

Thirty Tools for Writers

By Roy Peter Clark

[Author's note: Of the many things I've written for the Poynter website, none has been as popular as my "Twenty Tools for Writers." This list has been quoted, cited, praised, debated, and repurposed by writers, editors, teachers, and other professionals who care about the craft. That folks find these tools useful gives me courage. So I'm adding ten more to my workbench, and sharpening up several others.

As you can see, I'm very impressed with myself. Thirty writing tools requires a big workbench. And then I remember that I taught my first writing class 30 years ago, which means that I'm only clever enough to stumble upon one new writing tool per year. I guess an advantage of age is that things accumulate. I hope you find the new tools useful. You don't have to return them. And you can pass them on. – RPC]

At times it helps to think of writing as carpentry. That way, writers and editors can work from a plan and use tools stored on their workbench. A writer or coaching editor can borrow a writing tool at any time. And here's a secret: Unlike hammers and chisels, writing tools never have to be returned. They can be passed on to another journalist without losing them.

Below is a list of 30 writing and revising tools. We have borrowed them from reporters and editors, from authors of books on writing, and from teachers and coaches. Many come from reading the work of storytellers we admire. The brief descriptions should be enough to help you build your own tool collection.

Sentences and Paragraphs

1. Begin sentences with subjects and verbs, letting subordinate elements branch off to the right. Even a very long sentence can be clear and powerful when the subject and verb make meaning clear early.
2. Use verbs in their strongest form, the simple present or past. Strong verbs create action, save words, and reveal the players.
3. Beware of adverbs. Too often, they dilute the meaning of the verb or repeat it: "The building was completely destroyed."
4. Place strong words at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs, and at the end. The period acts as a stop sign. Any word next to the period says "look at me."

Language

5. Observe "word territory." That is, give key words their own space. Do not repeat an emphatic word unless you intend a specific effect.
6. Play with words, even in serious stories. Choose common words that rarely appear in news reports.

7. Dig for the concrete and specific: the name of the dog and the brand of the beer. Details help readers see the story.

8. Rather than settle for clichés, seek original images. Make word lists, free-associate, be surprised by language.

9. Prefer the simple over the technical: shorter words and paragraphs at the points of greatest complexity.

10. Recognize the mythic, symbolic, and poetic. Be aware that common themes of news writing (homecoming, conquering obstacles, loss, and restoration) have deep roots in the culture of storytelling.

11. When the news or topic is most serious, understate. When the topic is least serious, exaggerate.

Effects

12. For clarity, slow the pace of information. Short sentences make the reader move slowly. Time to think. Time to learn.

13. Control the pace of the story by varying sentence length. Long sentences create a flow that carries the reader down a stream of understanding, an effect that Don Fry calls "steady advance." Or slam on the brakes.

14. Show and tell. Move up and down the ladder of abstraction. At the bottom are bloody knives and rosary beads, wedding rings and baseball cards. At the top are "meaning" words like 'freedom' and 'literacy.' Beware of the middle, where bureaucracy and public policy live. There teachers are referred to as "instructional units."

15. Reveal telling character traits and the power of human speech. Avoid adjectives when describing people. Don't say "enthusiastic" or "talkative," but use a scene or quote so the person reveals those characteristics to the reader.

16. Strive for "voice," the illusion that the writer is speaking to the reader. Read the story aloud to hear if it sounds like you.

Structure

17. Take advantage of narrative opportunities. Figure out when you're writing a story, as opposed to an article. Think of action, complication, motivation, setting, chronology, and dialogue.

18. Thaw out the Five W's: Who becomes Character; What becomes Action; Where becomes Setting; When becomes Chronology.

19. Place gold coins along the path. Don't load all your best stuff high in the story. Space special effects throughout the story, encouraging readers to find them and be delighted by them.
20. Use sub-headlines to index the story for the reader. This tool tests the writer's ability to find, and label, the big parts.
21. Repeat key words or images to "chain" the story together. Repetition works only if you intend it.
22. In storytelling, the number of examples has meaning: One declares. Two divides. Three surrounds. Four inventories.
23. Write endings to lock the box. Place your hand over the last paragraph and ask "What would happen if my story ended here?" Seek the natural stopping place.

The Writing Life

24. Transform procrastination into rehearsal, a way of writing a story in your head.
25. Turn every story into a workshop during which you learn something new about your craft.
26. Break long projects into parts, long stories into chapters.
27. Read for both form and content. If you want to write more clearly, read the clearest stories you can find and figure out what makes them clear.
28. Create a support network of friends, colleagues, editors, and coaches who can give you feedback on your work.
29. Limit self-criticism at the beginning of stories. Turn it loose during revision.
30. Do your best to tolerate even unreasonable criticism of your work as a way of growing as a writer.

This list contains tools, not rules. In using them, we work outside the realm of right and wrong, and within the land of cause and effect. Coaching editors can share them with writers. They are keys to unlock stories and solve problems within them.

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