



## **Some words about writing by Commissioning Editor of Buzzword Books, D. S. Mills.**



### **Writing fiction - art or business?**

Writing is basically communication - not self-expression. Commercial writing, generally synonymous in the book world with fiction, is a matter of grabbing the reader's attention and holding it. As Sam Johnson remarked, 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.' So writing commercial fiction is a business.

But this is the last view most tyros wish to adopt. Daffy ones imagine that scribbling indulgent thoughts about their precious selves is an easy way to riches. They are the first to be discouraged. Because life isn't like that. Never was. Very few people make money with commercial writing. Possibly one per cent of those who try. And these lottery-like odds suggest this shaky profession is best left alone.



### **Simplify, simplify**

Good writing presents its subject as strongly and simply as possible. So the writer needs to be clear about what he wishes to do and, with fiction, has to visualize all he describes. It's best to use the plainest words that express the thought and the fewest adjectives, adverbs and clauses. Always use the word 'said' instead of 'vouchsafed', 'opined' and other stupidities implying speech. And try to find a mode of expression that, if not defiantly your own, is not so elaborate or boring that the reader give up at the first paragraph.

Paragraphs should be short. The 18th Century is past. Pressing the remote is now far more inviting than turning a page. Don't ramble on through an interminable paragraph that a sub-editor would turn into four.



### **Avoid that PHD**

In this fraught enterprise, education is no guarantee. Academics, bureaucrats, scientists are taught to write jargon or cant - abstruse sentences that mollify their peers. But effective communication eludes them.

Can writing be taught? Failed writers teach the craft to earn a minimum

wage. But, as aping the mistakes of others is not useful. The best way to learn to write is to write. And also to study the writers one respects. Practice is essential. You could teach a veterinary student the theory of the profession, but without hands-on experience, he would still be ineffective.

## **Plots are everywhere**

Tyros obsess about plotting. The 18th Century playwright, Carlo Gozzi, compiled a list of 36 plots or basic dramatic situations. By using or combining his list, you can cover almost all known variants. Plots are everywhere. Any article or news bulletin contains plot starters in abundance. And, of course, whatever strikes you as interesting should end up in your notebook.

## **Watch and learn**

The same goes for background setting. Life experience, careful observation, an inquisitive mind, a rampant imagination and the ability to find sermons in stones assist. A writer is someone who asks, then listens - who's always on the job and always discovering things. A true writer is flattering because he's utterly attentive to what he can learn from you. Without this magpie ability to turn unconsidered trifles into fiction, he won't get far.

## **Keep it direct**

Back to the craft. In this post-literate age, when an estimated 40% of the population has the most basic language skills or none, every word must count. There is no room for padding, meandering. Every sentence must increase interest or suspense.

## **Twist of mind**

That doesn't mean that you have to provide a narrative like a timetable. If the sun is shining through the window, it's not enough to say that. It needs a twist. Morning, perhaps, is creeping under the blind.

For instance, Raymond Chandler's hero knocks at a door that is opened by a man with ethnically frizzy hair high on his forehead. Chandler could have reported that and gone on with his story. Instead he wrote: *'Hair like steel wool grew far back on his head and gave him a great deal of domed brown*

*forehead that might at a careless glance have seemed a dwelling place for brains.'* This is no brilliant example of the mind twist that makes good writing but still shows that even Chandler at his worst was far ahead of the regular scribe. If you can manage to avoid the obvious without intruding yourself of adding pointless thrills, you have a skill that can keep a reader hooked.



## **Start strong**

How you begin is all important. Your title is your shop-front pitch and your first paragraph is what is in the window. So you'll begin with dialogue or action - preferably both - constructed in the most interesting way you can conceive. Leave your deadly flashbacks, narrative and back story for much later. In fact, leave these out if you can. Do it on the top story. Drama. Progression. Directness. Simplicity. Let it march. As for endings. They are the pinion of your whole story. Know exactly where you are going so that everything leads to that point.



## **Character relevance, not flatulence**

And, of course, your characters will be what? Stereotypes? Caricatures. (two-dimensional). Or fully rounded complex studies (three-dimensional). Will you be Dickens or Flaubert? Both methods have their place, depending on the story. Of course, you will avoid long descriptions of characters that slow action.

You need to be an impressionist - to know what to highlight and what to leave out. You will learn this by observing people. Constantly watching, looking. There are even techniques that can help here. Spend an hour looking at nothing but people's shoes. You'll find it's a revelation. Once you've decided by the shoes what kind of person is wearing them, look up to see if you are right. The same can be done with hairstyles, jewellery and watches, colours of jackets and so on.



## **Refine**

Writing is rewriting. And sentences should have balance, weight. Don't dribble a sentence to its conclusion. End it well. Perhaps on an emphatic word. Or as short one at least. Listen to the lilt of the syllables. A good ear is the writer's best friend. And speak your dialogue aloud. You'll be amazed at the difference it makes. And break it up. Don't be dreary. You're not writing a menu. Light and shade.

Remember always that you're writing prose. Metrical phrasing is death.

Prose is not blank verse. If you want to be a poet, be honest about it. 'Kill your darlings,' is very good advice for the commercial fiction trade. If you try to slip in sonorous sentences, you'll simply confuse and annoy your audience. It may be appreciated at your writer's club. But showing off is bad business in the cash-and-carry fiction market.

And once it's written, put your second hat on. Edit, edit, edit. Chop out everything you can. Until it's lean, spare, effective.

Well, that's enough for one article. Get it? Got it? Good.