

## The Four Habits of Highly Effective Writers

What's the difference (*or rather, differences*) between highly effective writers and those who want to write a book "someday" or who have started to write something and can't finish? As I discussed in another essay ("What Does It Take To Be a Writer?"), writing requires patience and fortitude. But although those are good traits for writers to have, writers also have to take an active role in developing their skills. Highly effective writers know they must observe the world, read widely, study words and language, and (of course) write.

Even if you require absolute solitude and silence to write, you can't lock yourself up in your room for several months to write *The Great American Novel*. It wouldn't be good for you psychologically, but in the long run, isolation will also affect your writing. You need outside stimulation to find ideas. No matter how boring you may think your daily life is, there are still events, settings, and characters you can find from it if you just look at your life from the right perspective.

Observing the world can also give you the details you need to write about other people and other things. Writers write because they want, even need, to communicate with others. To do this, you need to understand them – their language, their hopes, their dreams. You can't learn about these things if you're isolated from others; TV isn't an ideal teacher either. You need to observe the people around you, from the strangers you encounter to your family and friends. You can also pick up physical descriptions, speech patterns, gestures, and other character traits this way. Don't forget to observe yourself as objectively as you can; you can use everything from the way you think about certain things to the way you physically react when something happens in your stories. If you also observe objects – how they look, taste, smell, hear, and feel – you'll have all the details you need to make your fiction seem real.

Observing real life, though vital, isn't enough to help you create fiction; you must also familiarize yourself with books. Read as much as you can, particularly in the particular type of fiction that you want to write. Each genre has a different set of conventions, which you need to be aware of whether you follow them or deliberately break them. Observe what makes the books you read interesting or dull, plausible or unbelievable. But don't confine yourself to reading just science fiction, fantasy, romance, or mysteries. Reading stories in other genres can give you ideas for your own work or writing style. Besides, it's not unusual to see cross-genre stories these days, so you might want to write a mystery in a science fiction setting, for instance.

Besides becoming familiar with books, you also have to become familiar with the tools you need to create books – words. All writers need to have a large vocabulary and a sense of which words are most appropriate for the ideas they're trying to express. Reading books will help you increase your vocabulary – especially if you're not ashamed to look up the words you don't recognize or aren't very familiar with. Reading will also help you learn the connotations words carry, the subtle shades of meaning that affect the mood of your story.

Learning the exact meanings of words isn't enough, however; you also need to know how to put them together. For that, you need to brush up on your grammar if you're not already comfortable with it. There are several good books out there that discuss the rules of grammar in a clear – and even enjoyable – way. One I would recommend is *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire: The Ultimate Handbook of Grammar for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed* by Karen Elizabeth Gordon. I also like her *Torn Wings & Faux Pas: A Flashbook of*

*Style, a Beastly Guide Through the Writer's Labyrinth*. Another classic handbook is *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams. If grammar scares you, take heart: it's not really that hard, nor is it necessary to follow every rule to the letter. In fact, sometimes you'll find that it's more appropriate to break the rules, especially when you're writing dialogue. But you need to know the rules first before you can break them effectively.

After observing the world, reading, and studying words and language, a writer has to apply all of what he or she has learned and write. This may seem like something obvious, but it's not always easy to sit down and bang out a story. For one thing, since most of us can't leave our jobs and/or our family to hide out in a log cabin for a couple of months and write, you have to find time to make writing part of your daily life. Sometimes this may mean you have to give up other activities. I almost never watch TV in the evening anymore because I spend my time in front of the computer, for instance. But even when you're in front of the computer, there are plenty of other distractions – computer games, chatrooms, and Net surfing.

Sometimes it's good to take a quick break from your writing, but you have to be careful not to let a quick fifteen-minute break to check e-mail turn into a four-hour chat with half-a-dozen of your close friends. The key is to find a chunk of time at an hour when you're still functional to write steadily. Even if you can't write for hours every day, if you can consistently write for an hour every day, you'll eventually complete your story. You'll also find that if you write daily, it becomes easier to write. When I started working on *Day of All Seasons*, I hadn't written any fiction for two years. I found it hard to write every day, and when I did, the words came closely. But I continued to write as regularly as I could, and now I write almost every day and seldom get stuck. (I'll be honest; sometimes I still get writer's block too; more on that in a future essay. But I don't get stuck as much as I used to, and it's easier to get over it these days.)

Observing, reading, and learning are all important and good habits to acquire if you want to be a writer. They'll help you pick up another habit of writing steadily, and you'll find if you keep writing for long enough that you're addicted to writing. Although there's no cure for this habit, it's a great one to have, so why fight it? Enjoy it!

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