

# Simple Instructions: How to Write Like It Really Matters

By Dan Erickson

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# Finding The Writer In You

These days everybody wants to be a writer. The Internet is cluttered with professional and not-so professional writers. It seems there's no shortage of people who are finding the writer in themselves. Everywhere you turn there are journalists, bloggers, poets and authors. So do we really need more writers?

*“There are too few writers and too many people writing.”*

There's a difference between writing and being a writer. Writing is an action. *A writer* is an individual who looks at the world with a certain kind of wonder. A writer has a keen sense of observation. A writer is able to study the actions and behaviors of his or her surroundings and interpret them. A writer finds creative ways of explaining their world to their readers. Not everyone who writes is a writer. And not every writer writes.

*“Every one of us has a writer living within us. Finding that writer is the hard part.”*

If you’re reading this book, you either feel that you are a writer, or you want to be a writer. Either way, this book is for you. In the coming pages I’ll explain how to find the writer within. I’ll point out two of the biggest mistakes that writers make. I’ll offer some simple solutions for improving your writing. In the last chapter, you’ll learn how to write like it really matters.

I hope you enjoy the journey!

*“To find the writer in you, you must look outward. Your words and stories live out in the world, not within yourself.”*

Often, people think that writers are strange and mysterious introverts who look deep within their own souls to find the secret powers of the muse. We think the best writers have some sort of crystal ball that allows them to conjure up words at a whim. That is simply a romantic fallacy.

*“The greatest writers seek stories in others. They study the world around them and turn their findings into great works through a long, labor-intensive process.”*

Sounds difficult, doesn't it? It is. Writing is not for wimps. Great writing is hard work. Sometimes great writers suffer in order to find or reveal the story. That's the bad news. The good news is that anybody can become a great writer. There are a few simple steps to finding the writer in you:

## **1. Stop Trying So Hard**

How many people have you known who say they want to write a book someday? As a writer myself, almost everyone I talk to tells me that they have a story to tell. But very few actually write it down. Why? Because they overthink. They try too hard.

Many people wait for the perfect time to write. They search for the perfect words. They sit down to write and stare at a blank sheet of paper or an empty computer screen. They want to find the perfect opening sentence. They mistakenly think there is a secret formula to make the story just right, perfect.

Guess what? The perfect string of words will never come. There's no such thing as a perfect opening sentence. It's only when we accept this fact and humble ourselves to the point of embracing imperfection that we'll ever begin to truly be a great writer.

## **2. Accept Your Mortality**

The best writers are the ones who know that they are mortal. Good writers accept the inevitable: death. In fact, knowing that our days are numbered can be one of the strongest motivations for writing. If you truly have a story to tell, you need to sit down and write. Tomorrow might be too late.

How much you write is not the most important factor. It's the quality of your writing that counts more. No author said on his or her death bed, "I wish I would have written more books." Some, however, have likely said, "I wish I would have written more honestly."

Honest writing requires being honest with ourselves. Part of being honest with ourselves is accepting our weaknesses, our failures, and our mortality.

### **3. Keep Your Eye On Infinity**

We are mortal. Yet the things we write about are timeless, endless. The stories we write explore the human condition. Whether you're writing fiction, poetry or non-fiction books about business and leadership, there are common threads. We write about the world and our place within the world. Today, we write about the same things that Moses wrote about in the Bible.

Look around you. The sun shines. The rain falls. The wind blows. The bird sings. The brave knight conquers. The lover's heart gets broken. These things have been going on since time began. There is a force that drives all of nature. You might call it God. Some may call it *The Universe*. Some might say it started with a big bang.

Whatever you believe, the world keeps spinning on. Earth, from our human perspective, is spinning into infinity. Look to the things that are timeless and you'll find the writer within.

### **4. Stop Making Excuses**

I know that some of you don't want to hear this. But if as many people who claim they want to write a book actually did it, we'd *all* be authors. Maybe it's a good

thing some people don't write. Writing would not be valued in the same way if every one of us was an author.

However, in reality, we all have the potential to be writers. No matter how uninteresting or boring you think your life is, you have a story to tell. Don't tell yourself that you have not lived long enough to write your story. Just because you have not gone to exotic places, that doesn't mean you have nothing to say. Any excuse you can throw at me is a lie.

*“If you honestly want to write, you will.  
There is always time to write.”*

The biggest excuse that people make in regard to writing is that there is not enough time. That's a big lie. I'm a busy man. I have a full-time job as a college professor. I'm a full-time single dad. I practice karate. I go to church. I play in a band. Yet I find the time to write. I've written three books, hundreds of songs and I've kept several blogs over the past few years.

If you're honest with yourself, you have enough time to write. It's all about priorities.



What about skills? Many say they don't have the education or the skills to be a writer. I have one word for you: **Practice**. Skills come with practice. Great pianists didn't become great by sitting at the piano waiting for the skills or the inspiration. They practiced.

## **5. Give Yourself Permission To Be A Writer**

This is the biggest key to finding the writer in you. Give yourself permission to be a writer. I've been writing most of my life. But I never actually called myself a writer until I wrote my first book. It was only then that I realized that being a writer had nothing to do with mystery and talent and everything to do with being human and learning to tell your human story.

Writers are not Gods. We put our pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. When you realize that you are just as much of a writer as Stephen King, J.K. Rowling or whoever your favorite writer is, only then will you give yourself permission to be writer.

# The Writer's Biggest Mistake

The biggest mistake that thousands, even millions of writers make is simply that they don't write. There are many people who see the world as writers but who never write the words down. Perhaps you are one. Do you feel like you have a story to tell? Do you feel you have the talent to write a best-selling self-help book. You do!

*“Some of the best books have never been written or read because the words stayed inside the author's head.”*

Once we give ourselves permission to be a writer we need to take action and get started. Don't accept your own excuses. Rise above them. Writing is a labor. It takes time and discipline. With this in mind, there are a few steps you need to take in order to get started:

# 1. Begin

I know it's obvious, but sometimes we still need reminders. You'll never write a great novel. You'll never start that blog about your biggest passion. You'll never even write a poem if you don't begin.

You don't have to write a book in a day or even a month or a year, but you do need to write regularly. You might start simple by writing a poem or a journal entry. That's enough. You can work your way up to writing more in time. But you have to begin.

*“The road to an all-American classic is paved with the best of intentions.”*

# 2. Make A Habit

Starting is the first step, but continuing is the bigger challenge. Often we start only to fizzle out. We decide the story is boring or that no one would ever want to read the essay we're working on. Lies. We can't know how people will respond until we share our work. (I'll talk more about sharing our writing in the next chapter.)

Sometimes we quit writing because we feel like it's a pointless task. It takes time. It takes both physical and

emotional energy. Where's the payback? The chances of seeing our work become a bestseller may be as likely as winning the lottery. So why write? Because you are a writer. A writer must write. A writer does not care if they write a bestseller, but they do get a step closer to writing one with every word.

Great writers write regularly, daily, for a set period of time. But you don't have to write for hours on end. Even 30 minutes a day is a good start. Just set aside a time and a place to write. Make sure you're free of distractions. Get started today!

### **3. Complete Something**

Writing begets more writing. Finishing a work is inspiring. I started my writing journey as a songwriter.

When I complete a song something fantastic often happens. Another one begins to form. Completing a work fills us with a sense of accomplishment and makes us feel good about ourselves. That feeling can help to drive us into the next project.

*“How can you finish the race if you give up half way through? How can you complete your story if you quit writing?”*

After writing songs for 25 to 30 years, I decided to try my hand at a novel. I'm not going to lie. It was a long and arduous process. I felt like quitting more than once. But it was also a personal journey that I needed to take.

The topic was my own history of being the child victim in a religious cult. I had to work through some deep stuff. It was emotionally draining, but it also helped me deal with some deep-seeded feelings of anger. I was able to work on practicing forgiveness through writing.

The book, *A Train Called Forgiveness*, has not sold many copies. But most who have read it tell me that it touched them deeply and helped them work through some of their own forgiveness issues. That's priceless.

If you never start your story, you'll never complete it. If you start your story but stop in the middle, you'll never know how it ends. And you'll never know what it could have been or how many people you could have touched.

# The Second Biggest Mistake

For every writer that does not believe in himself or herself, there is a writer with the opposite problem. They think they can write like Ernest Hemingway when they are more on par with a kid who's struggling in 7th-grade English class.

The second biggest writing mistake is that people share their work before it's really ready to go out into the world. It's easy, after all. Anyone can send a tweet, post a status, or even self-publish books through Lulu or CreateSpace. But if you jump the gun and hit that publish button too soon you're sending out shoddy work. The public sees that work and you get a reputation as a shoddy writer. Not good.

*“Stop! Don't hit that publish button until you've re-read and edited your article or post at least three times.”*

How does one know when their writing is ready to share? Is there a litmus test?

Some of us are better writers than others. I'm no Wallace Stegner. But we all have the ability to check and recheck our work. Editing is just as important as writing. When we send our work out into the world, we should attempt to make it error free.

We're all human and most of us will wind up with occasional typos. Most readers understand this and they're forgiving, but if your writing has too many errors, nobody will read it. Fortunately there are things we can do:

## **1. Edit**

Read and reread your work carefully. Check for spelling errors. Check for grammar errors. Fix your mistakes. A first draft should be written quickly. It's the rewrite that needs your extra focus and care. Don't rush. The publish button will still be there tomorrow. Edit your article at least three times. You should hire an editor for larger works.

## **2. Use Your Eyes Not Your Apps**

In this computer-based age of writing it has become easy to rely on spellcheck, grammar check and other apps and software. Don't rely on those tools alone.

Spellcheck misses words that are misspelled or misplaced but are still words. Grammar check? Really?

The best way to find your mistakes is to use your eyes. After you write a piece, it's a good idea to take a short break and come back with fresh eyes. That way you're more likely to catch those pesky little errors. Reading your work out loud can also help. Reading it from end to start is another trick. Just make sure to edit and edit again and again.

### **3. The Grammar Snobs Will Remember**

We all know a few. I borderline on being a grammar snob myself. On the other hand, I've caught myself publishing a blog post only to later notice that I missed a grammar error.

There are two kinds of people in regard to grammar mistakes. Those who know the rules but are not careful and those who need to better understand the rules. This book is not about grammar, but the three biggest grammar offenses include the words they're, you're, and too. Here are three sentences that point out the proper way to use these words:



“They’re waiting for their manuscripts to get there.”

“You’re writing your next book.”

“I have two posts ready to post, too.”

*“Once you get a reputation as a sloppy writer, you’ll be hard pressed to connect with readers.”*

Punctuation is also important. One of the most misunderstood and overused punctuation marks is the semi-colon. I rarely use it. Misplaced commas can also be problematic.

If your writing is representing you as a professional, it’s important to make sure it’s right. I have seen some popular bloggers and self-proclaimed authors make grammar mistakes repeatedly. People notice. I did.

## **4. Format Matters**

A piece of writing needs to look good. The way we format our work is important. The #1 rule in this regard is consistency. Keep your typeface and font consistent. Offer headings that are easy to follow and allow some white space for breathing room. Break your writing up in to shorter chunks rather than longer ones.

People quit reading when the format is cramped, cluttered or too busy. Don't be cute or over creative when it comes to format. It's the message that matters, but making it visually appealing and easy to follow is a close second.

*“Don't skimp on editing your work. Quality is of the highest importance in a competitive writing market”*

# Write Like It Matters

Why do some writer's sell their books while others don't? Why do some bloggers bring in the traffic while others struggle? I'd be lying if I said it was entirely based on the quality of their writing. It's not. There are other factors that I'll address in future books and articles.

We've all seen great writing go ignored and crappy writing become sickeningly popular, making seemingly undeserving writers very wealthy. Can you say, "Vampires?" Hey, they found a market niche and made it work. There's something to be said for that.

The best writers share a few qualities. The hottest authors and bloggers use solid writing techniques that keep people engaged and bring them back again and again.

*"Writers who write simply, honestly, and directly will go much further than those who don't. Organization is important, too."*

If you're reading this book, you likely got it at my site <http://www.hipdiggs.com>. I'm a blogger. I have a couple

blogs. My blogs' traffic numbers have slowly been increasing. There are many factors in operating a successful blog. I'll be writing more about some of those factors in the future. The best place to start is with your writing.

As a blogger, I've made a point to study the formats and formulas used by the bloggers who are bringing in huge numbers of followers. Guess what? When it comes to their writing, they're not doing anything new. They are simply following age-old formulas.

I have an M.A. in communication. My minor was in business. I've worked in radio broadcasting. I'm a college professor. Writing and public speaking are the two subjects that I understand best. The bloggers who are on top are simply following simple rules of business and writing. I'll focus on the writing.

*“Short, understandable and consistent bits of useful information are key to gaining a larger following.”*

There are several things to consider when writing blog posts:

1. **Your topic:** Most blogs and bloggers work within specific and discrete areas of expertise. You need to choose a topic that works within the niche of your blog. The topic should address a problem or an issue that your readers are likely facing.
2. **Your title:** You need a strong headline that will grab your reader's attention. If possible, the headline should mention the core problem that the article will be addressing. You also need to use strong focus words.
3. **Your opener:** The opening line should be short, concise, and direct. You should also include your focus word in the opener. Keep your readers interested in the topic. If you lose them before the second paragraph you've accomplished nothing.
4. **Your points:** The main points of your blog post need to continue to address the problem. Each point should be concise yet have enough support to keep your readers engaged. Make sure to include a focus word or phrase throughout the main points of your post, too.
5. **Your call to action:** What do you want your readers to do? Do you want them to buy something? Do you want them to use a specific product? Do you want them to stop doing

something? You need a clear call to action at the end of your post. Many bloggers ask questions to engage readers in discussion.

*“People like to feel comfortable. Using specific, time-tested writing formulas help your readers to feel comfortable.”*

I’m an artist. I’m a poet. I’m a novelist. I’m a songwriter. The artist in me shudders at the idea of using formula writing. The artist in me wants to be unique, creative, and work outside of the traditional mold. And that’s okay. Having a streak of creativity in your writing can add interest. But you need to write for your audience first and foremost.

Most forms of writing have formulas. Songs have verses and choruses and rhyming schemes. Novels have heroes and villains and plots. There are many traditional forms of poetry that lock the writer into a specific meter and rhyme scheme.

Sticking with the formula that is expected by your audience is key to finding new readers and keeping them interested. So be careful about stepping too far away from the norm.

The best writers in most any genre of writing succeed because their writing is simple, direct, and easy to understand.

Many writers beat around the bush. Some writers are too descriptive and elaborate on every detail. Some writers are fearful of offending others and use an over-apologetic tone. Academic writers use language that's difficult to understand unless you're an expert in their field. Most academic papers tell you the gist of a topic in the abstract but then include 20 more pages of academic fluff. Why? Because it's what their audience expects.

I've never liked novels that are too descriptive or poems that ramble on and on. I don't like songs that have weak choruses. I like focused writing that gets straight to the point. I want to read a book to learn from it, not to be left confused. I want to find a short moral lesson in a brief poem. I like songs that I can sing along with. I want to read blog posts that are concise, simple and to the point.

When we write with a combination of brevity and command, we are writing like it really matters. When we are direct and concise with our writing, we are writing like it really matters. When we pay attention to our opening and our closing statements, we are writing like it really matters.

If you are passionate about something, you understand the topic thoroughly. When you understand a topic thoroughly you can break it down and give the reader the basics, the nuts and bolts. But you can also include a bit of your heart and soul. If you love the topic you're writing about, you, my friend, are a writer.

I encourage you to write every day. I encourage you to write about what you're passionate about. I encourage you to be creative. I encourage you to study other writers in your genre and learn the ropes. I encourage you to keep your writing honest and direct.

I encourage you to keep it **simple**. Write like it really matters.



My name is Dan Erickson. I've been writing for over 30 years. I've written for both newspaper and radio. I've written hundreds of songs and poems and several books including my debut, *A Train Called Forgiveness*, a story about being raised in a cult as kid.

I operate two blogs: <http://www.hipdiggs.com> and <http://www.danerickson.net>. I'm also a communications coach. I've taught writing and speaking courses professionally for more than 15 years.

If you would like personal coaching or if you would like me to speak at your event, please contact me at [danerickson@danerickson.net](mailto:danerickson@danerickson.net).

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