



Books & Writers



Are you the next Stephen King? J.K. Rowling? Emily Dickinson?
How does your writing stack up?

By David R. Altman
Books & Writers Editor

What makes a good writer? It depends on who you ask.

Stephen King said fiction writers "...don't understand very much about what they do—not why it works, when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad."

King also said "...if you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that."

The ultimate authority on writing is from William Strunk & E.B. White's classic book *The Elements of Style*, which is a basic tool in most journalism schools and sits close to the keyboard of any writer worth her/his salt.

Strunk & White break it down pretty simply. At the end of their book, which totals only 81 pages (they practice what they preach, Rule 6: Do Not Overwrite), they give 21 basic "reminders" that all writers should take note of.

We can't list them all here—but here are a few.

Write in a way that comes naturally—this means to use words and phrases that you are used to. It's as though you were speaking to someone. Don't be who you aren't.



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Whether you write with pen or computer, remember good writing starts one word at the time.

Write with nouns and verbs—not with adverbs and adjectives. This is a rule also observed by great poets, who remind us that verbs, particularly, are best when left alone (there is no need, for example, to use the phrase "totally destroyed", as "destroyed" speaks for itself).

Revise and rewrite—this is probably the most important tool for any writer. If you think you've got it the way you want it, you probably don't. I never write a column or a poem without looking at it again the following day (or week) with fresh eyes. Believe me, you will make changes you didn't think about in your 'perfect' first draft.

Be clear—According to Strunk & White, since "...writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue." While they say some obscurity may be useful at times, it's "clarity, clarity, clarity"

that carries the day.

Those rules generally apply to aspiring poets as well.

Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney wrote about poetry "...avoid the lilting platitude, give us poems humped and strong, laced tight with thongs of songs, poems that explode in silence, without forcing, without violence."

I've had the privilege of being able to write in many forms, including television news copy, corporate and political speechwriting, poetry, blogging and, of course, newspaper and magazine writing.

All that I can tell you is that Hemingway was probably right when he said "...we are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master." Given that quote comes from Hemingway, I'm not sure if it makes me feel inspired or frustrated!

Still, we write on, not because we have to, but because we want to.

So now that you've got some pointers, why don't you jump-in head first to the Sassafras Literary Exchange adult writing contest? This is not so much a question as it is an invitation.

The SLE has been around for 40 years—and annually sponsors writing contests for high school and middle school students. Now, it's the adults turn.

Anyone with a connection to Pickens County and is at least 18-years-old can enter. The theme is "Memories of Pickens"—and you can enter a poem or a fiction or non-fiction story (2500-word limit for fiction or non-fiction and 24 lines for a poem).

Entries can be sent to this email address: JosephM4@TDS.net. (And don't forget: please don't identify yourself on your story or poem—put that on a separate cover page).

It'll be a chance to see how your writing stacks up against others—but mostly it will be fun. Having your writing judged by a blind panel of judges is a little nerve-wracking, but there's no cost to enter, so give it a chance (deadline for entries is Sept. 9th).

Remember one last piece of advice, this one also from Stephen King, "...all great writing begins one word at a time." Good luck!

[David R. Altman, is a member of the American Academy of Poets and the Georgia Writers Association and will be a judge in this year's Sassafras Writing Contest. Check out his blog at georgiabigsticks.com.]