

INTRODUCTION



A Nation of Writers

Americans do not write for many reasons. One big reason is the writer's struggle. Too many writers talk and act as if writing were slow torture, a form of procreation without arousal and romance — all dilation and contraction, grunting and pushing. As New York sports writer Red Smith once observed, "Writing is easy. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein." The agony in Madison Square Garden.

If you want to write, here's a secret: the writer's struggle is overrated, a con game, a cognitive distortion, a self-fulfilling prophecy, the best excuse for not writing. "Why should I get writer's block?" asked the mischievous Roger Simon. "My father never got truck driver's block."

Good readers may struggle with a difficult text, but struggle is not the goal of reading. The goal is fluency. Meaning flows to the good reader. In the same way, writing should flow from the good writer, at least as an ideal.

The ability to read, society tells us, contributes to success in education, employment, and citizenship. Reading is a demo-

cratic craft. Writing, in contrast, is considered a fine art. Our culture taps only a privileged few on the shoulder. *We* are the talented ones, and you're not. The teacher read *our* stories aloud in class, or encouraged *us* to enter an essay contest, or pushed *us* toward the newspaper or literary magazine. We thrive on such recognition, but think of the millions left behind.

If you feel left behind, this book invites you to imagine the act of writing less as a special talent and more as a purposeful craft. Think of writing as carpentry, and consider this book your toolbox. You can borrow a writing tool at any time, and here's another secret: Unlike hammers, chisels, and rakes, writing tools never have to be returned. They can be cleaned, sharpened, and passed along.

These practical tools will help to dispel your writing inhibitions, making the craft central to the way you see the world. As you add tools to your workbench, you'll begin to see the world as a storehouse of writing ideas. As you gain proficiency with each tool, and then fluency, the act of writing will make you a better student, a better worker, a better friend, a better citizen, a better parent, a better teacher, a better person.

I first gathered these tools at the Poynter Institute, a school for journalists, but thanks to the Internet they have traveled around the world and back. They have found their way into the hands of teachers, students, poets, fiction writers, magazine editors, students, freelancers, screenwriters, lawyers, doctors, technical writers, bloggers, and many other workers and professionals who traffic in words. To my surprise, online versions are being translated into several languages, including Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, and Indonesian, reminding me that writing strategies can and do cross boundaries of language and culture.

You will find in this toolbox new ways of thinking, along with many familiar pieces of advice, dusted off and reframed for a new century. But where do writing tools come from?

- *From great works on writing, such as* *The Elements of Style* and *On Writing Well*. These tools took a lifetime to gather, and not just mine. They took the lifetimes of Dorothea Brande, Brenda Ueland, Rudolf Flesch, George Orwell, William Strunk and his student E. B. White, William Zinsser, John Gardner, David Lodge, Natalie Goldberg, Anne Lamott, and all generous authors who share their knowledge about how good writing is made.

- *From the authors whose works, more than two hundred of them, are sampled here.* Using a method of close reading, I find a passage that intrigues me, put on my X-ray glasses, and peer beneath the surface of the text to view the invisible machinery of language, syntax, rhetoric, and critical thinking that creates the effects I experience as a reader. I then forge what I see into a writing tool.

- *From productive conversations with professional writers and editors.* I once learned that only three behaviors set literate people apart. The first two are obvious: reading and writing; but the third surprised me: talking about how reading and writing work. Many of the tools came from great talk about the construction of stories and the distillation of meaning.

- *Finally, from America's great writing teachers.* They have labored for decades to demystify the writing process for students, to describe writing as a craft, a set of rational steps, a box full of tools, habits, and strategies.

I reveal these sources — great works about writing, the effective work of writers, good talk among writers and editors, tools passed on by teachers — not only to give due credit, but also to offer the means and methods by which to gather a lifetime of writing tools. As Chaucer wrote more than six hundred years ago: “The life so short, the craft so long to learn.”

Before I open *Writing Tools* for your inspection, let me suggest ways to use this book:

• *Remember, these are tools, not rules.* They work outside the territory of right and wrong, and inside the land of cause and effect. Don't be surprised when you find many examples of good writing in the world that seem to violate the general advice described here.

• *Do not try to apply these tools all at once.* Aspiring golfers swing and miss if they try to remember the thirty or so different elements of an effective golf swing. I promise you a case of writing paralysis if you think about too many of these tools when you sit down to write. Let your writing flow early. You can reach for a tool later.

• *You will become handy with these tools over time.* You will begin to recognize their use in the stories you read. You will see chances to apply them when you revise your own work. With time, they will become part of your process, natural and automatic.

• *You already use many of these tools without knowing it.* You cannot think, speak, write, or read without them. But now these tools will have names, so you can talk about them in different ways. As your critical vocabulary grows, your writing will improve.

You will notice that I have drawn examples of good writing from several genres of writing and storytelling: from fiction and poetry, from journalism and nonfiction, from essays and memoirs. The range is important. The literature reveals the best work that could be created under any circumstances, the journalism the best created under the exacting limits of time, space, and civic purpose. The testimony of many readers persuades me that tools in this book apply to the general tasks of most writers.

Writing Tools presumes some familiarity with the principles of standard English usage, grammar, punctuation, and syntax, but I have held technical language to a minimum. To gain full benefit, you should be able to identify the parts of speech, subjects and verbs, and the main clause of a sentence, and know the difference between active and passive voice. If you lack that

knowledge, please read this book anyway. It will still help you improve your writing and will make clear what else you need to learn.

When a good friend first read these tools, he noted that they carried the writer and reader on a journey from the subatomic to the metaphysical level, from where to put the subject and verb to how to find your mission and purpose. That comment inspired a division of the tools into four boxes:

1. *Nuts and bolts*: strategies for making meaning at the word, sentence, and paragraph levels
2. *Special effects*: tools of economy, clarity, originality, and persuasion
3. *Blueprints*: ways of organizing and building stories and reports
4. *Useful habits*: routines for living a life of productive writing

At the end of each tool, you will find a set of workshop questions and exercises, more than two hundred in all. I wrote these with the student and teacher in mind, but I encourage everyone to read them, even if you do not perform the suggested task. They will help you imagine ways to grow as a writer.

Now that you know the contents and structure of this book, I'd like to enlist you to stand behind its mission and purpose. You will notice that my title, *Writing Tools*, is modest, but the title of this introduction, "A Nation of Writers," is bold. It's hard enough to imagine a village or colony of writers, but a nation? Why not?

Look around you. The National Commission on Writing has described the disastrous consequences of bad writing in America — for businesses, professions, educators, consumers, and citizens. Poorly written reports, memos, announcements, and messages cost us time and money. They are blood clots in the body politic. The flow of information is blocked. Crucial prob-

lems go unsolved. Opportunities for reform and efficiency are buried.

The Commission calls for a “revolution” in the way Americans think about writing. The time is right. Students now face high-stakes writing tests to advance in school and enter college. But technology stands on our side, easing the burdens of drafting and revision. I wrote my first book in 1985 on a Royal Standard typewriter. A machine just like it sits in my office, a museum piece. Now young writers use cell phones to communicate in the telegraphic and acronymic language of instant messages; words flash around the world with breathtaking speed. These new writers have created millions of Web logs and Web sites, becoming publishers of their own work.

No doubt, the standards expressed in these new forms are looser than those suggested by Strunk and White. The voices are more casual, the approaches more experimental, and the personae of the authors more elusive. These new voices cross old boundaries and command attention, but who would argue that the quality of writing online is what it could be? As these new writers mature, they will need writing tools to perfect their work.

We need lots of writing tools to build a nation of writers. Here are fifty of them, one for every week of the year. You get two weeks for vacation.

Learn and enjoy.

PART ONE



Nuts and Bolts

TOOL 1



Begin sentences with subjects and verbs.

*Make meaning early, then let weaker
elements branch to the right.*

Imagine each sentence you write printed on the world's widest piece of paper. In English, a sentence stretches from left to right. Now imagine this. A writer composes a sentence with subject and verb at the beginning, followed by other subordinate elements, creating what scholars call a *right-branching sentence*.

I just created one. Subject and verb of the main clause join on the left ("a writer composes") while all other elements branch to the right. Here's another right-branching sentence, written by Lydia Polgreen as the lead of a news story in the *New York Times*:

Rebels seized control of Cap Haitien, Haiti's second largest city, on Sunday, meeting little resistance as hundreds of residents cheered, burned the police station, plundered food from port warehouses and looted the airport, which was quickly closed. Police officers and armed supporters of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide fled.

That first sentence contains thirty-seven words and ripples with action. The sentence is so full, in fact, that it threatens to fly apart like an overheated engine. But the writer guides the reader by capturing meaning in the first three words: "Rebels seized con-

trol.” Think of that main clause as the locomotive that pulls all the cars that follow.

Master writers can craft page after page of sentences written in this structure. Consider this passage by John Steinbeck from *Cannery Row*, describing the routine of a marine scientist named Doc (the emphasis is mine):

He didn't need a clock. He had been working in a tidal pattern so long that he could feel a tide change in his sleep. In the dawn he awakened, looked out through the windshield and saw that the water was already retreating down the bouldery flat. He drank some hot coffee, ate three sandwiches, and had a quart of beer.

The tide goes out imperceptibly. The boulders show and seem to rise up and the ocean recedes leaving little pools, leaving wet weed and moss and sponge, iridescence and brown and blue and China red. On the bottoms lie the incredible refuse of the sea, shells broken and chipped and bits of skeleton, claws, the whole sea bottom a fantastic cemetery on which the living scamper and scramble.

Steinbeck places subject and verb at or near the beginning of each sentence. Clarity and narrative energy flow through the passage, as one sentence builds on another. He avoids monotony by including the occasional brief introductory phrase (“In the dawn”) and by varying the lengths of his sentences, a writing tool we will consider later.

Subject and verb are often separated in prose, usually because we want to tell the reader something about the subject before we get to the verb. This delay, even for good reasons, risks confusing the reader. With care, it can work:

The stories about my childhood, the ones that stuck, that got told and retold at dinner tables, to dates as I sat by red-faced, to my own children by my father later on, are stories of running away.

So begins Anna Quindlen’s memoir *How Reading Changed My Life*, a lead sentence with thirty-one words between subject and verb. When the topic is more technical, the typical effect of separation is confusion, exemplified by this clumsy effort:

A bill that would exclude tax income from the assessed value of new homes from the state education funding formula could mean a loss of revenue for Chesapeake County schools.

Eighteen words separate the subject, “bill,” from its weak verb, “could mean,” a fatal flaw that turns what could be an important civic story into gibberish.

If the writer wants to create suspense, or build tension, or make the reader wait and wonder, or join a journey of discovery, or hold on for dear life, he can save subject and verb of the main clause until later. As I just did.

Kelley Benham, a former student of mine, reached for this tool when called on to write the obituary of Terry Schiavo, the woman whose long illness and controversial death became the center of an international debate about the end of life:

Before the prayer warriors massed outside her window, before gavels pounded in six courts, before the Vatican issued a statement, before the president signed a midnight law and the Supreme Court turned its head, Terri Schiavo was just an ordinary girl, with two overweight cats, an unglamorous job and a typical American life.

By delaying the main subject and verb, the writer tightens the tension between a celebrated cause and an ordinary girl.

This variation works only when most sentences branch to the right, a pattern that creates meaning, momentum, and literary power. “The brilliant *room collapses*,” writes Carol Shields in *The Stone Diaries*,

leaving a solid block of darkness. Only her *body survives*, and the problem of what to do with it. *It has not turned* to dust. A bright, droll, clarifying *knowledge comes over* her at the thought of her limbs and organs transformed to biblical dust or even funereal ashes. Laughable.

And admirable.

WORKSHOP

1. Read through the *New York Times* or your local newspaper with a pencil in hand. Mark the locations of subjects and verbs.
2. Do the same with examples of your writing.
3. Do the same with a draft you are working on now.
4. The next time you struggle with a sentence, rewrite it by placing subject and verb at the beginning.
5. For dramatic variation, write a sentence with subject and verb near the end.

TOOL 2



Order words for emphasis.

Place strong words at the beginning and at the end.

Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* advises the writer to "place emphatic words in a sentence at the end," an example of its own rule. The most emphatic word appears at "the end." Application of this tool will improve your prose in a flash.

For any sentence, the period acts as a stop sign. That slight pause in reading magnifies the final word, an effect intensified at the end of a paragraph, where final words often adjoin white space. In a column of type, a reader's eyes are likewise drawn to the words next to the white space. Those words shout, "Look at me!"

Emphatic word order helps the writer solve the thorniest problems. Consider this opening for a story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The writer, Larry King, must make sense of three powerful elements: the death of a United States senator, the collision of aircraft, and a tragedy at an elementary school:

A private plane carrying U.S. Sen. John Heinz collided with a helicopter in clear skies over Lower Merion Township yesterday, triggering a fiery, midair explosion that rained burning debris over an elementary school playground.

Seven people died: Heinz, four pilots and two first-grade girls at play outside the school. At least five people on the ground were injured, three of them children, one of whom was in critical condition with burns.

Flaming and smoking wreckage tumbled to the earth around Merion Elementary School on Bowman Avenue at 12:19 p.m., but the gray stone building and its occupants were spared. Frightened children ran from the playground as teachers herded others outside. Within minutes, anxious parents began streaming to the school in jogging suits, business clothes, house-coats. Most were rewarded with emotional reunions, amid the smell of acrid smoke.

On most days, any of the three elements would lead the paper. Combined, they form an overpowering news tapestry, one that reporter and editor must handle with care. What matters most in this story? The death of a senator? A spectacular crash? The deaths of children?

In the first paragraph, the writer chooses to mention the senator and the crash up front, and saves “elementary school playground” for the end. Throughout the passage, subjects and verbs come early — like the locomotive and coal car of an old railroad train — saving other interesting words for the end — like a caboose.

Consider also the order in which the writer lists the anxious parents, who arrive at the school in “jogging suits, business clothes, house-coats.” Any other order weakens the sentence. Placing “house-coats” at the end builds the urgency of the situation: parents racing from their homes dressed as they are.

Putting strong stuff at the beginning and end helps writers hide weaker stuff in the middle. In the passage above, notice how the writer hides the less important news elements — the who and the when (“Lower Merion Township yesterday”) — in the middle of the lead. This strategy also works for attributing quotations:

“It was one horrible thing to watch,” said Helen Amadio, who was walking near her Hampden Avenue home when the crash occurred. “It exploded like a bomb. Black smoke just poured.”

Begin with a good quote. Hide the attribution in the middle. End with a good quote.

Some teachers refer to this as the 2-3-1 *tool of emphasis*, where the most emphatic words or images go at the end, the next most emphatic at the beginning, and the least emphatic in the middle, but that’s too much calculus for my brain. Here’s my simplified version: put your best stuff near the beginning and at the end; hide weaker stuff in the middle.

Amy Fusselman provides an example with the first sentence of her novel, *The Pharmacist’s Mate*: “Don’t have *sex on a boat* unless you want to *get pregnant*.” The most intriguing words come near the beginning and at the end. Gabriel García Márquez uses this strategy at the opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to dazzling effect: “Many years later, *as he faced the firing squad*, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to *discover ice*.”

What applies to the sentence also applies to the paragraph, as Alice Sebold demonstrates in this passage: “*In the tunnel where I was raped*, a tunnel that was once an underground entry to an amphitheater, a place where actors burst forth from underneath the seats of a crowd, a girl had been murdered and dismembered. I was told this story by the police. In comparison, they said, I was *lucky*.” That final word resonates with such pain and power that Sebold turns it into the title of her memoir, *Lucky*.

These tools of emphasis are as old as rhetoric itself. Near the end of Shakespeare’s famous tragedy, a character announces to Macbeth: “The Queen, my lord, is dead.” This astonishing example of the power of emphatic word order is followed by one of the darkest passages in all of literature. Macbeth says:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

The poet has one great advantage over those who write prose. He knows where the line will end. He gets to emphasize a word at the end of a line, a sentence, a paragraph. We prose writers make do with the sentence and the paragraph — signifying something.

WORKSHOP

1. Read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and study emphatic word order.
2. With a pencil in hand, read an essay you admire. Circle the first and last words in each paragraph.
3. Do the same for recent examples of your work. Revise sentences so that powerful and interesting words, which may be hiding in the middle, appear near the beginning and at the end.
4. Survey your friends to get the names of their dogs. Write these in alphabetical order. Imagine that this list appears in a story. Play with the order of the names. Which should go first? Which last? Why?

TOOL 3



Activate your verbs.

*Strong verbs create action,
 save words, and reveal the players.*

President John F. Kennedy testified that a favorite book was *From Russia with Love*, the 1957 James Bond adventure by Ian Fleming. This choice revealed more about JFK than we knew at the time and created a cult of 007 that persists to this day.

The power of Fleming's prose flows from active verbs. In sentence after sentence, page after page, England's favorite secret agent, or his beautiful companion, or his villainous adversary, performs the action of the verb (the emphasis is mine):

Bond *climbed* the few stairs and *unlocked* his door and *locked* and *bolted* it behind him. Moonlight *filtered* through the curtains. He *walked* across and *turned* on the pink-shaded lights on the dressing-table. He *stripped* off his clothes and *went* into the bathroom and *stood* for a few minutes under the shower. . . . He *cleaned* his teeth and *gargled* with a sharp mouthwash to get rid of the taste of the day and *turned* off the bathroom light and *went* back into the bedroom. . . .

Bond *gave* a shuddering yawn. He *let* the curtains drop back into place. He *bent* to switch off the lights on the dressing-table. Suddenly he *stiffened* and his heart *missed* a beat.

There had been a nervous giggle from the shadows at the back of the room. A girl's voice *said*, "Poor Mister Bond. You must be tired. Come to bed."

In writing this passage, Fleming followed the advice of his countryman George Orwell, who wrote of verbs: "Never use the passive where you can use the active."

I learned the distinction between active and passive voice as early as fifth grade. Thank you, Sister Katherine William. I failed to learn, until much later, why that distinction mattered. But let me first correct a popular misconception. The voice of verbs (active or passive) has nothing to do with the tense of verbs. Writers sometimes ask, "Is it ever OK to write in the passive tense?" *Tense* defines action within time — *when* the verb happens — the present, past, or future. *Voice* defines the relationship between subject and verb — who does what.

- If the subject performs the action of the verb, we call the verb *active*.
- If the subject receives the action of the verb, we call the verb *passive*.
- A verb that is neither active nor passive is a *linking verb*, a form of the verb *to be*.

All verbs, in any tense, fit into one of those three baskets.

News writers reach often for the simple active verb. Consider this *New York Times* lead by Carlotta Gall on the suicidal desperation of Afghan women:

Waiflike, draped in a pale blue veil, Madina, 20, *sits* on her hospital bed, bandages covering the terrible, raw burns on her neck and chest. Her hands *tremble*. She *picks* nervously at the soles of her feet and confesses that three months earlier she *set* herself on fire with kerosene.

Both Fleming and Gall use active verbs to power their narratives, but notice an important difference between them. While Fleming uses the past tense to narrate his adventure, Gall prefers the present. This strategy immerses readers in the immediacy of experience, as if we were sitting — right now — beside the poor woman in her grief.

Both Fleming and Gall avoid verb qualifiers that attach themselves to standard prose like barnacles to the hull of a ship:

sort of	seemed to
tend to	could have
kind of	used to
must have	begin to

Scrape away these crustaceans during revision, and the ship of your prose will glide toward meaning with speed and grace.

The earnest writer can overuse a writing tool. If you shoot up your verbs with steroids, you risk creating an effect that poet Donald Hall derides as "false color," the stuff of adventure magazines and romance novels. Temperance controls the impulse to overwrite.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, novelist Amy Tan exercises exquisite control, using strong verbs to depict the authentic color of emotional truth:

And in my memory I can still *feel* the hope that *beat* in me that night. I *clung* to this hope, day after day, night after night, year after year. I would *watch* my mother lying in her bed, babbling to herself as she *sat* on the sofa. And yet I *knew* that this, the worst possible thing, would one day *stop*. I still *saw* bad things in my mind, but now I *found* ways to change them. I still *heard* Mrs. Sorci and Teresa having terrible fights, but I *saw* something else. . . . I *saw* a girl complaining that the pain of not being seen was unbearable.

✓ Ian Fleming's verbs describe external action and adventure; Amy Tan's verbs capture internal action and emotion. But action can also be intellectual, in the force and power of an argument, as Albert Camus demonstrates in *The Rebel*:

The metaphysical rebel *protests* against the condition in which he *finds* himself as a man. The rebel slave *affirms* that there is something in him that will not *tolerate* the manner in which his master *treats* him; the metaphysical rebel *declares* that he is frustrated by the universe.

Notice that even with all the active verbs in that passage, Camus does not pass on the passive when he needs it ("he is frustrated"), which brings us to the next tool.

WORKSHOP

1. Verbs fall into three categories: active, passive, and forms of the verb *to be*. Review your writing and circle verb forms with a pencil. In the margins, categorize each verb.

2. Convert passive and *to be* verbs into the active. For example, "It was her observation that" can become "She observed."

3. In your own work and in the newspaper, search for verb qualifiers and see what happens when you cut them.

4. Experiment with both voice and tense. Find a passage you have written in the active voice and in the past tense. Change the verbs to the present tense and consider the effect. Does it seem more immediate?

5. I described three uses of the active voice: to create outward action, to express inner or emotional action, and to energize an argument. Look for examples of all three in your reading and for opportunities to use them in your writing.

TOOL 4



Be passive-aggressive.

Use passive verbs to showcase the "victim" of action.

So the gold standard for writing advice is this: use active verbs. ✓ Those three words have been uttered in countless writing workshops with such conviction that they must be gospel. But are they?

Check out that last paragraph. In the first clause, I use a form of the verb *to be*, in this case "is." In the next sentence, I use the passive voice: "have been uttered." In the final sentence, I resort to another form of *to be*, in this case "are." My point is that you can create acceptable prose, from time to time, without active verbs.

Why, then, does voice matter? It matters because of the different effects active, passive, and *to be* verbs have on the reader and listener. I'll call on John Steinbeck again to describe this true-life encounter in North Dakota (the emphasis is mine):

Presently I *saw* a man leaning on a two-strand barbed-wire fence, the wires *fixed* not to posts but to crooked tree limbs stuck in the ground. The man *wore* a dark hat, and jeans and long jacket washed palest blue with lighter places at knees and elbows. His pale eyes *were frosted* with sun glare and his lips scaly as snake-skin. A .22 rifle *leaned* against the fence beside him and on the ground *lay* a little heap of fur and feathers — rabbits and small