

Ten Worst Myths— and Best Truths— About Good Writers

Association for Creative Business Writing
Your mentor for business writing that rocks!



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Powerful business writing delivers increased sales, improved results, and even a promotion or two*
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Introduction

Almost everyone harbors misconceptions about good writers. Maybe early on, you had a particularly harsh teacher or boss who told you'd never be a good writer; only those who majored in—and excelled at—English could hope to achieve that. Or somehow, for other reasons, you lost your confidence in ever becoming a good writer.

It's easy to latch on to limiting beliefs about writing because so many myths circulate out there. I know because I believed a lot of them. Now, after hundreds of magazine articles, five books, and dozens of coaching clients at major organizations, I know how false those notions are.



I've pulled together my top 10 list of the worst myths—and best truths—about good writers. I hope you'll read these and get rid of any false notions that may be rattling around in your head. When you do, you'll start writing better immediately. Why not make that today?



Myth #1

Good writers write fast.

Truth:

Oh, I wish. Writing can be a slow trek as you pull together your thoughts, materials, and research. You're bombarded by quandaries about where to put that great quote from the sales manager or how to fit in that colorful anecdote about the new widget. And all those interruptions at work don't help either.

Of course, sometimes the writing does go smoothly, especially when you're excited about a subject or you've done your research. But not very often. So, try to ignore that irritating voice inside your head saying, "You're taking too long; hurry up!" Give yourself a break. (Literally, see Myth #9.) Even writers who've been at it for years rarely write a polished piece fast.

Now, that said, one of the best ways to write well is to write your first draft fast. That's a different process from delivering a polished piece fast. If you can get that first draft down quickly, you accomplish several important things:

- You get over the hurdle of the first draft quicker.
- You save time for more editing. (Good writing is really good editing.)
- You are more likely to tap into your creativity. Something about writing fast quiets the ornery editor inside your head (those terrible voices telling you you're not a very good writer or that what you've just written is drivel) and lets you tap into ideas you didn't even know you have. Sound too good to be true? Recent scientific studies have proven it *is* true. (See [Words at Work](#), page 41.)

To recap: Don't expect a finished document fast. Do write your first draft fast and spend more time on editing. Check out the next myth for more details.

Myth #2

Good writers write great first drafts.

Truth:

Sure, every now and then someone is a Mozart with words. For the most part, though, we all slog through that first draft. We just get it down the best way we can. Once we fill that blank sheet of paper or monitor screen, something happens. We relax a little, knowing we can make that terrible first draft a lot better in the hours, days, weeks ahead. (Good writing is really good editing.)

Anne Lamott wrote the best essay about first drafts in her classic book, *Bird by Bird*. The entire book is a wonderful read, and here's an excerpt:

*Now, ... even better news ... is the idea of sh**ty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. ... I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. (Page 21.)*

Again, write the first draft as fast as you can. You'll enjoy the benefits listed in Truth #1. I sometimes set a timer and make myself write and write—without stopping—for 10 or 15 minutes. You'd be amazed what you get down in that amount of time. If you've got spaghetti head (a tangle of ideas) or frozen synapses (no ideas), this technique can break the ice. The process lets you relax. Instead of having to write something brilliant, your only task is to get as much down in 15 minutes as possible. Because you relax (and here's the irony), you usually end up with something much better than if you stridently strive for perfection.

Myth #3

Good writers are confident.

Truth:

We get the heebie-jeebies just like everyone else. Even now, after more than 25 years as a professional writer, I sometimes still feel that I'm not up to the task. The difference now—compared to my earlier years as a writer—is that I don't let those feelings overwhelm me. Sometimes I'm even able to let them inspire me. ("I'll show you what I *can* do!")

Next time you're feeling less than confident, read something you wrote that you really like. Or read something someone else wrote that you really like and tell yourself you can do it too! Or just start plugging away at whatever you have to write, saving lots of time for editing. Good writers are really good editors. Bad writers just stopped too soon. Remember that. Print both of those on index cards. Frame them. Read them whenever you feel a little shaky, and you'll do just fine.

Natalie Goldberg has written many fine books on writing. In *Writing Down the Bones*, she wrote:

It is important to separate the creator and editor or internal censor when you practice writing ... The more clearly you know the editor, the better you can ignore it. ... If the voice says, "You are boring," and you listen to it and stop your hand from writing, that reinforces and gives credence to your editor. ... Hear "You are boring" as distant white laundry flapping in the breeze. Eventually it will dry up and someone miles away will fold it and take it in. Meanwhile you will continue to write. (Page 26.)

Early in the process, keep those critical editors away from your writing. That's when they can do a lot of damage because they don't let you relax and write stupid things that can lead to smart things. (Effective brainstorming needs stupid ideas. They set the stage for brilliant ideas, so fire away!) If you still hear that critical editor telling you something isn't good enough, make a bargain with the devil. Tell it to go away now and come back when you're editing. (More on that in Myth #4.)

Myth #4

Good Writers don't need to edit.

Truth:

Good writing is really good editing. Bad writers just stopped too soon. (I repeat those phrases every chance I get. That's how important they are.) Editing is how you get from that terrible first draft to the polished final draft. This is the perfect time to invite your ornery editor back to help you. Now is the time to accept a well-intentioned critique. As I write in *Words at Work*, your ornery editor can be your best friend. Like those times you're feeling self-satisfied and he disagrees. Listen to him *now* because he's almost always right in this situation.

I often edit a piece a dozen times; if it's an important document, that number can double. In case you still think the need to edit means you're a poor writer, consider E. B. White. He's best known for his children's books *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, but he also wrote marvelous essays for *The New Yorker*. The first time I read them, I was convinced he simply jotted them down while sitting on the front porch of his farmhouse in Maine. Here's the truth: It took him 25 to 30 edits to get that warm, conversational tone just right—and even then he didn't think they were good enough. These essays are some of the finest writing I've ever read, so when I'm struggling with a piece, I remind myself that if E. B. had to edit 30 times, there's no shame in my having to do that too.

Myth #5

Good writers have to know a lot.

Truth:

Good writers interview people; conduct research; observe scenes, situations, and behaviors. We keep journals and write everything down. We explore the Web, though we're careful to fact-check. (Who are those idiots spreading misinformation and mayhem online?) What good writers, especially nonfiction writers, write about has little to do with our personal experiences, though that can provide a strong foundation. Writers and their writing are like a beautiful wardrobe. We're underneath all those glad rags—we are the form they drape over—but the wardrobe, i.e., each piece we write, is a unique package gleaned from research and interviews.

I hope you have a journal or a filing system for all the ideas and information you come across. It's so easy to think you'll remember them all, but no one does. Ideas are precious—and ephemeral. Honor them, and when you do, even more wonderful ideas come your way. Which can be overwhelming sometimes. Too many good ideas to act on. That's when you need what one of my favorite coaches, Mike Robbins (www.mike-robbins.com), suggests: a “Not Doing Now List.” Capture them in a book, in a file, on your laptop—just capture them, even if you can't get to them right away.

Myth #6

Good writers have a college degree in writing.

Truth:

People often think that writers had to know early on that they wanted to be writers—that they worked on the high school yearbook or the college newspaper. Well, all I can say is I never worked on any of those. I'm a late bloomer. I didn't know until I was in my 20s that I wanted to write. Even then, life got in the way, aided and abetted by my negative self-talk. It took me a while to get rolling, but once I did, I've never stopped. You can do it too.

Don't get hung up on credentials. I've met successful writers who haven't had much training but do have a strong passion to write. That serves them well. A lack of credentials is no reason to stop—or never start—writing. (Of course, if you've got the credentials, be proud of them and write with abandon!)

Another variation on this myth: Good writers are born, not made. You know the thinking: If you're any good at writing, you're brimming with talent; the writing flows—as does the praise. Believe me, it rarely happens this way. Good writers are made—through perseverance, study, practice, editing, practice, editing, editing, and faith in themselves.

Myth #7

Good writers never get red marks.

Truth:

Just because someone has a red pen doesn't mean s/he knows how to write. Or edit. Or encourage.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with good instruction. In fact, be happy if you work with a good editor. Use him/her as a mentor. Ask for guidance. Get all you can out of that situation.

Too often, though, I've worked with clients who are struggling at work, fearful even, because their bosses mark their work with red pens and send it back with no explanations. When I ask them if they can talk to their bosses about this editing, the look on their faces says it all. "No" in neon. In that case, try to learn from those marks. Study them. Ask yourself why. See if you can match them up with grammar rules or writing techniques. Learn as much as you can—and then put those skills into writing a new résumé. Get out of toxic situations as soon as you can.

Even as a magazine writer with just shy of a thousand credits, I still occasionally have editors ask me to rewrite a paragraph or section. Do I like it? No. But we all need editors. One of the best writers I know—Howard Pousner at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*—told me that. And that made a world of difference in my thinking. When I realized even he needed an editor, I didn't feel bad any more about needing one too.

Myth #8

Good writers write in long stretches.

Truth:

Not always. And even when we do, it's usually not a good idea. Sometimes we get bored—even with a great story—and just want to be finished. So we hurry it up, cross it off our to-do list, and sigh with relief. Until we read what we submitted. “Oh no, how could I have written that?” we groan. “And what's with all the typos?”

Good writers get tired too. A long stretch of writing is a good idea only when you're on a roll. Otherwise, write until you feel you're getting stale. You'll know. Listen to your gut. Research now shows that your gut has more neurons than your brain. In fact, your gut, aka your enteric nervous system, sends and receives impulses and reacts to your emotions just like your brain. Your gut is more than a food grinder—it is now considered your “second brain.” So listen to it when you feel like ending something that should be longer, or when you just want to scratch something off your to-do list. You'll know, deep down in your gut, that you're taking a shortcut—to disappointment.

I recently met Pierre Khawand, founder and CEO at OnTheGo Technologies in San Francisco (www.People-OnTheGo.com). His research shows that we have a Results Curve™ or a period of peak performance. Here's what he says in his book, *The Accomplishing More With Less Workbook*:

My suggestion is that we aim for an uninterrupted 40 minute period. My belief after working with thousands of people on productivity issues and challenges is that while 30 minutes is reasonable and achievable, after 30 minutes of focused work, the “engine” is now fully warmed up and functioning optimally, so those extra 10 minutes are “pure” performance.

So, taking a break isn't lazy or unproductive. Overwork is unproductive. Write in smaller chunks and come back refreshed. When you're developing ideas, your brain has been working during the break, and no doubt you'll have new insights when you return. Or if you're editing, somehow typos and mistakes jump off the page/screen when you sit down again. Good writers don't write in long stretches—at least not without a number of breaks—so don't beat yourself up for writing in shorter bursts. You're on the right track.

Myth #9

Good writers use big words & complex constructions.

Truth:

Cumbersome words and complex construction are so 20th century! Writing has changed. Over the past four decades, the accepted style of writing has morphed from the stuffy corporatespeak of the '80s to the slap-dash texting of the 21st century. The balance is somewhere in between—a more conversational, personal style. Many of us didn't learn this in school; in fact, conversational writing was frowned on back in the 20th century, which makes the shift from august to approachable harder. And for anyone weaned on texting? The shift to an accomplished style is just as difficult.

Today, you'll sound fine if you write from your heart. Be genuine. Tell stories. Have a conversation with your readers—from their perspective, not just yours.

Here's what I write in *Words at Work*: (See page 83.)

Write the way you talk

Today, as a business writing coach, I help people break their love affair with six syllables when one works even better. I've read some paragraphs so convoluted I had to ask clients to explain what they were trying to say to their readers. When they start talking, their thoughts come out fresh and clear. I stop them before they forget what they just said and tell them, "Put that down!"

William Zinsser wrote the first book I ever read on writing well (which is his title: *On Writing Well*). It's still one of the best ever written on the subject. Here's what he says about writing in a conversational style: (See page 154.)

...plain talk will not be easily achieved in corporate America. Too much vanity is on the line. Executives and managers at every level are prisoners to the notion that a simple style reflects a simple mind. Actually, a simple style is the result of hard work and hard thinking.

It's that easy. Write the way you talk. Okay, maybe not the way you talk to your friends but certainly the way you talk to your mother. Just an easy flow of words that succinctly captures what you want to say.

Myth #10

Good writers are always motivated.

Truth:

Some days, it's just the image of my landlord that motivates me. We're all human. Try not to project an artistic aura onto writers. Sure, we regularly practice our art, but that doesn't mean we always feel like writing.

But we write.

Forge ahead. Work in small segments. Write the part that's the easiest for you. For me, that's the lead. I love the excitement of coming up with something creative in the first three or four paragraphs. Once I've done that, I've built enough momentum to keep me rolling. A client of mine has to start in the middle. It's his security blanket—he knows what he needs to say in the middle; once that's done, he can fill in the rest. When he's done with the middle, he's over the hump.

Find your own rhythm and trust it. Go with your flow. And read *If You Want to Write* by Brenda Ueland. It's the best book on writing I know. Here's what she has to say about motivation. (See pages 42-43.)

I used to have to drive myself to work. You cannot imagine what an uncomfortable, effortful thing it was to be supposed to be a writer. To work at all I had to be a jump ahead of the spears—to need money very badly. ...[Eventually] I learned ... that inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little change to start flowing, prime it with a little solitude and idleness. I learned that you should feel when writing, not like Lord Byron on a mountaintop, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten—happy, absorbed and quietly putting one bead on after another.”

Her book is filled with inspiration and humor. Not feeling motivated? Take a break and read a few pages from *If You Want to Write*, and you'll be raring to go.

Editing for Success Checklist

“Good writing is really good editing.”

Editing can help deliver increased sales, improved results—
and even a promotion or two.

Spend time polishing your writing and adding all the pizzazz you can.
Then, take time to double check:

- Headlines: Are they attention grabbers?
- Lead: Does it make you want to read on?
- Body copy: Is it chocked full of facts?
- Sentence length: Is it varied?
- Paragraphs: Do they focus on one topic?
- Purpose: Is it clear?
- Focus: Is it on the readers' needs?

- Style: Does it match your audience?
- Tone: Is it conversational and persuasive?
- Content: Is the document complete?
- Keywords: Have you used as many as possible?
- Answer: Who, what, where, why, when, how?
- Jargon: Have you taken it out?
- Concise: Did you cut out extra words?

- Creative: Have you used vivid verbs, similes, quotes?
- Transitions: Do paragraphs flow one to the other?
- Design: Have you taken advantage of:
 - Bullets Sidebars
 - Quotes White space

- Flow: Is the cadence smooth?
- Call to action: Does the reader know what to do?
- Proofing: Have you proofread at least once?
- Ending: Is it memorable? Does it include a call-to-action?
- Editing: Could your document use one more?

Great Books!

- Cameron, Julia, *The Artist's Way*, Tarcher/Putnam Book, 2002
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- Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 2009.
- McDaniel, Lynda, *Articles 101*, Association for Creative Business Writing (AFCBW), 2010.
- McDaniel, Lynda, *Creativity @ Work*, AFCBW, 2010.
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- Spears, Richard, *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary*, McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, Longman, 2000.
- Ueland, Brenda, *If You Want To Write*, Graywolf Press, 1987.
- Urdang, Laurence, *The Synonym Finder*, Warner Books, 1978.
- White, E.B., *Writings from the New Yorker 1927-76*, Harper Perennial, 2006.
- Zinsser, William, *On Writing Well*, Collins, 2006.

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BONUS! Join today and receive a free copy of our e-book, *Ten Worst Myths—and Best Truths—About Good Writers*. www.afcbw.com

2. Premium Mentorship Program (PMP). Over the years, I've known a lot of people who longed for such a creative community at work. They wanted someone to bounce ideas around with. Or a group they could feel comfortable collaborating with. And that's exactly what **Premium Membership Program** offers you for **only \$8.95 a month**.

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- **In Other Words: the writing workshop in a box (your inbox!).** Twice a month, you'll receive this online workshop packed with writing tips, tools, and techniques that build your confidence and boost your career. It's sized just right—not too much information to absorb before the next issue rolls around.
- **Writing with a Full Deck,** 52 cards (one delivered weekly) to help practice and perfect one writing issue a week.
- **Online Forum,** private, monitored 24/7 online discussion forums for asking questions, sharing ideas, and fostering creativity. Advice from experts and peers keeps your writing on target and in synch with your goals.
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