

A Practical Guide for Those Who Want to Learn to Write as Little as Possible

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TRANSLATED BY JAMIE RICHARDS

—It's the length that kills.

Robert Louis Stevenson

1. A good rule is not to linger excessively in uncomfortable positions at the desk before the proverbial “blank page”: it’s antiquated, sad, for backward-looking romantics. Better to yield oftener, as did Walser, to the joy of long walks in the woods, with pauses at pleasant rest stops; or to devote oneself to other enjoyable diversions, even — why not? — of the lower bodily type. Both your mood and your back will benefit enormously.
2. Don’t be inordinately exigent with your writing; this will save you significant time and effort. In other words, be

wary of slavishly following bad models like Baudelaire who, when an editor insisted on redacting a comma from one of his works, wrote him angrily: “You must know, I reflected a week’s time to decide whether that comma was necessary!” More reasonable would be to emulate the attitude of the amiable Khlebnikov who, to a typographer who feared misreading a word in one of the Russian poet’s manuscripts, replied: “Do as you see fit.”

3. When you feel the desire to write rise up in you irresistibly, to quell the ebullience of inspiration — an atrociously vague concept — briefly contemplate the teaching of Ernesto Ragazzoni, who maintained that an idea ought to remain in a state of pure spirit: “Stopping to translate it into action, even if simply on paper, means succumbing to its tyranny; it means excluding all possible others; smothering, perchance to raise a turnip, the thousands upon thousands of fragrant sprouts in an enchanted garden.”
4. The number of copies sold, of prizes or reviews that a book may boast has never earned a writer happiness; consider how many famous writers, who have passed into history and have had the privilege (or misfortune) of having their picture displayed prominently in the encyclopedia, usually with languid or studied expressions, have taken their own life.
5. From the statistical point of view, it has been demonstrated that on average only one out of ten books a writer publishes is well written and can be deemed

passable (a ratio known to specialists as the “Musil-Carnetti effect”); this should suffice to redirect to meeker counsel the graphomaniacs, the indefatigable peacocks of the printed page, and more generally all those who struggle to find the courage to retire in a timely fashion like the sire of young Holden, or to remain in the shadows, off to the side, or even better, to disappear, as did Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Cravan, Hart Crane, and many other meritorious literary and artistic figures.

6. Keep within reach in the most visible spots of your habitation, your work table or nightstand, or in your wallet if you prefer, notepaper on which you jot down anecdotes such as the below, and read them at least once a day, out loud if possible. “A young man, visibly excited, appears in front of Ennio Flaiano, and to attract his attention, exclaims, ‘I’m a poet!’ At which Flaiano says, ‘My condolences.’”
7. Never forget that the sociological category of professional writers, more than other analogous groupings, is composed mainly of individuals who are cantankerous, quarrelsome, narcissistic, vindictive, bitter, envy-beset poseurs willing to do anything to get a book printed or nab some critical acclaim.
8. If you’re still overwhelmed by the desire to write and can’t do otherwise, at least indulge without attracting too much attention, perhaps by leaving your texts sealed away in a drawer or a wall safe, if you happen to have one.

9. At the end of a sentence, a paragraph, or at least when you are about to turn a page, have the perspicacity to ask yourself whether you aren't spitting into the wind. If even the slightest doubt that you truly have something to say occurs to you, abandon the enterprise immediately, without a second thought. Moreover, this will free you up to enjoy the unparalleled beauty of the blank page, which many a clever writer has thusly celebrated in order to have a subject on which to write.

10. Now that you've reached this point, toss away the present guide, yet another testament to the vacuity and sterility of any writing-related endeavor, and proceed as set forth in Point I.