

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPETENT WRITERS AND OF GOOD WRITING

I have listed below some of the characteristics of competent writers and of good writing. The list is suggestive only, and is based on my experience—such as it is—as reader, writer, editor, and critic. Careful attention to the following points and much practice will improve your abilities, skills, and effectiveness as a writer. Copyright © Robert D. Sutherland, 2020

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: BASIC SKILLS and HABITUAL BEHAVIORS

Effective writers (regardless of the genres they work in) tend to have

1. Powers of **KEEN OBSERVATION** (they tend to see a great deal—both generalities and particulars; they have both panoramic vision and an eye for detail)
2. A good **VISUAL MEMORY** (they see clearly, and remember what they see; they are able to recall it clearly, recreating the experience in their mind's eye)
3. Powers of **CONCENTRATION** (they are able to keep their eye on the ball, to fix and focus, to avoid being deflected or sidetracked from the specific effect they are trying to achieve)
4. A **CAPACITY FOR REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE** and
5. A **CAPACITY FOR MAKING SUBTLE DISCRIMINATIONS**
(they are able to discern parts that make up a whole; distinguish the important from the trivial; order priorities; recognize cause/effect relationships; analyze sequential processes; understand interpersonal relationships; draw comparisons, ascertain implicit meanings)
6. A **CAPACITY FOR EFFECTIVE USE OF LANGUAGE** (they know and understand the various resources that language provides for communication and

expression; they are aware of language's potentials and its limitations—what it can and cannot do; they are sensitive to nuances of word connotations, command a vocabulary and range of styles and sentence structures suitable for their purposes, know the effect that different styles and idioms have within the culture; they have a sense of knowing what to do when for desired effect.)

7. Powers of **KEEN LISTENING** (There are two dimensions here: (1) good writers have an ear for speech—its rhythms, melody, cadences, styles, pauses; the acoustic and auditory effects of vowels and consonants singly or working together in concert; and (2) good writers attend to what people say, striving to understand the meanings that lie behind the words.)

8. **EFFECTIVE ORAL INTERPRETATION WHILE RECITING OR READING ALOUD** (Good writers are able to recite or read aloud effectively their own work and that of other authors.)

9. A capacity for **READING OTHER AUTHORS WITH PLEASURE AND UNDERSTANDING** (Good writers tend to be interested in other authors' work and read widely to see how others "do it"—what they write about, how they accomplish their aims and achieve their effects. Good writers read to appreciate and understand—not to imitate, but to LEARN.)

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: SPECIFIC RHETORICAL SKILLS and HABITS OF MIND

Good writers are characterized by the following. They have

10. **A SENSE OF AUDIENCE** (they "aim" their writing at potential readers—an audience³ real or hypothetical, particular or general; they know what they've

got to do to reach and hold that audience, with regard to syntax, word choice, tone, control of vocabulary, etc. Achieving these ends is a matter of rhetorical strategy; it does NOT imply a "selling out: to the whims or prejudices of the audience, or telling them only what they'd like to hear. See #18.)

11. **A SENSE OF TACT** (they know when they've said enough; know when to quit and not say too much; they know when to leave it up to the reader to "fill in the blanks", when to let the reader participate in the act of creation.)
12. Powers of **SELF-CRITICISM** (they know how to read their own work "from the outside" and make honest evaluations and judgments about it; they don't fall prey to thinking something is good just because they wrote it)
13. **A SENSE OF DISCIPLINE** (There are at least three dimensions here: (1) they have the strength to prune away what should be removed, to leave out what doesn't belong or that which detracts from the total desired effect, no matter how good it may be in itself; they do not become so ego-involved or self-indulgent about their own words and ideas that they lose the power to see them objectively;

(2) they develop the patience and concern with craft necessary to revise, re-think, and re-write as much as may be required (generally, one's writing improves with careful revision); they overcome impatience and tendencies to laziness and carelessness, taking pains to "get it right";

(3) they sustain (and maintain) some form of continuous output or production, knowing that it is necessary to keep producing; they develop some type of regular work habits (which of course vary with the individual writer)—for it's only by writing that one learns to write and improves as a writer.)

**REQUIREMENTS FOR THE BEST WRITING THAT YOU CAN DO—
PERSONAL ORIENTATION**

General advice for improving effectiveness in writing:

14. **Write about WHAT YOU KNOW** (The more you know, the more you experience, and the more you reflect upon your experiences, the more you will have to write about and the more effective your writing will be. This truism does not mean that you shouldn't use imaginative projection to envision circumstances you haven't actually *lived*; it means that there should be some sort of knowledge, experience, or expertise on your part to serve as a base, or foundation for your projections. If there is not such a foundation, you may appear a fool to those who *do* know; you will find yourself out of your depth, and will probably become bored with what you're writing.) By writing from (or about) what you know, you will gain self-confidence, establish credibility with your readers, and avoid certain types of frustration and failure.)

15. **Write about WHAT INTERESTS YOU** (This will make writing pleasurable, honest, convincing to the reader *and* to you—exciting, even. It will build your self-confidence and skill. If you try to write about things that don't interest you, you'll become bored, impatient, frustrated—and your writing will reflect this.)

16. **BE YOURSELF** (That's what it's all about; it's your uniqueness that's interesting and worth knowing about. Don't imitate other writers except as a learning-exercise or to pay homage.)

17. **BE HONEST** (Avoid phoniness, pretentiousness, pimping; be true to yourself: that will come across. Say it as you see it.)

18. **WRITE TO PLEASE YOURSELF** (Don't write with an eye to slavishly pleasing others; don't let others call

the shots—whether editors, publishers, reviewers, critics, teachers, or friends— UNLESS your prime concern IS to satisfy a particular readership, provide how-to-do-it information to a mass market, achieve commercial success by following formulas, or make lots of money. If following your own bent as well as you can is your chief concern, remember that #10 (above) does NOT require you “sell out” your integrity. Please yourself first, and that will probably please at least some others. But, equally important, at the same time DON’T BE SELF-INDULGENT AT THE EXPENSE OF YOUR ART! Don’t become so defensive or ego-involved in your creation that you refuse to listen to concerned and judicious criticism or fail to see where your work might be strengthened. If you can’t take friendly and well-reasoned criticism and can’t criticize yourself, you close off an avenue to learning and improvement. Keep yourself open; listen to judicious criticism from reliable and trustworthy sources; reflect upon it; and be able to modify your practices if the suggestions are good ones.)

IMPORTANT RHETORICAL STRATEGIES and TECHNICAL SKILLS

The effectiveness of your writing will improve if you pay attention to the following:

19. **PRECISION** (the capacity to choose the right word for a particular context entails on your part an intimate and detailed knowledge of the connotational nuances that individual words have. The “right word” is one that hits the nail squarely on the head; near-misses are misses, and make for sloppy writing, for they call the reader’s attention to themselves. In creating phrasal units, precision is the assemblage of “right words” to frame a grouping that says just what you want to say without accidental ambiguity or vagueness. If you wish to use

conscious ambiguity for special effect, knpw what you're doing! If you are writing in an ironic mode, make sure your reader knows that you are being ironic!)

20. **ECONOMY** (be as succinct and spare as possible, consistent with your matter, and with the effect you're trying to achieve; avoid wheel-spinning, wordiness, repetition that's excessive or non-functional. Trim away the fat; jettison the garbage. Turn everything to account; avoiding waste. When you think you're done, set the writing aside for awhile, then re-read it carefully, testing every word and phrase to determine if it makes a contribution toward your desired end or effect; if it doesn't take it out. BUT: be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water.)
21. **SELECTION** (be extremely careful in selecting things to be said: see above, #s 4–5, and #20. Your total effect and effectiveness will depend on what you choose to select from the random and chaotic mix of experience available to you.)
22. **ORDERING, ARRANGEMENT** (in surveying your selected materials, find the best inter-relations, internal ordering, and sequence of the items for the purposes and effects you wish to achieve; develop a capacity to see and mentally explore alternative routes and their consequences, and make reasoned judgments as to which would be best for your specific purposes)
23. **PACING** (in expressive writing—such as poetry, prose fiction, anecdotal humor, and essays presenting personal opinion—it's frequently the author's skill in managing the forward flow or progression of plotline, action, ideas, arguments, rhythms, and sequences of vowels and consonants that may determine whether or not readers will find the piece effective. The variations possible in the forward flow of key elements is called 'pacing'. Pacing denotes the relative *speed of progression*: of revelation, generation of suspense, movement from topic to topic, withholding of information, etc.)

It's roughly analogous to the concept 'tempo' in music (a spectrum of "fast" to "slow"). The best way to acquire skill in pacing is to *read, read, read good writers*. A good place to start is the poem "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est", one of the best anti-war poems ever written in English. Those two poems contain clear illustrations of brilliant pacing. They must be read aloud, of course, several times, with an ear open to hearing the shifts in pacing.

24. **IMMEDIACY, DIRECTNESS, "GRAB"** (Strive for vigor, clarity, simplicity, pith; think "action"; avoid indirection unless it is functional to the effect you wish to achieve (there *is* a place for it); clearly, #s 19–22 have relevance here). Watch your verbs in particular: take the time to hunt for those which provide vividness and pungency (don't go overboard, of course!). And watch out for flaccid adjectives that don't really say much: as a general rule, don't try to make adjectives do *your* work. In verb constructions, remember that active voice is usually more direct and vivid than passive voice. "The president decided." "It was decided by the president."
25. **EDITING and RE-WRITING** (Develop a "feel" for what's needed, and a capacity for sensing whether it's present or not. Develop a capacity to see what is NOT needed and should be omitted. Become adept at devising alternative ways of saying something, and develop your competence to choose the best alternative for your purpose and desired effect. If something does not add to or further your purpose and effect, it probably should come out. Learn how to proof-read with accuracy, from a vantage point "outside" the text. Be able to assess your precision, economy, principles of selection and ordering, and your "grab" quotient. Train yourself to be your own best editor. Have the patience to be able to re-write until you get it "right".
26. **READING ALOUD** (if you have developed a good ear for spoken language, and a good interpretive oral style, one of the BEST WAYS to discover how

effective and graceful your writing is (and to spot "bad" passages) is to read it aloud or listen while someone else (who has a good oral style) reads it to you. Good writing tends to feel good in the mouth and sound good to the ear. This principle is a help both in writing and in editing. I think the oral/aural test is crucial. (Try it and see for yourself.)

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