

THE ART AND THE CRAFT OF WRITING

Insights from Artists and Craftsmen

Compiled by Elder Gerald N. Lund, October 12, 2022

I. THE AUTHOR

- There is danger for a writer in doing too many interviews. Too much talk can make you fat-headed: you get the idea that everything you say is worth being recorded and that you are in some sense a wise man and an interesting person. The more an author thinks of himself, the less attentive he's going to be to the business of trying to transcribe reality. —[John Updike](#)
- Every compulsion is put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient—and sterile! —[Murray Kempton](#)
- Success [in the arts] is dangerous. One begins to copy oneself, and to copy oneself is more dangerous than to copy others. It leads to sterility. —[Pablo Picasso](#)
- Mormon artists should be people who believe in the Mormon religion, who have a testimony, and who write from it; but they need not write especially for Mormons, and they need not write especially on Mormon subjects, though the treatment will be inescapably Mormon. The task of the Mormon artist of the future is to be an artist to the world (a powerful potential for conversion), to represent Mormon values to the world by his art and not be turned inward on himself or his group. Anonymity, even in the United States of America, may be good for the artist. —[Arthur Henry King](#)
- Here is one of the great temptations of the human spirit. When we create a book, a painting, or other work of art, and crowds gather around to tell us how incredibly talented we are, it is an almost irresistible temptation to demure and downplay what we've done, even as inwardly we are telling ourselves: "It is true. You really are quite astonishing." —[Anonymous](#)

II. THE WORK

- Writing is not hard. Just get paper and pencil and write as it occurs to you. The writing is easy. It is the occurring that's hard. —[Steven Leacock](#)
- I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork. —[Peter de Vries](#)
- I think I did pretty well considering I started out with nothing but a bunch of blank paper. —[Steve Martin](#)

- Write without pay until someone offers pay. If nobody offers within three years, the candidate may look upon this circumstance with the most implicit confidence as a sign that sawing wood is what he was intended for. —[Mark Twain](#)
- Only half of genius is intelligence. The other half is harness. —[Will Durant](#)
- The profession of book writing makes horse racing seem like a solid, stable business. —[John Steinbeck](#)
- Write only if the passion to write can be its own reward. Otherwise the goal of publication is a snare and a delusion—too difficult for most, and not worth it for most who attain what they thought they wanted. Writing is a Chinese curse and a form of slavery. If you do it, you had better love to tell your stories. —[Herbert Gold](#)
- The best books are not written. They are rewritten and rewritten and rewritten! —[Gerald N. Lund](#)
- Nine keys to being an effective writer. “Read, read, read. Write, write, write. Rewrite. Rewrite. Rewrite. —[Anonymous](#)
- Writing is like driving a car at night. You never see further than your head lights, but you can make the whole trip that way. —[E. L. Doctorow](#)
- It is only natural for a writer to feel great love and affection for his or her creative efforts. Those feelings are somewhat analogous to the love of a mother for even the plainest and fussiest of babies. But in writing, the creator must have the insight, wisdom, and courage, and perhaps even a certain ruthlessness, to cut out and throw away what he may consider to be the most beautiful and amazing of his creations but in reality is but mere froth on the cake. Once we realize that, we can do so, knowing that we can give birth to something equally, or even more exquisite and beautiful. —[Gerald N. Lund](#)
- There are only three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are. —[W. Somerset Maugham](#)
- I have observed that it is not the geniuses that make the difference in this world. In fact, many of them are in jail for trying to find shortcuts to wealth and opportunity. I have observed that the work of the world is done largely by men and women of ordinary talent who have worked in an extraordinary manner, . . . things that come of the heart, things that come of the Spirit, things that come of the divine in each of us.” —[Gordon B. Hinckley, Commencement Address, Utah Valley State College, April 28, 2001](#)
- [On getting input on your writing from others] Show your work to a number of people—ten, let us say. Listen carefully to what they tell you. Smile and nod a lot. Then review what was said very carefully. If your critics are all telling you the same thing about some facet of your story—a plot twist that doesn’t

work, a character who rings false, stilted narrative, or half a dozen other possibilities—change that facet. It doesn't matter if you really liked that twist or that character; if a lot of people are telling you something is wrong with your piece, there is! —[Stephen King](#)

III. THE CRAFT

.CRAFT: From Danish and Saxon: art, cunning, power, force, to crave, “The primary sense is to strain or to stretch. Hence, strength, skill, a crying out, holding, ability, dexterity.”

—[Noah Webster, American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828.](#)

- No true compassion without will, no true will without compassion. Without will—the artist's conscious determination to take his characters and their problems seriously—no artist can achieve real compassion. And without compassion—without real and deep love for his “subjects” (the people he writes about, and, by extension, all human beings)—no artist can summon the will to make true art. He will be satisfied, instead, with clever language or with cynical jokes and too easy, dire solutions like those common in contemporary fiction. —[Daniel Martin](#)

- Some Mormon readers demand nothing more of writers than inoffensive content, and some literary critics demand nothing more of writers than technical dexterity. Truly great literature, on the other hand, is produced only in the integration of significant content with significant art. . . . Some writers in the Mormon culture, for example, rightly want to affirm Church practices and beliefs. So they construct a story or a verse in which the characters or the narrators rather mechanically recite the clichés that we have all read or heard dozens of times. . . . Even the rebels in these pieces sound like all the rebels we have ever heard. . . . When this moralistic but artless writing is accepted as the model for Mormon literature, it perpetuates itself. . . . Too many readers [in the Church] would rather have their backs scratched than their minds engaged. —[Marilyn Arnold](#)

- [On being asked what is the difference in writing fiction and nonfiction] “That's easy. Fiction has to be believable!” —[Tom Clancy](#)

- Every compulsion is put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient—and sterile! —[Murray Kempton](#)

- The Muse who provides human inspiration is a teacher, not a trickster. —[Walter Lippman](#)
[Note: Muses are Greek goddesses of music, literature, and art.]

- Mr. Lippman's observation is a profound one with which I heartily agree. However, my experience has been that occasionally the Muse chooses to be a trickster. It gives us some profound, breathtaking idea. However, if it is in a particularly mischievous mood, it might tease us with a truly brilliant idea. But if we are at all hesitant, or are slow to record the impression that comes, the Muse impishly steals it back again and will never return it. And thus we may lose something truly stunning. —[Gerald N. Lund](#)

- The courage to ruthlessly remove something clever from your work can come from asking yourself: Is my ability to come up with good ideas so limited that I'd better use every one I get before the supply runs out? If you have confidence in your creative powers, you will dispassionately delete the line or the scene you are "in love" with for the sake of improving the overall script. (If your confidence is less than total, you'll set it aside in hopes of perhaps using it elsewhere.) In any event, with experience should come the confidence that you can spare any gem, because from where it came from will come a thousand others, just as good or even better. If and when you truly believe that, you're a professional writer. And your writing will show it. —[Stewart Bronfeld](#)
- A novel, whatever else it may do for the reader spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually, ought to entertain. Otherwise it is just a tract. —[Eric Ambler](#)
- The word "entertain" comes from the Latin *tenere*, meaning "to seize or to grab and hold tight." —[Gerald N. Lund](#)
- The art of reading is to skip judiciously. —[Philip G. Haverton](#)
- I try to leave out the parts that people skip. —[Elmore Leonard](#)
- A key part of the art of writing is to ruthlessly delete those parts of your work that your readers will tend to skip if you do leave them in. —[Gerald N. Lund](#)
- Except in the classroom, where we read what is assigned, or study compositions or paintings to pass a course, we read or listen to or look at works of art in the hope of experiencing our highest most selfless emotions, either to reach a sublime communication with the maker of the work, . . . or to find, in works of literature, characters we love as we do real people. Ultimately, in fact, plot exists only to give the characters means of finding and revealing themselves, and setting only to give them a place to stand. The artist who has no strong feeling about his characters—the artist who can feel passionate only about his words or ideas—has no urgent reason to think hard about the characters' problems, the "themes" of his fiction. He imitates human gesture in the movements of his puppets, but he does not worry as a father worries about the behavior of his son; and the result is a fictional universe one would not want one's loved ones forced to inhabit. —[John Gardner](#)

IV. ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

- Criticism is the art wherewith a critic tries to guess himself into a share of the artist's fame. —[George Jean Nathan](#)
- Critics are never inhibited by ignorance. —[Harold Macmillan](#)
- Novel reading—is it acceptable? I would rather that persons read novels than nothing. —[Brigham Young](#)

- There are many things which contribute to great art and literature, which help the artist or the author rise above the oceans of good, mediocre, or awful art. In Latin, art means “to stretch and to strain.” When artists and authors diligently and consistently stretch and strain to achieve these three elements, most of the other important things will follow along of themselves. There is an old saying in philosophy. “If two or more things are necessary for the existence of something, you cannot argue which of them is the most important.” Thus, these three elements are depicted as an equilateral triangle. Turn it any way you wish, and the message is always the same. They are:

TO ENTERTAIN (from the Latin *tenere*, “to seize or to hold fast”)

TO EXCEL: (from the Latin *excello*, “to lift or raise up”)

TO EDIFY: (from the Latin *edificare* “a building, especially a sacred one, e.g., a temple”)

Commitment to these three equally important actions will help us create true art, which again, means “to stretch and to strain.” —Gerald N. Lund

THREE GREAT TALKS ON THE ARTS BY ORDAINED PROPHETS, SEERS, AND REVELATORS

Elder Boyd K. Packer, “[The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord](#),” BYU Twelve Stake Fireside, February 1, 1976.

President Spencer W. Kimball, “[The Gospel Vision of the Arts](#),” *Ensign*, July 1977.

Elder M. Russell Ballard, “God’s Purpose for the Artist in the Gospel Plan,” Tuacahn, April 8, 1995.