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Quick AND Dirty Tips™

FOR BETTER WRITING

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Chapter 9
WORK IT

YOU NOW HAVE TOOLS THAT will help you be a clear, concise, and effective writer, and it may be time to take it to the next level, whatever that level may be. Maybe you want to work as a full-time staff writer, to work as a freelancer on the side, or to write and sell a short story or novel. Maybe you want to raise your profile at work and write an article for the company newsletter or website. Maybe you want to contribute to your school paper or church bulletin. If you're already a writer, maybe I have some tips you haven't thought of yet. Whatever your situation, here are some tips that should help you be a better working writer.

INTERVIEWING TIPS

If you want to write nonfiction, interviews will be a huge part of your job; and if you're interested in writing fiction, you may also conduct

interviews to help develop your story, for example, to gather background or historical information. Conducting an interview is not the same as having a conversation.

Some of the best advice I got when I was starting out as a writer was to avoid the temptation to show the person you are interviewing how smart you are. And depending on your field, that can be really hard! I used to write magazine articles about science, so I was interviewing researchers who I thought were doing fascinating work. I have a master's degree in science, so it was hard to resist the temptation to show an amazing scientist that I knew my stuff and to avoid lapsing into jargon.

But if you fall into either of those traps, you're not going to get the quotes you need for your article or the full story that may help you think creatively about your novel. You need the people you are interviewing to explain what they know, in their own words. If you start showing off, you're going to put words in their mouth. Even worse, they'll realize you know the answers, and they won't tell you the important parts, leaving you to write about it without quotes.

A related issue is that it's important to avoid asking questions that will put the interviewee on the defensive. "Did you mutilate the cute snail after using it for your own purposes?" is not going to get you the same answer as, "What happens to the snails after the experiments are done?" Similarly, you don't want to ask leading questions. A leading question is a question that leads the person to the answer you want. For example, "Isn't that police inspector the nicest, cutest woman you've ever met?" After that kind of question, they're not likely to answer, "She's a horrid wench," which would actually be a great quote to get.

What this ends up meaning is that through most of the interview, you often sound like a dull, rather dense, but perhaps inquisitive lump of coal, interjecting questions such as "Can you tell me more about the police inspector?" or "Can you expand on the life cycle of the snail?"

Of course, this does not mean that you shouldn't do background research, or have interview questions prepared. You need to know where your story is going so you can probe in the right direction. You need to know the person's background and as much as you can about the topic

of the interview. Although your job is mainly to get them talking and listen to what they say, you need to know when they say something of questionable accuracy, misspeak, get off track, or when there could be something interesting they forgot to mention. For example, it may be important to ask someone about an opposing theory they neglected to mention. For example, "OK, Dr. Jones, but what about the people who believe that your data is merely the result of tainted water?" It's helpful to understand the process behind their industry. For example, you may need to ask, "Well, Dr. Lopez—and I'm sure you have more insight on this than I do—how can you get your drug to market by fall 2008 when the typical trial takes four years?"

Now I'm going to share my secret weapon for interviewing with you. My last question is always, "Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important or worth talking about?" I ask that no matter how much preparing I do for an interview, and a third of the time that question got me something I hadn't anticipated.

STYLE GUIDES

It's true that when it comes to grammar there are a lot of hard-and-fast rules; but it's also true that there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of issues that are dictated by style. I know it would be so much easier if the rules were just black and white, and I could always just tell you what to do—I like to tell people what to do—but in a lot of cases you're going to have to decide on your own. You need a personal or corporate style guide.

Here's an example: I subscribe to an e-mail list for writers. There, the people are at each other's throats about how many spaces to put after a period at the end of a sentence—one or two. These people are surprisingly militant about spaces. Honestly, it kind of scares me; but regardless of what you think about the issue, the bottom line is that it's enough of an unresolved point that it's a matter of style. You should just find out what the style is of the people who have hired you, and do it that way. (See also the section on periods in chapter 4, "Punch Up Your Punctuation"; I'm a one-space girl myself.)

So, back to the point, this is where style guides come in. A style guide is a document that is typically put together by editors, managers, or producers to define how they want their writers to handle all the unresolved writing and grammar problems that arise (and, believe me, they do arise on an almost hourly basis). It can include almost anything the creator wants it to, but a style guide typically covers things like

- Punctuation
- Spelling
- Formatting
- General writing recommendations

A punctuation topic could be whether to capitalize the first letter of a full sentence after a colon. (I don't.) A spelling topic could be whether to use the American or British spelling of a word. (I use the American spelling.) A formatting topic could be what font to use for a specific section of the document or website. (If I'm referring to a specific word, I italicize it.) And finally, a general writing recommendation could be whether jargon is allowed. (I try not to use jargon.)

A style guide will keep editors from wasting time reworking documents to fit their preferences and from getting annoyed with writers for doing things "wrong."

A style guide will help companies and publications keep their work consistent, which makes their overall offering feel more professional. People may not consciously notice it, but they'll feel as if something is wrong if things aren't consistent from page to page. It is better to have one single style that some people don't agree with than to have different writers doing different things so that company documents are all willy-nilly. You don't want readers to end up thinking it's a disorganized, clueless company.

Writers in companies can also waste a lot of time trying to decide what to do (especially in organizations where people collaborate on documents). Trust me, I get a lot of e-mail messages that begin "My coworkers and I have been arguing about this for hours."

So, the quick and dirty tip is when you start a project with a new company or publication, always try to get the style guide; if you hire writers, make sure you have a style guide to give to them.

Keep in mind that different style guides have different uses. For example, *The Associated Press Stylebook* is primarily for writers who work at newspapers or news magazines; the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers is* obviously for writers of research papers, and it's used most commonly by people in the liberal arts and humanities. Writers of research papers in the sciences, on the other hand, may be more likely to use the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* or *American Medical Association Manual of Style*. If I had to peg *The Chicago Manual of Style,* I'd say that its primary audience is book authors, but I love *Chicago* because it is one of the most comprehensive style guides, and I believe it's an essential backup for everyone.

Generating Writing Ideas

Working as a writer often means coming up with story ideas. The process is a bit different for fiction writing and nonfiction writing.

Generating Nonfiction Story Ideas

I made my living as a freelance magazine writer for a few years, so my ability to pay my bills rested on my ability to generate marketable story ideas. For the first couple of months it was difficult, but much to my surprise, after I wrote a few stories and became familiar with my target publications, I saw story ideas everywhere. Some days I would come up with as many as five story ideas. Some of them weren't great, but with that many to choose from, I could easily pick the winners.

For me, generating story ideas was all about having the right mindset and surrounding myself with people and publications. Here's some specific advice.

- **Adopt a curious mind-set.** You want to know the details about every-thing. I once got a great story idea for a science trade magazine from a friend's casual mention of a repetitive-stress injury. That initial brief comment led me to learn—and write—about lab workers who had to change careers because of repetitive pipetting injuries. If I hadn't been inquisitive, I wouldn't have learned that there was a story behind that initial brief comment.

- **Stay current.** When you know what's going on, you can spot trends and areas where different stories may intersect. Editors love trend sto-ries.

    When I was freelancing I subscribed to about twenty magazines and spent at least two hours each day reading news on the Internet. An example of a story that could come out of this type of undirected re-search is a piece about environmentally friendly weddings. A few years ago, green stories were popping up everywhere. I saw an unrelated article about weddings, and suddenly the idea of green weddings popped into my head.

- **Talk to people.** This may seem obvious, but most stories are about people. The more people you talk to, the better chance you have of stumbling upon a fantastic story. Also, when I was a science writer, al-most all my story ideas came from talking to scientists because they had better access to cutting-edge information than I did. I got new story ideas from scientists I was already interviewing and from scientists I met at conferences.

- **Identify target publications.** Keep a list of targeted publications in mind as you're out in the world. I've heard magazine editors complain about writers who pitch stories that aren't appropriate for the maga-zine. If you are intimately familiar with a publication and know what kinds of stories it runs, not only can you identify ideas, but you'll also write a pitch that's more likely to be accepted.

    For example, I knew I wanted to write for a trade publication called

The Scientist, so when I heard about a fire in a lab near my house, my mind was ready. I realized that *The Scientist* might be interested in a story about how to prepare a lab for an emergency if the story included a news hook about the fire. And, indeed, the publication snapped up the article.

In truth, stories are everywhere if your mind is prepared to look for them.

Generating Fiction Story Ideas

Now, on to fiction. For fiction stories, you need inspiration. And actually, getting inspiration for fiction writing isn't so different from searching for nonfiction story ideas.

It's still a good idea to read voraciously and interact with others. Fictional stories need characters, and you can get great inspiration from people you know or people you briefly encounter. When I was in college, I used to sit at coffee shops and people watch. I'd pick people who seemed interesting and make up stories about their lives.

Watching the public Twitter feed can also give you story ideas. You can watch until you see an intriguing post that inspires you, or you can challenge yourself by picking five random posts and forcing yourself to make a coherent story out of them. (And actually, if I were still a freelance magazine writer, I would also watch Twitter for nonfiction story ideas. It would be a great place to pick up on new trends.)

Another fun approach is to co-opt a minor character from another work to use as your starting point. The most famous example is probably the book *Wicked,* whose main character is the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz,* but there are many examples. For instance, *Grendel* is a book about the monster in *Beowulf,* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is a play, which was turned into a movie, about minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* And, of course, fan fiction writers imagine new adventures for minor characters in their favorite TV shows, movies, and books.

A listener named Jurgen wrote in with a similar idea. He chooses two people from different news stories and imagines more about their lives and how they might interact with each other.

Keeping a journal can also be helpful. Flashes of inspiration can come at any time. It can help to have a journal where you write down ideas as they come and where you can keep track of your general reflections and your dreams as you are just waking up.

OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

Some days it just doesn't come together. You stare at the computer screen, but can't think of a thing to say. Or maybe you write, but you hate what you've written. Anything you do to overcome writer's block is just a mind game, but I don't mean that in a bad way because sometimes you have to play mind games to get your work done. Writing is a solitary experience; it's really all about you and your mind. Here are some things that work for me:

- **Don't play.** If you're going to procrastinate, force yourself to do something productive. Your choices are folding laundry or writing, not playing solitaire or writing. (Some people may advise you to take short, timed play breaks, but that doesn't work for me. If I start playing, it's harder to stop; and if I know I can do something fun instead of writing, I'll opt for the fun thing every time. Sometimes overcoming writer's block means forcing yourself to put in the time.)

- **Skip around.** Don't get too hung up on writing the first sentence or paragraph. If you have a great quote or plot point, and it falls in the middle of your story, write that first and come back to the beginning later. When I got stuck while writing this book, I'd jump to another section and work on that instead.

  If you have multiple projects going at the same time, work on one of your other projects for a while. For example, I can always work on a

Grammar Girl podcast episode or edit a script for one of the other podcasts in the network.

- **Change location.** If I'm feeling bogged down, I take my laptop to the coffeehouse, library, or spare bedroom. A change of scenery can be inspiring and the act of packing and setting up my "office" somewhere else gives me that fresh-start feeling.

- **Try free writing.** When I was in college, I had a professor who forced us to do free-writing exercises. We had to sit at our desks and write without stopping for thirty minutes. It didn't matter what we wrote. She just watched to make sure that we were constantly putting pen to paper. The exercise was helpful, so you may want to give it a try if you are having a creative block. And a bonus is that it can also be a good way to come up with story ideas.

- **Get real deadlines.** Nothing focuses the mind like a deadline. So set yourself a deadline and try to make it as real as possible. If you don't have an editor setting deadlines for you, line up friends to read your story and tell them you'll deliver it at a certain time. Plan a date, but let yourself go out only if you finish your story. Maybe you're not like this, but I don't take a deadline seriously unless I know that something bad is going to happen if I don't finish on time. These days my podcast listeners are my "something bad" because I know they'll be unhappy if I release my show late.

    If you want to set real deadlines, meet other writers, and get feedback, one great way is to join (or start) a writing group. When I was freelance writing, I met with about eight writers every other week. We swapped stories for feedback, talked about our projects, and set goals for the next meeting. It was a wonderful experience, and many of those writers are still my good friends today. Taking a writing class at your local community college has a lot of the same benefits as joining a writing group and has the added benefit of giving you access to a formal instructor whose goal is to help you improve your writing.

Participating in writing contests can also help you set a deadline and get inspiration. I know of four contests with deadlines:

100-word Stories. *100-word Stories* is a blog and podcast that gives out a vague writing assignment every week and chooses a winner from the submissions.

Writers Weekly. The *Writers Weekly* website holds a quarterly short-story contest.

Writer's Digest. *Writer's Digest* has writing contests throughout the year and distributes weekly writing prompts.

NaNoWriMo. November is National Novel Writing Month and the NaNoWriMo.org website is where it all happens. Tens of thousands of people successfully write a fifty-thousand-word novel every year with the encouragement of other writers and the NaNoWriMo team.

PROOFREADING TIPS

I was surprised to discover that one of my most popular Grammar Girl podcasts is the episode with proofreading tips. I guess I'm not the only one to live through the horror of an embarrassing typo.

Here are a couple of big typo stories so you don't feel as if you're the only one.

- Someone at the Bank of Kazakh misspelled the word *bank* on the country's newly released notes in 2006, and the notes were printed and entered into circulation. How's that for a big, embarrassing proofreading problem?

- Also in 2006, Arizona had a typo on the election ballot, making the text on the ballot different from the text of the underlying law. (The proposition was for an $0.80-per-pack cigarette tax whereas the ballot

read that people were voting for an "0.80 cent per pack cigarette tax," which equates to an $0.008-per-pack tax.) The proposition passed, and the interested parties went to court to determine which tax would apply. What an expensive and unfortunate typo!

Over time I have come to believe that it's nearly impossible for people to accurately proofread their own writing. Typos are bad and can get you in a lot of trouble; but even though you should do your best to catch them, I also think it's important not to beat yourself up too badly when typos happen. Human error is inevitable. The real key to avoiding typos is to have someone else proofread your copy. Which brings me to something people always ask me: why is writing on the Internet so bad?

Bloggers Don't Have Copy Editors

In addition to the fact that most people don't get a good grammar education, I believe a significant reason you see so many typos and errors on websites is that most Web copy goes live without ever being reviewed by anyone but the writer. By contrast, copy you see in newspapers and magazines (in addition to being written by professional writers) goes through an extensive editing process. After a writer turns in a story, it's usually reviewed by multiple editors, including the department editor who assigned it, a senior editor, and a copy editor. Of course these editors all have more training in grammar and writing than the average person writing a blog. Commercial websites, in my experience, fall somewhere between magazines and blogs—these companies tend to run lean editorial departments and may have only one editor looking at copy before it goes live. (For example, at the Quick and Dirty Tips website, only one copy editor reviews our articles before they go live.)

Who's Your Daddy, er, Proofreader?

The best advice I can give you for avoiding typos is to have someone else proofread your work. On the other hand, I know this isn't possible

for things like e-mail messages or rushed projects, so here are eight more proofreading tips I've collected over the years.

1. Read your work backward, starting with the last sentence and working your way in reverse order to the beginning. Supposedly, this works better than reading through from the beginning because your brain knows what you meant to write, so you tend to skip over errors when you're reading forward.

2. Read your work out loud. This forces you to read each word individually and increases the odds that you'll find a typo. This works quite well for me, and most of the typos that make it into my transcripts seem to be things you wouldn't catch by reading aloud, such as misplaced commas. A listener who works in a crowded office shared a funny secret with me: he pretends to be talking on the phone while he reads his work aloud to himself so his coworkers don't think he's crazy.

3. Make your computer read to you. Most computers these days come with software, designed for the visually impaired, that will read the text to you. You can put on your headphones and listen to the robotic computer voice read your masterpiece. It won't catch problems with words that sound alike (e.g., *it's* versus *its*) but you'll definitely hear missing or mangled words. (Search for "text to speech" in the Help section of your word-processing software.)

4. Force yourself to view each word. If you don't want to read out loud, you can force yourself to consider each word by using the tip of a pencil or pen to physically touch each word. You can also force yourself to focus on smaller sections of the document by putting a ruler under each line of text as you are reading or by cutting out a small rectangular window on an index card and sliding it over your copy as you read.

5. Always proofread a printed version of your work. I don't know why, but if I try to proofread on a computer monitor, I always miss more errors than if I print out a copy of my work and go over it on paper.

6. Use the auto-correct feature. I also call this the "know thyself" trick. For example, I always type *pateint* instead of *patient*. Always. But with the auto-correct feature in my word-processing software, I can tell the computer that every time I typed *pateint* it should insert *patient*. Problem solved!

7. Give yourself some time. If possible, let your work sit for a while before you proofread it. I'm just speculating here, but it seems to me that if you are able to clear your mind and approach the writing from a fresh perspective, then your brain is more able to focus on the actual words, rather than seeing the words you think you wrote.

8. Use a spell checker. Don't forget to run your work through your computer's spell-checking tool. It won't find every error, and you shouldn't rely exclusively on spell check, but you should be doubly embarrassed if you turn in something or publish it with an error that spell check would have caught.

THE END OF THE BOOK, BUT THE BEGINNING FOR YOU

If you made it this far, I hope I've given you the tools you need to write with confidence. I think of grammar and usage as the rules to the game of writing, and the rules are just the building blocks of creativity. Writing proper sentences doesn't ensure that your work will be brilliant and inspiring, but knowing the rules can keep errors from marring your brilliance and inspiration.

Never let fear of making mistakes keep you from writing. Just do your best. If you find that you are too intimidated while writing, forget

about the rules in your first draft and go back over the piece later with a specific eye for grammar and usage rules. Look things up if you don't know them. If something wasn't covered in this book, you can likely find it in a dictionary, usage guide, or style guide. If someone marks up your writing with a big red pen, consider it a learning experience and go on.

At a minimum, take your newfound skills and write a kind and witty e-mail message to a friend to brighten their day. Write your grandmother a letter that will make her proud. Make this year's holiday newsletter shine.

If you've never written something public before, why not give it a try? Do you live in a small town and love to read? Ask the local newspaper if you can occasionally review books for their paper. Start a blog about something you love or a topic related to your job. Revise that forgotten short story one more time, and send it out to literary magazines—who knows what may happen?

If you're already a working writer, well, you already know what to do. Just keep this book and your other favorites handy for times when you forget where you should put a comma or when to use *whom*. Make your copy editor's job a little easier.

Now, go forth and write!