WORDSMITHING FOR YOUR PUBLICATION NEEDS



### **Nancy's Ten Tips for Effective Writing**

Let's face it, writing is hard work. But if you want to tell your story, there's no way around the basic act of putting pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard. Writers write. The hardest part about the writing process is getting started. It helps to remember that writing is about exploring; you start from nothing and learn as you go.

I joke when I say that I started writing in the womb—scribing my stories in amniotic fluids—but I believe it. I've been writing my whole life. My high school English teacher, Ken Kitchen—the hippest teacher I had in 1976—handwrote a letter to my parents to tell them how much he enjoyed sharing a portion of my school day and that my "wit and spirit were a constant pleasure". He wrote, "If Nancy tries in her other courses as she has in my writing classes, she'll set records."

I've spent years journaling, telling stories to myself, for myself—I have boxes of notebooks filled with my "spirit and wit". I became a teacher and immersed myself in helping students find their voice and believe for themselves that they had something worthwhile to say. Time traveled and I eventually became a free lance writer. I wrote stories, over 4,000 for one local paper alone. I loved learning about other people's lives and sharing with the public. For me, writing has always been about helping other people find their way on the page. It's part of the human condition to want to share things—thoughts, ideas, opinions.

I offer writing workshops to help people leave the isolation of "Diary-Land" and join a community of writers. I created what I craved when I first started writing—a place to write together, not alone, a place to receive supportive feedback to bring stories into the light in their best possible form.

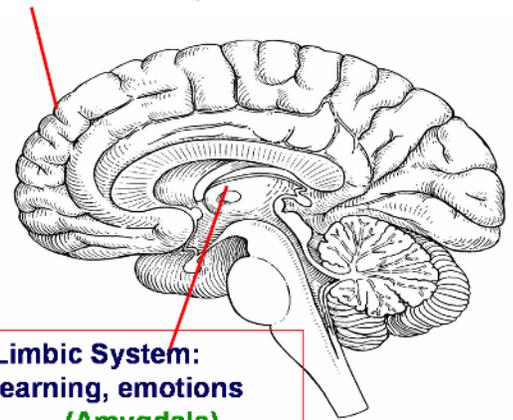
If you're reading this, like me, you are drawn to write. You may find yourself alone at the computer drafting page after page; perhaps even talking to the screen as if the words will respond. Or you sit, waiting for words to flow but nothing comes, the fear of it not being "good enough", the doubt of, "do I really have anything worth saying?" stifling your creativity. Or maybe the stringent demands of proper academic formatting is off-setting, the thought of peer reviewers' remarks looms in the near future.



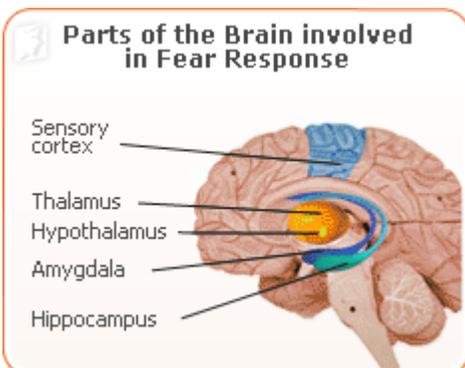
The funny thing is, when we're afraid, our brain doesn't work quite right.

Neuroscience has shown that the part of our brain that does the high powered thinking, the logical put-it-all-together narrative part of our brain that taps into our creativity shuts down. Our speech area closes off, too—we may even babble incoherently during times of extreme duress.

**Frontal Cortex:**  
decision-making, self-control



**Limbic System:**  
learning, emotions  
(Amygdala)



We are evolutionarily designed to revert to survival mode—the reptilian part of our brain, responsible for basic functions such as respiration and heartbeat keeps us alive while critical thinking and self-expression go underground.

Yet, this small soft spot deep inside our belly waits for us to broach the fear binding us in frustrated silence so we can share our knowing. It is truly a courageous act to sit down in the midst of our hectic lives and put words on a piece of paper, and then offer them to the world.

While there's no magic wand that I can wave over a piece of paper and weave your story to life, there are some effective tips I can offer to make the writing process easier and more efficient. The goal is to write something that *you* want to read and others want to read, too.



### Tip #1

**Believe in yourself.** Your stories are alive waiting for you to breathe life into them. Start by asking yourself the following questions (thanks to Marisa Murgatroyd for this list):



What do you love to do the most and why do you love it?

How did you make the choice to do what you are doing?

Are you dissatisfied with the status quo in the field and want to see a change?

What big problem do you have a solution for?

What's at stake? What's the cost of not fixing this now?

If there were only one thing in this world you could share, what would it be?

What was your lowest point or greatest challenge?

What was your greatest success or accomplishment?

**Take time to answer these questions, and they will help set the course for your first writing project.**

## Tip #2

**Write about what you know and love.** Follow your passion and your knowledge will follow. When you write from a sense of knowing, words flow from the intimate connection to your story. The content is there, it just needs space to expand on the page. Once you have your ideas out, you can revise them. For now, the first step is to set aside any fears about worthiness and correct grammatical construction and write with a sense of authority. This is your story and only you can tell it. Don't spend time trying to figure out what other people want to hear from you; focus on what you want to say. Authenticity—being true to yourself— is the best you thing you can offer.

## Tip #3

**Write first. Revise later.** While writing the initial draft, focus on the content. Let your thoughts be free to wander where they want, let all ideas be heard. Don't hold anything back. Write as if nothing else matters but what you have to say right here, right now. Tangents may rise; that's okay. The more data you gather, the more you have to work with. The true art of writing is knowing how to revise. Like a floral designer, you start with a vision of what the outcome will be but first you have to gather different flowers and fillers and then, one-by-one, you put them into the vase in just the right place. You consider height, width, color, texture, foliage. You stand back and look at what you have created. You see gaps and address them. You see mismatches and you fix them. You see the Gestalt and address what needs attention. You can't do this until you have all the materials together. So write fast and furious, let it all out, now. What you don't use in this story can always be saved for the next.

## Tip 4#

**Revise. Revise. Then revise again.** As John Irving once said, "Half my life is an act of revision." Once you have the basic materials down, then you sculpt the story. There are things to keep in mind while revising that will contribute to the clarity of your story.

One: Assume your readers are smart but in reality they know little to nothing about your specific topic—you are the expert in this moment. It is your job to fill them in.

Two: Consider your tone. How do you want to sound? How do you want your characters to sound? What voice do you want to project so that readers will hear you as you want to be heard? Play around, talk aloud, tape record yourself as you imitate the voices as you hear them and then write to that.

If you are writing an academic paper you want to be formal but not *too* formal. When you are talking about yourself use "I" do not say "the researcher" or "the author". Know that contractions are not allowed. And be restrained with putting forth claims.

Use sentence starters such as:

Evidence suggests that

One may infer that

Perhaps

It is plausible that

And avoid using these:

It is a fact that

This proves that

We know that

I feel that

### Tip #5

**Word Choice.** A major tripping stone for readers is language. Define words that are specific to a particular field, slang, sub/micro culture, and so forth. For example, an Italian writer hired me to revise his article for a peer reviewed Journal. He wrote "four different anamneses are evaluated." Of course my mind went to words that sounded similar like amnesia, so I thought it

might reference something related to memory and memory loss. Turns out he was talking about a patient case history using the patient's recollection. Then I came across this phrase: 'eziopathogenic' variables. I know what variables are and thanks to the online dictionary learned that he was writing about variables that cause the development of a disease or abnormal condition. Think about your word choices and what you want to convey to the reader. Big words are not always best.



## Tip #6

### **Imagine yourself conversing with your readers and listen to their remarks.**

Write with them in mind. Anticipate their questions, their objections, their needs when reading your text. And if you have to use precise terms for a specific topic, define them, don't make your readers leave off to search for meanings so they can make sense of your text.

## Tip #7

**Clarity.** Readers crave clarity. Confusion causes them to close the book.

What creates clarity?

Structure.

What creates structure?

Paragraphs.

Paragraphs are the building block of your organizational structure.



Paragraphs have their own structure. For starters, each paragraph begins with a lead or topic sentence. The topic sentence is where you state the main idea of the paragraph and every one that follows must address this one idea.

Every paragraph in the paper must convey one and only one main idea. Any sentence in a paragraph that is not directly relevant to the paragraph's

main idea needs to be eliminated or moved to a paragraph where it is supportive of the main focus.

While the topic sentence tells the reader what the paragraph's one main idea is, it also tells the reader how this paragraph relates to the previous paragraph. They include transition words that link one paragraph to the next.

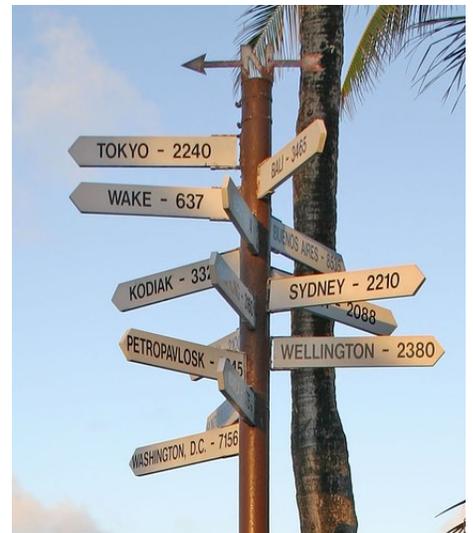
Each sentence/paragraph/section needs to follow logically from the one before it. It is your job to make the logical connections between the points clear to the reader. Transition words are helpful to bridge ideas presented to guide readers from paragraph to paragraph and sometimes from sentence to sentence, and to help readers to know where they are in the document.

Transition words can help makes thing clear:

- Exceptions/Contrasts: but, however, on the one hand. Notwithstanding, on the contrary, on contrast to, still, yet, that said
- Time: after, afterward, at last, before, currently, during, later, now, recently, subsequently, when, while, finally
- Examples: for example, for instance, namely, to illustrate, that is
- Emphasis: even, indeed, in fact
- Places/Positions: above, adjacent, below, beyond, here, in front, in back, nearby, there, farther on, opposite, close, to the left
- Cause and Effect: accordingly, consequently, hence, so, thus, if . . . then, as a result, for this reason

### Tip #8

**Use road signs.** Road signs let readers know where they're going. At key places in your story or academic paper, you need to draw a road map—set up guide posts that alert readers and indicate what just happened and what to be on the lookout for next. For example, "Having discussed the literature on bulimia, I will now review research on the vagus nerve and make new connections." I tell the reader what I just did, what I am going to do next and that I will make the connections clear. (My dissertation research tested a hands-on therapeutic intervention's influence on binge/purge cycles among women living with chronic bulimia.)



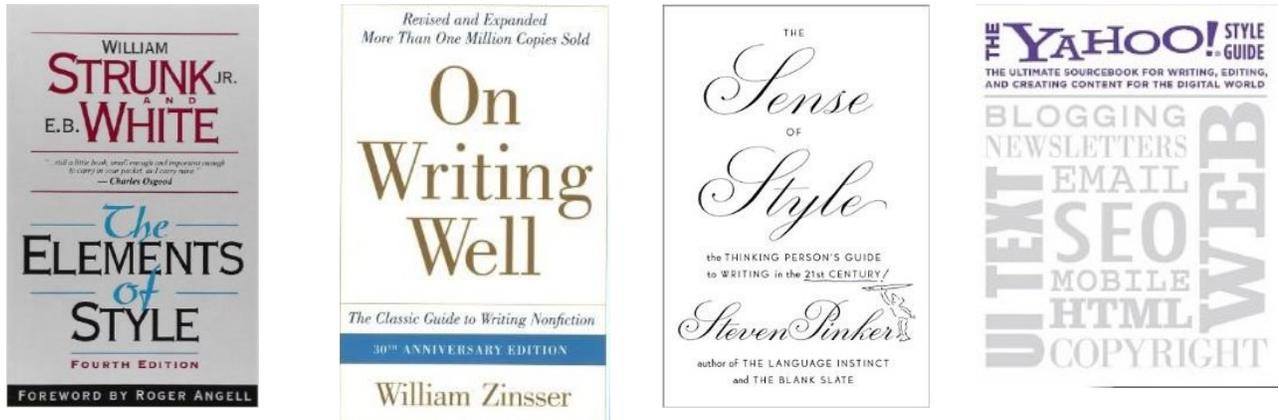
### Tip #9

**Be precise.** Readers want writers to be precise. They want to know that you know what you are talking about. And if you make any claims, support them. Do not go overboard; simply writing more is not enough to convince your reader of anything. The exact word at just the right moment makes a difference.

Choose accurate words. Use strong nouns and verbs, limit adjectives and adverbs. If you are writing an academic paper remember that this is not an emotional paper. It is data based and data driven. You are presenting facts and must support those facts.

## Tip #10

**Consider grammar.** Proper grammar creates clarity and readers crave clarity.



William Strunk and E. B. White (*The Elements of Style*) reigned for years as the go-to-guidebook. William Zinsser (*On Writing Well*) offered advice for nonfiction writing. Stephen Pinker's 2014 release, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* adds his voice to the writing scene as well as *The Yahoo! Style Guide: the Ultimate Source book for Writing, Editing and Creating Content for the Digital World*.

Find the right resource for you and keep it handy. When formatting an academic paper, I have the American Psychological Association's 6th Edition style guide online for easy access.

Another useful tip: When revising for grammar, read your paper aloud. You will hear when a sentence goes astray.

And while reading aloud ask yourself the following three questions:

- Do I understand the point that is being made?
- Do I understand why that point is being made?
- What function does this information serve?

Then revise according to your response.

People will connect with your writing because of your story, because you reveal something of yourself in the details. Even if you are writing a research paper, you, as the researcher, are part of the process. The details matter; and yet, it is the person telling the story that keep readers engaged. It is your job as a writer to present yourself, be it first person or third, from a narrator's voice or different characters' reality and how they interweave in your storyline (be it a person, plant, animal, or cosmic ray of stratified detritus) (see how big words jump out!)

*"I went for years not finishing anything. Because, of course, when you finish something you can be judged"* (Erica Jong)

Your willingness to share with a critical audience who will in fact judge whatever you do or don't do, who will make comments pro and con about your story, about your case study, about your research, is an act of courage. You have to keep the faith that this matters and the information will entertain and/or enlighten people. We cannot control how our words land. We cannot control what someone will think or feel after reading our work. But, we can honor our need to share, to talk, to be heard, and to do so with the utmost integrity. "To thy own self be true." I offer these ten tips to assist you in writing the first draft and then move into the revision process. With time and use, they can and will become part of your writing repertoire without conscious effort.

There is much more that I can say. For example, tips on outlining the story, creating a structural framework to build on—before and/or after the draft is complete. I invite you keep an eye out for an occasional newsletter or email sharing useful tips to facilitate your writing process. And if you have questions or want to talk further, please contact me at [Nancy@nancyeichhorn.com](mailto:Nancy@nancyeichhorn.com)