

# Identity and voice essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

‘ If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut.’ (King, 2000: 145) To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Good writers are able to express complex ideas with style, clarity, and accuracy. When they articulate ideas which we ourselves, as writers, have struggled with, they gain our appreciation, respect, and even admiration. We often wonder how and whether they can teach us how to do it. Many writers have tried to teach the principles of good writing and have even explained their methods, but this merely cannot teach their students how to write, or else by now we would all be excellent writers.

Most teachers of writing, and all good writers, agree that there are two things that cannot be avoided in learning to write well: reading and writing. I completely agree with King’s statement. ‘ If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut.’ (King, 2000: 145) One must do each of these things, enthusiastically and prolifically. Reading a lot is necessary to learn the principles of good writing, but the knowledge of these principles is not sufficient to make one a good writer. One must also write a lot in order to provide feedback for editing, where these principles are applied to one’s own writing. After gaining the ability to write well, one must do it enough to make it a habit.

Stephen King believes that a good writer must be able to “...read and write 4-6 hours a day. If you cannot find the time for that, you can’t expect to

become a good writer.” (King, 2000: 178). Although 4-6 hours is the minimum recommended by King, it is certainly not the maximum. Such a maximum or cap simply does not exist. The brain learns to write largely by osmosis and the more sentences you expose it to, the more it will learn. King considers that reading a lot is essential in order to become a good writer. He believes that good writing teaches the writer about style, graceful narration, plot development, the creation of believable characters, and truth-telling. (King, 2000: 152). In a word, it helps the writer develop good taste.

Style is the easiest thing to notice in good writing. It is one of the only features of good writing that should stand out. Good writing often displays artful phrasing, creative and pleasant to read. This kind of writing often possesses a balance in its sentences and a rhythm that carries from sentence to sentence. There is also an obsessive attention to word choice; each word has a purpose and a place. (Pack, 1991: 113) A good writer must develop these points of technique, so fundamental to writing yet so diverse in their application. In order to be fully appreciated, these sentences that result from good style must be read aloud. (Pack, 1991: 57)

Auditory readers, in particular, benefit enormously from reading good writing. Auditory readers are people who sound out words in their heads while reading. When reading, these readers are able to hear the rhythm and consonance of the arrangement of words which we call a sentence. This cultivates a certain appreciation and sensitivity to the flow of the sentence. The sensitivity developed as readers helps people with their phrasing of sentences as writers. This is particularly true for writing which is meant to be spoken aloud, such as speeches or literature.

Reading good writing also teaches the writer what sort of effect good writing should have on the reader. King explains that “ You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you.” (King, 2000: 153) Good writing produces a feeling of deep absorption, exhilaration, and the anticipation of more writing. When the reader is finished reading, they will notice they have just returned from somewhere else, from the grip of the writer. This is a feeling that can only be known through experience.

Reading good writing, however, is not enough. A writer must also get accustomed to bad writing in order to know which practices to avoid. Though the reading of bad writing is the more painful learning exercise, it also yields its lessons more easily. After all, it is much easier to notice bad writing as good writing only betrays itself after we are finished reading, while bad writing announces itself as it is read.

The characteristics of bad writing cannot be taught by just a list of practices. The writer has to know why they are bad. Bad writing is not bad merely because it violates principles of good writing. Actually, it is uncertain whether such principles even exist. Bad writing is bad because of the effect that it has on the reader. This effect can take a number of forms, but they all share one quality, they are not the effect that the writer intended to produce.

In fiction, bad writing often involves a certain clumsiness with details, offering too much of the trivial and/or too little of the important. Bad writing can bore the reader with meaningless detail, killing the story’s momentum

and preventing the reader's absorption. (Leonard, 2010: 78) It can also confuse the reader by omitting key details, causing the reader to feel like a stranger to the action. A clumsiness with detail is most apparent in the area of character development. Bad writers often include "important" characters who do not feel important to the reader. That is, the characters are important to the plot, but have not been developed enough for the reader to care about them.

Bad writing causes the reader to either not understand what is happening or, even worse, not care. Only after experiencing the effect of bad writing practice on the reading experience will someone be able to understand why those practices are bad. It helps a writer develop the critical faculties that are so important during the process of editing and re-writing.

Another benefit of reading good writing is that it motivates the writer to actually write, to put in the work required to become good. King attributes this to a mix of admiration and jealousy, recalling his own experience with reading Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." (King, 2000: 151) Indeed, most good writers were motivated to pick up the pen and persist because they wanted to possess the skill and genius displayed by their idols. They read sentences that flow like water and hope to write with the same sort of grace. They meet characters that become a part of their lives and want to introduce us to characters that are just as charming.

As with any other craftsmen, the best way for a writer to improve is by doing. A writer cannot learn to write well through a discursive explanation of style or plot development. Not even a familiarity with good writing and bad

writing, and their common features, will teach a writer how to write. Such features, after all, are only important to readers and the writer only has an indirect interest in them.

In writing, there is a fundamental, yet unacknowledged difference, between the interests of the writer and the interests of the reader. That is, a writer only cares about issues such as clarity and organization because the reader cares about them and the writer wants to be understood by the reader. In a perfect world, a writer would be able to jot down whatever comes to mind, making the writing process effortless and productive, and readers would know exactly what the writer means to convey. However, this is not the case because no reader will possess experiences and habits identical to the writer.

The writer has to bridge this gap between herself and the reader if she wants to be read. The fundamental urge to express one's self, which drives writers, must be balanced with the needs of readers. However, accounting for what the reader can be expected to understand takes much effort and experience. More importantly, it can inhibit the process of creative expression, the sheer generation of written words. This is why such lessons about clarity, style, and organization are more apt to hurt a writer when learning how to write well. They are thinking too much about rules when they need to be writing.

Although reading and writing have distinct value in the development of a writer, they operate in tandem when the writer is learning to balance his creative (writing) and critical (editing) faculties. The writer must use the intuition and sense of taste that she has acquired as a reader to guide her

writing. He or she must develop a sort of inner critic to remember what bad writing feels like and can spot it, even while the writer is writing. A writer must also develop a reservoir of memories that echo all of the best sentences, rhythms, and phrasing she has read throughout her reading experiences.

It is only when a writer reads what he or she has written do issues such as style and organization become apparent and, therefore, capable of evaluation. The more you write the more feedback you get about your writing. This feedback is essential for spotting out the weaknesses in one's writing. It often turns out to be less smooth and clear than it seemed while the writer was writing it. A writer's ability to spot these weaknesses is enabled, of course, by reading a lot of bad writing. The more bad writing a writer reads, the better he or she gets at editing. However, the novice writer cannot spend too much time trying to avoid these mistakes on the first draft.

The writers who are able to strike the balance between pure creative expression and critical evaluation are what we call good writers. When a writer has written enough good sentences and has organized enough ideas, the principles of style and organization are instilled in their DNA. Every word the writer composes thereafter is shaped by these habits and no longer has to pass through the filter of dos and don'ts. This is the point when the writer has developed her "voice."

The act of habituated writing may even change the way a person forms thoughts. Writing a lot helps a person organize their thoughts into something that might make sense on paper. Most good writers and almost all great

writers have their own distinct style, their own voice. The style is the result, as well as the proof, of their proficiency in the craft of writing. Anybody that has done something enough will develop their habits and idiosyncrasies.

Some will argue that being a good thinker is sufficient to make one a good writer. These people hold that writing is just thinking on paper and that anybody who can think clearly can write clearly. The fact that many good thinkers are also good writers appears to provide support for this position. After all, good thinkers who do not write well are rarely recognized as good thinkers because they cannot demonstrate the quality of their thought.

This view is also problematic for more fundamental reasons that have to do with the nature of thoughts as compared with words. Thoughts are very slippery compared to words. It is difficult and perhaps impossible to translate a shapeless, transient thought, however “clear”, into the form of a word without leaving out some dimension of the thought. We can see words, but we cannot see thoughts. Therefore, there is no way for us to know if the word is an adequate representation of the thought.

For the novice writer, composing written sentences is not second nature. It is not, as some claim, like talking on paper. Thoughts often manifest as a voice in our heads, but the contents of these thoughts rarely come in paragraph form. Thinking is a solitary activity. Thoughts are generated for our consumption alone and they are delivered in our own unique shorthand. Furthermore, thoughts arise from naked self-interest and urgency, our mind’s insistence that we attend to something now. Most people, excluding saints, would be hesitant to have their thoughts committed to paper as they



arise in the mind. Writing, unlike thought, is social activity. It is motivated by a desire to communicate, to make oneself understood. Many times, it is grounded in the urge to connect with people. Most good writers, in fact, are social in the sense that they like people and find them interesting in some sense. It is only such people who would be willing to articulate their thoughts in a way that is easy for others to understand, to find the balance between uninhibited expression and the modification of this expression.

A word, the writer's medium, is only a symbol which we use to represent reality. The words themselves have no intrinsic meaning or reality. They are merely symbols or stand-ins for reality. As the modern spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle observed, "A word is only a signpost, which points beyond itself." (Toelle, 1991) What the word points to is a reality, or a certain aspect of a reality, which we typically call an idea.

By constantly writing, preferably about a broad range of ideas, a writer learns how to articulate ideas through the selection and arrangement of symbols. The practice a writer gets creating these symbols, these signposts, is particularly useful when trying to express complex, rarified, or misunderstood ideas. Though no writer can express an idea perfectly, but they can express them more clearly than they have been. These are the feats which readers appreciate good writers for.

Writers rely on many devices to help point readers to an idea. Sometimes, writers must resort to analogy, by using similes. Sometimes, they rely on imagery, through the use of metaphors. Unfortunately, a good simile or metaphor is never germane to the idea itself. It must be invented. The skillful

invention of these devices requires practice if a writer does it effectively and artfully.

The fact that words are mere symbols or signposts, empty of intrinsic meaning, means that no one word or arrangement of words can ever be the perfect expression of an idea. This is what creates infinite possibilities for the expression of an idea. Readers, however, prefer the writer who can express an idea most simply and most elegantly. It is this skill that a writer can always improve at, yet never perfect.

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