

Myths and Truths About Writing

Myth: Writing flows easily for everyone but me.

Truth: Successful writers struggle too.

I suffer always from the fear of putting down that first line. It is amazing the terrors, the magics, the prayers, the straightening shyness that assails one.

-John Steinbeck

I believe in miracles in every area of life *except* writing. Experience has shown me that there are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work.

-Isaac Bashevis Singer

To me, writing is a horseback ride to hell and back. I am grateful to crawl back alive.

-Thomas Sanchez

You know, when you think about writing a book, you think it is overwhelming. But, actually, you break it down into tiny little tasks any moron could do.

-Annie Dillard

You have to work out problems for yourself on paper. Put the stuff down and read it—to see if it works.

-Joyce Cary

I rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

-Ernest Hemingway

Myth: Good writers don't have to revise so much.

Truth: Revision is key to good writing.

Writing is rewriting.

-Donald Murray

I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers.

-Vladimir Nabokov

I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's great revisers.

-James Michener

My first draft has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what they are and build from them and throw out what doesn't work, or what simply is not alive.

-Susan Sontag

There may be some reason to question the whole idea of fineness and care in writing. Maybe something can get into sloppy writing that would elude careful writing. I'm not terribly careful myself, actually. I write fairly rapidly if I get going....In trying to treat words as chisel strokes, you run the risk of losing the quality of utterance, the rhythm of utterance, the happiness.

-John Updike

You are always going back and forth between the outline and the writing, bringing them closer together, or just throwing out the outline and making it a new one.

-Annie Dillard

When I start a project, the first thing I do is write down, in longhand, everything I know about the subject, every thought I've ever had on it. This may be twelve or fourteen pages. Then I read through it, for quite a few days...then I try to find out what are the salient points that I must make. And then it begins to take shape.

-Maya Angelou

It's a matter of piling a little piece here and a little piece there, fitting them together, going on to the next part, then going back and gradually shaping the whole piece into something....You don't rely on inspiration—I don't anyway, and I don't think most writers do.

-Dave Barry

The beautiful thing about writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time—unlike, say, brain surgery.

-Robert Corimer

Myth: Most writers work in solitude.

Truth: Most writers get work with and get some feedback from others.

For excellence, the presence of others is always required.

-Hannah Arendt

[Ezra Pound] was a marvelous critic because he didn't try to turn you into an imitation of himself. He tried to see what you were trying to do.

-T.S. Eliot

Myth: Writers know what they have to say before they start to write.

Truth: Writing is a process of discovery.

How do I know what I think until I see what I've said.

-E. M. Forrester

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see, and what it means.
-Joan Didion

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them.

-William Stafford

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying.

-John Updike

...I think best with a pencil in my hand....

-Anne Morrow Lindberg

Don't tear up the page and start over again when you write a bad line—try to write your way out of it. Make mistakes and plunge on....Writing is a means of discovery, always.

-Garrison Keillor

I have to write everyday because, the way I work, the writing generates the writing.

-E.L. Doctorow

I am never clear about any matter as when I am just finished writing about it.

-James van Allen

I don't see writing as a communication of something already discovered, as "truths" already known. Rather, I see writing as a job of experiment. It's like any discovery job; you don't know what's going to happen until you try it.

-William Stafford

Myth: Writers are born, not made.
Truth: Writing is a skill one can learn.

Learning to write well takes time and much effort, but it can be done.

-Margaret Mead

Those who are learning to compose and arrange their sentences with accuracy and order are learning, at the same time, to think with accuracy and order.

-Hugh Blair

I went back to the good nature books that I had read. And I analyzed them. I wrote outlines of whole books—outlines of chapters—so that I could see their structure. And I copied down their transitional sentences. I especially paid attention to how these writers made transitions between paragraphs.

-Annie Dillard

Read, read, read....Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read!

-William Faulkner

Myth: Writing is just for school.

Truth: Writing contributes to all aspects of our lives.

Writing is a form of therapy.

-Roald Dahl

Writing is a political instrument...a way to describe and control [your] circumstances.

-James Baldwin

Writing has been for a long time my major tool for self-instruction and self-development.

-Toni Cade Bambara

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