

- **Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000)**
- The work must move you emotionally
- The narrator's original perception of a character(s) may be as erroneous as the readers
- Stopping a piece of work because it is hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea
  - Sometimes you have to go on when you don't feel like it, and sometimes you're doing good work when it feels like everything is going wrong
- Take writing seriously
- To write to your best of abilities, build a toolbox of skills and then build up enough muscle to carry it with you
  - Most basic tool of all – vocabulary
- One of the really bad things a writer can do is dress up their vocabulary, looking for long words because she is ashamed of short ones
  - Use the first word that comes to your mind if it is appropriate and colorful
- The word is only a representation of the meaning – even at its best the writing almost always fall short of full meaning
  - Thus, don't make things worse by choosing a word which is only a cousin to the one you really wanted to use
- Grammar is also a vital tool
- Do not abandon the rules of grammar unless you can do it well
- Do not use too many simple sentences in a row
  - But they can help steer you away from a confusing web of complex sentences
- With an active verb the subject of a sentence is doing something
- With a passive verb something is being done to the subject of the sentence
  - The subject is just letting it happen
  - Avoid passive tense
- Always consider your reader while you're writing – it should be your main concern
- Do not use adverbs if you can avoid it
  - The context of the sentence will often tell the reader how the action is taken
  - Avoid use of adverbs in dialogue attribution
    - Best form of attribution is “said” – even in a moment of emotional crisis for the character
- The fear that the reader might not understand you is at the root of most bad writing
- Sentence fragments can work to streamline narration – King says it is impossible to overuse a well-turned fragment
- If you want to be a writer you must do two things 1) read a lot 2) write a lot
- Good writing teaches the learning writer about style, graceful narration, plot development, the creation of believable characters, and truth telling
- Read to experience the mediocre and the outright rotten to guard against this writing from creeping into your work
  - Also, read to measure yourself against the good and the great – to get a sense of all that can be done, to experience different styles
  - You have to read wisely, constantly reforming your own work as you do
  - You have to teach yourself to read in small sips as well as large gulps

- Constant reading gives you a growing knowledge of what has been done, what hasn't, what is trite and what is fresh, what works and what doesn't
- Readers are pulled into a novel when they recognize the characters, their surroundings, and their talk
- Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending your own personal knowledge of life, friendships, relationships, sex, etc
  - But do not lecture about what you know – simply let it enrich the story
- Novels consist of three parts
  - 1) Narrative – moves the story from A to B
  - 2) Description – erects a sensory reality for the reader
  - 3) Dialogue – brings the characters to life through their speech
- King argues that plotting is not essential because our lives are plotless and because it stifles spontaneous creation
  - He believes stories must make themselves
- The job of the writer is to give stories a place to grow and to transcript them to the page
  - Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world and it is essentially the writer's job to dig them out of the ground
- Put characters in situations and watch them try to work themselves free
  - Don't demand your characters do things your way – let them do things their way
- Most interesting stories begin with “what if” – what if vampires invaded a small town
- Description is what makes the reader a sensory participant in the story – and it is always a question of how much
  - Visualize what you want the reader to experience and translate what you see in your mind into words on the page
    - Description begins with the writer's imagination and ends with the reader's
  - Thin description leaves a reader feeling bewildered and near-sighted; over-description leaves the reader buried in details
    - So the trick is finding the middle ground
      - If you describe too much you close off the reader from making their own judgments – this weakens the bond between reader and writer
  - It is important to know what to describe and what can be left alone so you can get on with your main job – telling the story
- King does not like an exhaustive physical description of physical characteristics of people or what they are wearing (especially a wardrobe inventory)
  - Locale and texture are more important for the reader feeling in the story than physical description of the players
  - Good description usually consists of a few well-chosen details that will stand for everything else
    - Usually the first details in your mind are the best
- But it's not always about the setting – it's about the story
  - Narration/action takes you out of description and back to the storytelling
  - Too much description slows the pace of the story

- Boring stories usually mean the writer uses too much description; always keep the story moving
- Don't just give detail because you think it is good (it should ALL be good)
  - If you do this you will seem self-indulgent
- Use of simile or other figurative language is one of the chief delights of fiction – but do not make your similes lazy (e.g. ran like a madman; pretty as a summer day; fought like a tiger)
- For description use simple words
- Your job is to say what you see and then get on with the story
- The best stories always end up being about people, not an event
- Use symbolism to enhance a story (look for patterns)
  - Not every book has to be loaded with symbolism and irony and musical language – but it has to be about something
- Don't start with theme – start with a story and progress from there
- When editing, ask yourself: is this story coherent, what are the recurring elements – do they entwine to make a theme
- If reaction to your work is mixed – some like character A and don't like character B and others don't like character A but like character B – then it is a wash and the tie goes to the writer
  - But if everyone says you have a problem then there is a problem and you have to fix it
    - Listen very carefully to things your readers don't understand
- Pace: the speed at which the narrative unfolds
  - But it can be overdone – not everything has to have a fast pace
    - But if you slow the pace too much the reader will lose patience
      - Try to imagine if the Ideal Reader will be bored by a scene – will they feel there is too much pointless talk, over-explained/under-explained scenes/situations, failure to resolve what is important to the plot
  - The goal with pacing is to leave out the boring part
- KILL YOUR DARLINGS – don't keep something in the novel because you think it is good; if it doesn't belong or violates certain principles of writing: kill it
- Second Draft = first draft – 10%
- Every story is collapsible to a certain degree – judiciously cut down what you wrote
- When you think character, immediately think MOTIVATION
  - It is important to give the back story as quickly as possible but do it in a graceful way
  - Remember, everyone has a back story, and most of it isn't very interesting (stick to the points that are)
  - With a fact intensive back story, remember: you are writing a novel, not a research paper