

10 Tips to Becoming a Better Writer

By Paul Buyer

The ability to write well is one of the most valuable and marketable skills you can possibly have as a musician. Quality writing is expected at every stop on your career path, from research papers and assignments for school, to applications and cover letters for jobs, to articles and books for tenure and promotion. As you pursue a career in the percussive arts, keep in mind that the ability to write well will help you get hired in a competitive job market, give you an edge over the competition, and make you stand out in a culture of fitting in.

But where exactly does one learn *how* to write well? More and more college students today are graduating without the skills and training necessary to become good writers. General education curriculums are cutting writing courses or allowing students to place out of college-level English requirements, *Writing Across the Curriculum* programs are not holding students accountable, and campus Writing Centers are not being utilized by the majority of the student body. Furthermore, in today's social media culture of texts, tweets, emails, blogs, and posts, it is easy to develop bad writing habits. According to Rachel Siefert in her article, "Is Twitter Helping Millennials Destroy the English Language?"

I am concerned that the informal texting language is becoming *the* English language for Millennials...Do you talk to your friends the same way that you speak to your professors or your boss? You do if you bring your texting and tweeting language into papers, assignments and...gasp...cover letters or other business communication...Sure, none of us can remember a time without Internet and cell phones, but does that mean that we can no longer separate informal conversations from formal ones?...all industries need employees that can write well.

BUYER'S REMORSE

A few weeks ago I bought a copy of a new book by a Hall of Fame football coach I greatly admire. Excited to read it and see what lessons I could learn and apply, I quickly noticed that the introduction contained a variety of errors, including incorrect punctuation, a failure to capitalize letters, and missing words—literally, words missing in the middle of a sentence. I was immediately deflated and disappointed. The

book was well-researched and featured dozens of interviews from the coach's former players, but I knew I would never finish it. I wondered, how did this book ever get published? Why didn't the author hire a copyeditor—or at least a proofreader? How in the world did it make it onto the shelves of Books-A-Million? I returned it the next day.

WHY WRITE?

There is something special about good writing. As the author of two books and more than 25 articles, writing has been a passion of mine for a long time and a way for me to reach, mentor, and influence people from all over the world.

There are many reasons why people write. According to authors Guy Kawasaki and Shawn Welch in their book *APE – Author, Publisher, and Entrepreneur*, there are good reasons and bad reasons to write.

Good Reason 1: Enrich Lives. The first good reason to write is to add value to people's lives.

Good Reason 2: Intellectual Challenge. Master a new skill.

Good Reason 3: Further a Cause. Do you feel a moral obligation to write?

Good Reason 4: Catharsis. Writing is therapeutic. [It is about] the process of expressing yourself.

Bad Reason 1: Popular Demand. Lots of people tell me I'm a good writer...Have you ever told friends or relatives they should open a restaurant because they were great cooks?

Bad Reason 2: Money. Making money is a possible outcome, but not the purpose of writing.

Summary: Writing is often a lonely and difficult process. [It is also] one of the most rewarding experiences in life.

The writing process is unique to each writer. It is often private, invisible, and hidden from view, taking months or even years to materialize. According to *The Nearly Ultimate Guide to Better Writing*: "The rewards often appear long after the work is finished...Most other creative types get to enjoy the immediate gratification of their patrons' response and appreciation. Dancers, musicians, actors, even visual artists can perform their craft and reap the rewards fairly quickly. Writers must plod along, hammering ideas into words with no supportive fans standing behind them shouting, 'Well done, bravo!'"

FINDING YOUR VOICE

Because writing is very personal, you will eventually discover your own style. This style will become your identity, your niche, and your voice that defines who you are as a writer.

If you have ever thought about writing an article or book to be considered for publication, now is your chance. Take the leap. Give it a try. Then, follow my 10 tips to becoming a better writer and enjoy the journey.

THE 10 TIPS

1. Write more than you need, then trim it down.

Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." So start writing. Get as many thoughts and ideas down on paper as possible, and don't worry about how jumbled, sloppy, or incoherent everything looks at first. My biggest fear is forgetting something I want to say because I did not write it down. Another popular quote—this one about brainstorming—is to "throw a bunch of mud at the wall and see what sticks."

2. Write to express yourself.

Already identified as a good reason for writing, my philosophy has always been: *When something bothers me, I write about it.* In fact, both of my books and most of my articles began as issues that bothered me in percussion education. I figured if these things bother me, they might bother other people, too. So I decided to do something about it.

3. Strive for simplicity, clarity and quality.

Take time to simplify. Abraham Lincoln said, paraphrasing Pascal: "I'm sorry I wrote such a long letter. I did not have time to write a short one." Avoid getting caught up in scholarship, jargon, and complexity. Quality writing is clear, easy to understand, and simple. You can visualize a culture of simplicity as a fish tank with clean water and a culture of complexity as a fish tank with dirty water. If your writing does not make sense, if it does not flow, if it is awkward in any way, simplify.

4. Don't just communicate, connect.

In his book *Everybody Communicates, Few Connect*, author John C. Maxwell states, "Connecting is the ability to identify with people and relate to them in a way that increases your

influence with them.” To truly connect through the written word, it is important to develop a mind-set to educate, mentor, teach, help, and serve your readers. Inspire them to turn the page, cause them to nod their heads, and speak to them in an authentic and genuine way.

5. Eliminate the fluff.

Eliminate whatever is not contributing to great writing. Stay away from filler. Writing is not about word counts or number of pages. It is about how the words you use make others feel when they read them. Say what you want to say and move on.

6. Become a good editor.

Master grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and be able to recognize poor writing. Author and blogger Ali Luke said, “I firmly believe that grammar, spelling, and punctuation are just part of what makes a good piece of writing—but they are an important part. Don’t worry if you’ve not had much formal instruction in these areas: Many great writers approach them in a more intuitive manner.” A great free resource is *Writing Forward* at <http://www.writingforward.com/>.

7. Organize in small chunks.

Organize your writing into small, bite-sized chunks. Use several subheadings in bold to organize your content. This not only makes it easier for your readers to follow, digest, and retain the information, it also helps them come back later to locate sections they may want to read again.

8. Find a place to write.

Find a place where you can concentrate and get quality work done. This could be your office, your home office, or somewhere else more remote. Author Sara Gruen spent four months writing in her walk-in closet, just to get some privacy. Returning to this place each day can trigger ideas when you write. It can transport you into “author-mode,” allowing you to think and be creative.

Just as important is finding a good *time* to write, which helps develop a ritual or routine. Are you a morning person or do you work better late at night? Author David Baldacci, who had a family and a day job early in his career, wrote from 10 P.M. to 2 A.M. for ten years.

9. Be an avid reader.

Stephen King said, “If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.” Writers are readers and are influenced by the authors they read. An author’s voice and style can get “into your system” and help you learn and develop your craft. Building an extensive library of books within your genre can also help improve your writing skills. When writing my second book, *Working Toward Excellence*, I drew inspiration from my library of over 150 books on leadership, teamwork, and success

that I collected over the years. Reading truly fueled my writing.

10. Work toward excellence as a writer.

Working toward excellence as a writer requires identifying, practicing, and developing values such as hunger, effort, process, quality, consistency, leadership, time, and perseverance. If you want to work toward excellence and become a better writer, follow this 3-step game plan.

Step 1: Identify the values. Know what they are and why they are important.

Step 2: Practice the values. Practice hunger by being proactive and demonstrating a desire, passion, drive, and initiative to write. Practice consistency by disciplining yourself to write every day and make steady progress over time. Practice perseverance by never giving up and not letting adversity deter you from your goals. That is what Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen did. They are the co-authors of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and practiced the value of perseverance longer than most. Initially rejected by 140 publishers, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* now has almost 200 titles in its series and has sold more than 112 million copies.

Step 3: Develop the values. By practicing the values over time, you will start to develop them and make them part of who you are. Once they are part of who you are, you will start to become a better writer. In fact, you will start to become better at whatever it is you want to do.

These 10 tips are what work for me. In fact, I followed them to the letter when writing this article, and I am confident they can help you become a better writer. But as I stated earlier, the writing process is unique to each individual, so experiment to see what works best for you.

BONUS TIPS

- Have friends or family proofread your writing. You will be amazed at the errors others will find just when you think you have caught everything.
- Make sure you begin with the end in mind and allow yourself enough time to create a finished product you can be proud of. Good writing must be crockpotted, not microwaved. I usually allow two or three weeks to write an article, and a book can easily take up to a year.
- It is always a good idea to get away from your writing to clear your mind and take a break. You will come back fresh and have some new ideas ready to go.
- Keep a notepad in your car so you don’t miss an opportunity to write an idea down.
- After all the proofing, tweaking, and editing, stop writing and be willing to submit your work.
- If you are rejected at first, welcome to the club! Don’t give up; stick with it. Persevere like Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and hundreds of other writers have. You never know who will say yes down the road.

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Paul Buyer is Director of Percussion, Director of Music, and Professor of Music at Clemson University. He is the author of *Working Toward Excellence: 8 Values for Achieving Uncommon Success in Work and Life*, published by Morgan James Publishing (2012) and *Marching Bands and Drumlines: Secrets of Success from the Best of the Best*, published by Meredith Music Publications (2009). He is also a contributing author to the second edition of *Teaching Percussion* by Gary Cook, and his articles have appeared in *American Music Teacher*, *Teaching Music*, and *Percussive Notes*. Dr. Buyer is a member of the PAS Marching Percussion and College Pedagogy Committees, chair of the PAS Education Committee, and Career Development Editor for *Percussive Notes*. **PN**