

Write With Your Speaking Voice

The Guide to Successful Writing

David Klein

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Preface

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison advised: “If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it.” When I was learning to write, decades ago, I would have loved to have read, and reread, this book. It hadn't been written, so I wrote it.

As a beginning writer, I could not read enough about the art of writing. Many books were available at the time, and for the most part, they were quite good. Some of those books are classics and are still available and popular today.

While the books I refer to are outstanding, none are shaped quite like this one. It gets right to the heart of how to write well, which is based on writing with your speaking voice. I've compiled the best of what I've learned about writing from countless hours of reading the best writers who ever lived and from my own hands-on experience, which includes operating a freelance writing business as well as writing and publishing Sudoku instruction books. And I've shaped that knowledge into a volume that is easy to read and that focuses on the most important ways to become a skilled writer. You may find especially helpful the discussion of flow-writing, which teaches writers how to capture their spoken voice and seamlessly transfer that voice to the written page.

This book is written for anyone who wants to learn to write better—for the student as well as the aspiring professional writer. I've written in a simple and personal manner, making this book pleasant to read and easy to understand. It's filled with anecdotes, word illustrations, quotations, and, at times, humor. My goal is for you to learn to write with ease, skill, and enjoyment. Writing well is fulfilling and fun; you'll experience that fulfillment and fun.

My editor, upon reading this book for the first time, said that she was so fired up she wanted to write without delay. I hope this book instills in you, too, a strong desire to put into practice the writing tips you'll learn, which are time-tested and practiced by the world's top writers. May you learn to write with your speaking voice, and may you delight in the joys of writing for years and years to come.



Introduction

“Writing is simply talking on paper.” – Beryl Bainbridge

Writing is about as basic a task we have. Everyone needs to write, and the better we write, the better we do in life. Good writing is a key component to both scholastic and business success, and in recent years writing has become a major part of how we communicate on a daily basis. And yet many, if not most, seem to struggle when it comes to crafting a well-worded document.

Yet most people have no problem with verbal communication. We tend to speak without even thinking about it, and the words flow naturally, often with amazing grace, power, and rhythm.

What’s so striking about this is that speaking and writing are both forms of the same thing: communicating with words. It’s understandable that someone might say: “I’m good at chess, but I’m really bad at gymnastics.” Why? Because they are two entirely different activities, requiring totally different skill sets. But speaking and writing, they are the same—using words to communicate. The main difference is that one comes from the mouth and the other off the fingertips.

So there is the key to becoming a good writer: getting your speaking voice out of your head and putting it down on paper. It’s not difficult to do. I’ll show you how anyone who can speak well can write well.

This book gets right to the heart of the matter of how to write well, beginning with flow-writing, which allows you to easily capture your speaking patterns and turn them into the written word.

I’ll discuss the sound of your writing—its rhythm, its beat. You’ll learn how to find your writing voice, which is very easy to do. I’ll show you how personality, humor, illustrations, anecdotes, and parables can breathe life into your writing. And I’ll briefly discuss the mechanical aspects of writing, such as grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph structure. You’ll learn to write strong openings and conclusions, as well as how to dispel writer’s block. I’ll show you which writing “rules” are outdated or never should have been rules in the first place. You’ll learn to polish your writing through the editing process. Finally, I’ll provide helpful tips, such as how to use styles and macros and how to avoid common writing mistakes. And if you’re interested in self-publishing, I’ll show you what to expect and how to get started.

Hundreds of quotes from the world's top professional writers are included in this book. This was not my original intention, which was to use one quote to introduce each chapter. But I wanted to find the very best material, so I read several thousand quotes covering all aspects of writing. In the process, I came across such an abundance of excellent material, totaling many thousands of years of writing experience, I felt a need to share the best of these words of writing wisdom with you, the reader. If I enjoyed and benefitted from them, why not let you enjoy and benefit from them too?

It is my goal that in just a few minutes you'll gain a deeper understanding of the writing process, you'll know which common writing mistakes to avoid, you'll be able to write cleaner, clearer, crisper sentences and paragraphs, and you'll know which techniques to use to enliven your writing. Gaining such valuable knowledge will help you in all areas of life that require written communication. As a plus, writing well is a joy. Those who write well often love doing so.

In these few pages this book will show you how, without a doubt, this truth applies to you: If you can speak, you can write. And you can do this, and do it well, by learning to write with your speaking voice.

David Klein
January 2018



Getting Started

Chapter 1

Becoming a Skilled Writer

Chapter 1's Main Takeaway: You're already equipped to be a skilled writer. Your many years of experience using the spoken word have laid the foundation for you to write with skill.

"If you're a writer, write. And always strive for excellence." – Linda Yezak

Do you want to become a skilled writer? You may be surprised to learn that you are already equipped to become one; you already have the tools. Without even knowing it, you've been preparing your entire life. How? By talking, by speaking, you've learned to communicate effectively. If your friends can understand you when you speak, then you are on your way to becoming a skilled writer. You're well over half way to your destination!

I'll illustrate: A few years ago my wife and I were learning American Sign Language (ASL) so we could help the deaf with their educational pursuits. ASL is a beautifully expressive language . . . and then there's finger spelling. Finger spelling is quite dull, but it's a necessity, as certain names and words need to be spelled because there are no signs for them.

I'm right-handed, so I always finger spelled with that hand. Out of curiosity, after having become fairly proficient at finger spelling, I decided to try finger spelling with my left hand. I assumed that training my less dominant left hand to go through the motions of spelling would be as difficult as, or even more so, than my right hand. I was shocked by the results.

Instantly, I was able to finger spell at virtually 100 percent efficiency with my untrained left hand. How did that happen?

It's because of the marvelous ability of the human brain to deal with language. The ability to finger spell with the right hand was burned into the brain. The ability already there, it was a cinch to transfer the task to the left hand. It was essentially automatic.

It's similar with speaking and writing. They are the same functions of the brain . . . language. You already speak well; you've been doing it your entire life. Just as the finger speller can shift the expression of language

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from right hand to left, anyone can shift the expression of language from verbal to written, from mouth to paper.

Is shifting the spoken word to paper all there is to writing? Almost. The written word is slightly different than the spoken word. The main difference is that speaking is a one-time endeavor. Once the words leave the mouth, they're out there and they're not coming back. But the written word can be polished; you get second and even third or more chances to get things right before your words go public. You just need to learn the polishing process, which is not a difficult task.

Every book needs a place to start, and this book starts with learning how to capture your speaking voice on paper—the one you've been using your entire life, which is now deeply ingrained within you. Copying your speech patterns is the first big step to becoming a skilled writer. I'm happy to teach you how to do that, as well as the other steps to complete the task.

So rejoice. You already have the tools to become a skilled writer. This book will teach you how to unleash those skills and then how to enhance and polish your written voice. May you enjoy the journey.



Chapter 2

Capture Your Style of Speech

Chapter 2's Main Takeaway: When you learn to write the way you speak, with the same words and rhythms, you'll become a skilled writer. It's not difficult to accomplish this task.

The closer you can get your writing voice to the way you speak, the more lively, powerful, and engaging your writing will be. – Richard Andersen, Helene Hinis

It's a fact that we learn to speak long before we learn to write. That's the natural order of things. We can't learn to write until we are reasonably skilled at speaking. Speech is the very foundation of writing: writing is based upon speech. That's why we often sound the words out in our minds as we're writing. As we read, we usually do the same, and we may even speak the words in an undertone. We're tying writing and reading back to speaking, which is the first form of verbal communication we learned. It's the one we've done the longest, do the most, and the one we know the best. (Even professional writers speak more words than they write. The average professional writes about 1,000 to 2,000 words per day, but the average person speaks about 13,500 words per day.)

Therefore, doesn't it make sense that our writing should sound just like us, like our speech? It should mimic our speaking patterns closely. The major difference between the spoken and written word is that our writing should be just a little better. Why? Because with writing, you have the ability to go back and polish. You can make adjustments in word choice and word order, you can improve the rhythm of the words, you can use punctuation to your advantage, and you won't have any word whiskers, such as "uhs" and "ums."

Gary Provost, in his excellent book *100 Ways to Improve Your Writing*, puts it this way:

"Mimic the spoken language in the variety of its music, in the simplicity of its words, in the directness of its expression. But do not forfeit the enormous advantages of the written word. Writing provides time for contemplation. Use it well.

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“In conversation the perfect word is not always there. In writing we can try out fifteen different words before we are satisfied.

“In conversation we spread our thoughts thin. In writing we can compress.

“So strive to make your writing sound like a conversation, but don’t make it an ordinary conversation. Make it a good one.”

If someone says to you: “Your writing sounds exactly like you when you speak,” it’s one of the best compliments they can attribute to your writing abilities. It means you’ve learned to capture the voice inside your head and put that voice on paper. You have a voice in your mind: it’s how you think and how you form your words.

We actually think in our native language. That means we think not just in concepts and ideas, but we think by forming words and sentences. We’re literally having an internal conversation with ourselves. And the words and sentences are formed in a unique way in each person’s mind. That’s our “voice.” The goal of speaking is to get that voice out clearly through the lips, and the goal of writing is to get that same voice down on paper. Louis Menand writes: “Inside your head, you’re yakking away to yourself all the time . . . What you are trying to do is transpose the yakking into verbal music [writing with a pleasing rhythm].”

But somehow, many think that good writing has to sound ultra formal, as if they are a completely different person, trying to impress with “scholarly” words and vague thoughts. For instance, a person may witness an automobile accident and may tell others on the scene: “I saw it, the Vette smashed into the Bronco, the Vette smashed into the Bronco.” When the police arrive, that witness may say the same thing: “Officer, I saw the Vette smash into the Bronco.” But if asked to write a report of what they witnessed, the finished product may read like this: “This pedestrian was ambulating northward when the said vehicle, the Chevrolet-made sports car, intruded upon the sports utility vehicle. At that point in time there occurred an instant of impact, compromising the latter vehicle’s structural integrity.” Ick. That person would have been better off writing what? You guessed it: “I saw the Vette smash into the Bronco.”

Fancy words or vague writing will not impress anyone. But good, crisp, clear writing will impress; it’s proof of a good, crisp, clear mind, and it will help you to be more successful in anything you do.

Richard Andersen and Helene Hinis sum up the matter nicely in their book *Write it Right!* They note: “We speak in simple, clear, easy-to-

understand sentences. When we write like we speak, our messages are simple, clear, and easy to understand.”

But how can you get the voice out of your head and onto paper? The most important method will be discussed in our next chapter. That method is called flow-writing.

End Quote:

“Most Americans are taught that the written language and the spoken language are entirely different. They learn to write in a stiff style and to steer clear of personal flavor.

“Notice how somebody will say, ‘It sounds just like her’ in praise of some particularly effective writing. What you write should sound just like you talking when you’re at your best—when your ideas flow swiftly and in good order, when your syntax is smooth, your vocabulary accurate. Afterward you think you couldn’t possibly have put things any better than you did.

“A first step to achieving that effect is to use only those words and phrases and sentences that you might actually say to your reader if you were face-to-face. If you wouldn’t say it, if it doesn’t sound like you, why write it?”

— Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson, Writing That Works



Chapter 3

Flow-Writing

Chapter 3's Main Takeaway: Flow-writing, writing without stopping to correct minor flaws, such as spelling and grammatical errors, allows you to write quickly and with the same natural expressions you use in your speech. Learn how flow-writing will make you a better writer.

“The worst thing you can do is censor yourself as the pencil hits the paper. You must not edit until you get it all on paper. If you can put everything down, stream-of-consciousness, you’ll do yourself a service.” – Stephen Sondheim

Flow-writing. It’s one of the main keys to writing well and makes this, perhaps, one of the most important chapters in this book. But what is flow-writing?

As the name implies, it’s writing with a steady flow, not stopping to edit or correct things along the way. You just let your thoughts flow from your mind to your keyboard or pen and paper.

If you’ve never tried flow-writing before, and begin now, you’ll enjoy an immediate boost in both the quality and the quantity of your writing. But how does flow-writing work? Why is it so effective?

Imagine that while you spoke you had your mind fixed on every word you were saying, and if the word didn’t sound just right, you’d stop, correct yourself, and then start over again. Or every time you said an “uh” or an “um” you stopped immediately, regressed, and started the sentence again. Your speech would be choppy, brutal to listen to, and you’d constantly forget the points you were trying to make. Likely you’d be brimming with frustration, and you would quickly become exhausted.

When we speak we just open up and let the words fly. Minor mistakes are not a problem, as our main intent is to share our thoughts as quickly and clearly as possible. The thoughts come to our minds and are almost automatically out of our mouths with very little effort.

This brings us to flow-writing. Flow-writing is the best method to capture our spoken speech patterns. We just open up the keyboard and let fly, concentrating on the thoughts and not on the details, such as spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and word choice. This makes our writing natural, it makes it flow. It captures our conversational voice:

it's as if we've redirected the words that were to come from our mouths and put them on paper. Then, after a period of writing, we can go back and polish the document until it's ready for press, print, e-mail, etc.

There is actually a scientific basis to this method. Brain researchers have known since the 1960s that the brain's two hemispheres, right and left, function differently. The right side of our brain tends to be the artistic side, the side that is more dominant in handling such functions as ideas, art, and music. The left side is the analytic side; it's more dominant when we're performing such tasks as mathematics, logic, and editing.

So by constantly stopping and correcting as we write, this is what's happening: We start out with the right hemisphere having thoughts it wants to transmit, doing so for a moment, and then the left hemisphere takes over, thinking, "We've made an error and it must be corrected. NOW!" (The left hemisphere is exacting and tends to be pushy.) So the left hemisphere does its corrective work, and then the right jumps back in and tries to continue, but the left interrupts again and wants to fix things, even small things. This hemispherical battle continues for a while as very little gets accomplished. The right brain is not given the opportunity to get into a creative groove. Each interruption stops the creative process, which must be restarted again.

But with flow-writing, the left brain steps aside while the right brain takes the lead, transmitting ideas in a rhythm and cadence that is pleasing to the ear. (Remember, the right hemisphere is the dominant musical hemisphere.) When the right hemisphere has written a good segment, it's now okay for it to step aside and allow the left hemisphere to kick in and do the editing it's been so eager to get at. In this way the brain's hemispheres are cooperating and acting as complements, not warring against each other. This allows one hemisphere to rest while the other is taking the lead. Both hemispheres remain fresh, providing the benefit of a longer and more productive day's work.

(Recently, there's been a little disputing in the field of science as to exactly how dominant the brain's two hemispheres are at these various tasks. Nevertheless, the same principle applies: the brain does a better job of writing when creativity mode is allowed to flow-write without interruption. The completely different, critical task of editing can begin after a period of flow-writing has been completed. The writer thus wears only one hat at a time: writer first, editor second.)

Flow-writing is not just a matter of sitting at a computer, hitting keys, and good things randomly happening. No, flow-writing takes preparation. To flow-write well, one must know the subject well. Remember, flow-writing is writing that closely mimics our speech patterns. Just as we can't open our mouths and speak intelligently about matters we have no knowledge of, we can't write about what we don't know. So to flow-write well, we must reasonably know our subject and the ideas we want to convey about it.

One more benefit of flow-writing is that it works in harmony with another characteristic of the human brain. Thoughts in the brain are similar, in a way, to blasts of water from a geyser. The geyser's blast is strong at first, loaded with water, but in a short time the water turns to mist and starts to evaporate into the atmosphere. If you wanted to take a good photograph of the geyser, you'd have to work quickly and snap the shutter soon after the geyser erupted, before the water disappeared. And such is the human thought process. Thoughts are strong at first, but in short order they begin to evaporate as our minds move on to something else. Therefore, flow-writing, which gets our thoughts down on paper quickly, helps us to keep pace with the thought process and record those thoughts while they are still strong in our minds. So flow-writing produces more robust communication and better unity of thought.

How long should a flow-writing session last? The short answer: as long as your writing is flowing, as long as you are writing well, then you can continue flow-writing. Most find that to be between five and thirty minutes. After thirty minutes it's normally time for a break. But I've had flow-writing sessions last more than an hour, especially when writing about a subject I know well and have strong feelings about. The words kept coming and were sharp and clear, and I was not about to stop them. As celebrated writer William Faulkner put it: "When my horse is running good, I don't stop to give him sugar."

How do you know when it's time to take a break? You'll know. The words and ideas just won't be flowing. You may feel fatigued, distracted, or maybe even frustrated. At that time, it might be better to move on to something else—perhaps editing the document, or even flow-writing another area of the document if it's multi-sectioned. Or the break can be, and sometimes needs to be, away from the computer completely and perhaps to a more physical, less thought-intensive activity. After a change of pace, you may feel refreshed and ready to continue.

I consider this chapter to be one of the most important in this book, and I consider the following quote, by Shannon Hale, one of the most helpful in the entire book. She wrote, “I’m writing a first draft and reminding myself that I’m simply shoveling sand into a box so that later I can build castles.” Indeed, let it flow and get those words down on paper. Shovel your thoughts into the sandbox (in your computer or on paper), and put them in with the natural rhythms of your speech. You’ll have plenty of time to build word castles later during the editing process.

Yes, flow-writing will make writing a pleasure; it will make writing just about as easy as speaking. And flow-writing will produce excellent results. Your writing will sound like you, like your speech, and the quality of your writing will soar.

Note: There is another type of writing that is similar to flow-writing. It’s called freewriting. Though similar, the two are not identical. Freewriting involves writing for a set amount of time without stopping or pausing. The writing may be completely random and undirected. Wikipedia describes freewriting this way: “If you get off the topic or run out of ideas, keep writing anyway. If necessary, write nonsense or whatever comes into your head, or simply scribble: anything to keep the hand moving.” So freewriting is essentially a writing exercise.

Flow-writing is not about writing “nonsense.” It’s purposeful, directed writing. The writer has prepared his or her thoughts and then puts those thoughts down on paper as quickly and coherently as possible, with natural writing rhythms, and without stopping to make any grammatical or spelling adjustments.

End Quote:

*“It is really important that focusing on things such as spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting doesn’t inhibit the creative flow.”—
Michael Morpurgo*



Chapter 4

Music—The Rhythm of Your Writing

Chapter 4's Main Takeaway: Readers will enjoy your writing more when the sentences are varied and the sound is rhythmic. In this chapter you'll learn to put rhythm, or music, in your writing.

“The writer controls the pace for the reader, slow or fast or in between, and uses sentences of different lengths to create music, the rhythm of the story.”
- Roy Peter Clark

Music. It's one of the most important aspects of good writing, and it's one of the least understood and written about. Music has to do with the sound of the writing to the reader's ear. Is it rhythmic? Is it pleasant? Or is it dull, repetitive, or even irritating.

To illustrate the importance of rhythm in writing, think of one of your favorite songs. Likely, it's a song with both lyrics and music. But what if you heard that song with the music tracks removed? Just the voice or voices. How would it sound? Lacking, at least, if not a little creepy. And then, what if you heard that song with only the instrumental tracks, without any lyrics? It would, again, likely sound lacking to you, even boring—think elevator music. The words and the music together make the song what it is, bringing it to its full potential.

It's the same with writing. The meaning of the words is important, but the rhythm of the words bring the written expression to its full potential. Of course, what we write is not accompanied by literal music, but we can add rhythm and melody by such things as word choice, word order, variation of sentence and paragraph length, grammatical construction, and skillful use of punctuation.

There are two opportunities to add music to your writing. The first is during the writing process itself. Flow-writing, which we've learned mimics the spoken word, has rhythm built in. Most people speak with nicely varied sentences and with enough rhythm to keep their speech from sounding mechanical. So flow-writing practically takes care of the music by itself. It gets the rhythm of the words from your mind to the paper.

The other opportunity is during the editing process. Editors look for various qualities in the work they edit. They carefully examine grammar, spelling, punctuation, organization, and clarity of thought. But they also have their ears attuned to the sound of the writing. Is it rhythmic and pleasing? Does anything sound awkward and in need of reconstruction? The writer's goal is to get the point across to the reader and to make it a pleasant experience. If the writing sounds pleasant to the ear, the reader is more likely to continue reading.

The connections of language and rhythm are deep-seated within us, going back to, well, before we were even born. Note these excerpts of an article that reported the results of a fascinating study concerning newborn babies and language:

“Only days after birth, babies have a bawl with language. Newborn babies cry in melodic patterns that they have heard in adults' conversations—even while in the womb,' say medical anthropologist Kathleen Wermke of the University of Würzburg in Germany, and her colleagues.

“By 2 to 5 days of age, infants' cries bear the tuneful signature of their parents' native tongue, a sign that language learning has already commenced,' the researchers report in a paper published online November 5 in *Current Biology*.

“Fluent speakers use melodic patterns and pitch shifts to imbue words and phrases with emotional meaning. Changes in pitch and rhythm, for example, can indicate anger. During the last few months of fetal life, babies can hear what their mothers or other nearby adults are saying, providing exposure to melodies peculiar to a specific language,' Wermke says. Newborns then re-create those familiar patterns in at least some of their cries, she proposes.

“German newborns' cries tended to start out high-pitched and gravitate to increasingly lower pitches. French newborns' cries started out low-pitched and then moved higher. Comparable high-to-low and low-to-high intonation patterns characterize words and phrases used by fluent speakers of German and French,' Wermke says.” — Bruce Bower, *Science News*, November 5, 2009

This research highlights the importance of the sounds and rhythms of natural speech. They are an integral part of us, linked to events occurring even before childbirth. We bonded to the patterns of music and speech before we took our first breath of air. We take comfort in them. Logically,

if readers find the cadences of our writing comforting, they'll stay with it longer and enjoy the process more along the way.

Another series of studies shows the importance of music and rhythm to human activities. Specifically, this has to do with the effect of music on those who exercise. Note excerpts of the following article, which was written by Ferris Jabr and published in *Scientific American* on March 20, 2013:

“Research on the interplay of music and exercise dates to at least 1911, when American investigator Leonard Ayres found that cyclists pedaled faster while a band was playing than when it was silent. Since then psychologists have conducted around a hundred studies on the way music changes people's performance in a variety of physical activities, ranging in intensity from strolling to sprinting.

“In the last 10 years the body of research on workout music has swelled considerably, helping psychologists refine their ideas about why exercise and music are such an effective pairing for so many people as well as how music changes the body and mind during physical exertion. Music distracts people from pain and fatigue, elevates mood, increases endurance, reduces perceived effort and may even promote metabolic efficiency. When listening to music, people run farther, bike longer and swim faster than usual—often without realizing it. In a 2012 review of the research, Costas Karageorghis of Brunel University in London, one of the world's leading experts on the psychology of exercise music, wrote that one could think of music as ‘a type of legal performance-enhancing drug.’

“In some cases, the rhythms of the underlying melody may not be as important as the cadence of the lyrics.

“Participants who cycled in time to music required 7 percent less oxygen to do the same work as cyclists who did not synchronize their movements with background music.”

Do you see the correlation to reading? If your words present a pleasing cadence, an enjoyable rhythm that replicates music, readers will stay with you longer. Reading will be less taxing for them and more enjoyable. Thus, writing with a pleasing rhythm is simply better writing.

Therefore, when you edit your own writing, in addition to looking for all the mechanical things that need to be corrected, you should also pay close attention to the melody. If it doesn't sound pleasing, take steps to move things around until the same thoughts are being communicated in a rhythm that satisfies.

Language. Music. There is a close and unbreakable connection between the two. A good writer takes advantage of this connection, making sure the words do their work in a way that sounds sweet to the reader's ear.

Ways to Add Music to Your Writing

Again, flow-writing is the number one way to add music to your writing. We tend to speak with a natural rhythm, as our ear monitors what we are saying and influences us to add variety to our words and sentences. Flow-writing helps us capture that natural rhythm on paper.

Three factors that help create pleasing writing patterns are 1) variation of sentence length, 2) variation of sentence structure, and 3) word choice.

We all know that the word “monotone” is not held in high esteem. And why should it be? It indicates monotony, boredom, and an impending nap. If most of our sentences follow similar patterns, having the same structure and approximately the same number of words and syllables, our writing will sound monotonous and will be boring.

It's better to vary **sentence length**. Find a rhythm. Keep it. Then break it. Write a few short sentences. Then change the pattern by writing a longer sentence or two. But don't use too many long sentences, as shorter ones tend to create better rhythm. Is it helpful to occasionally throw in a one-word sentence? Yes! Strive to pay attention to the rhythm, and rewrite whatever sounds awkward or painful to the ear. Good songs make skillful use of variation. So does good writing.

When **sentence structure** is varied, our writing sounds better to the reader's ear. Notice this in the following four sentences, which say essentially the same thing, but each sentence begins with a different word class. (“Word class” refers to nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, etc.):

You might begin a sentence with a pronoun, like this one. Or you might begin a sentence with a conjunction, like this one. Consider beginning a sentence with a verb, like this one. Finally, begin a sentence with an adverb, like this one.

The variety of words that begin those sentences—“You” (pronoun), “Or” (conjunction), “Consider” (verb), and “Finally” (adverb)—give the sentences rhythm. Without this variety all four sentences would essentially be the same and would sound monotonous. There are usually multiple ways to construct any given sentence. Strive to use variety in the

makeup of your sentences. Writing with your natural speech patterns will help you accomplish this. (Sentence length and structure is further discussed in chapter 18, “Sentence and Paragraph Structure.”)

The third factor is **word choice**. Each word has its own sound, its own feel. Sometimes two words can mean the same thing, but one word might sound better in a certain sentence. Words, like musical notes, work in harmony with each other, creating sounds and rhythms.

When deciding between words with almost identical meanings, let your ear be the judge. Take, for instance, the words “tranquil” and “serene.” They are intertwined as synonyms. Look up one in a thesaurus and perhaps the first choice given is the other. Both words mean “peaceful,” but some think the actual sound of one is more peaceful than the other. Can you guess which one most people select as the more peaceful sounding? It’s “serene.” “Serene” sounds like it’s dominated by soft vowels, whereas “tranquil” sounds like it’s dominated by harsh consonants, and it has a more nasal quality. It’s probably for this reason that “Serena,” which is based on the word “serene,” is a common girl’s name, whereas “Tranquila” is not. To most ears, likely, one of them just sounds better.

How Important is Sound to Writing?

How important is rhythm, or sound, to writing? That depends, more than anything, on the type of writing you’re producing.

Note the words of Jack Prelutsky: “Writing is not a visual art any more than composing music is a visual art. The sound of a word is at least as important as the meaning.”

Is the sound of the word really as important as the meaning? To Mr. Prelutsky, yes, because he’s a writer of children’s poetry, and children’s poetry needs to be lively and rhythmic to engage the young mind. Percentage-wise, with children’s poetry, sound is perhaps 80 to 90 percent of the task.

On the other end of the spectrum is technical writing. How important is sound to technical writing? Close to zero; maybe 10 to 20 percent, if even. Sound and rhythm definitely take a back seat to accuracy and clarity.

Most writing is somewhere in the middle. Your writing should sound as good as possible, but never at the expense of clarity or accuracy. Depending on the type and purpose of your writing, strive to achieve a balance.

An Example of Rhythmic Writing

Poetry, by its nature, is normally rhythmic. The words don't necessarily have to rhyme, but the sound of the words is of great importance.

A wonderful example of rhythmic writing is found in the poem "Casey at the Bat." If you'd like to read it now, please turn to page 201 of this book, where it's included in its entirety. Notice the fine rhythm author Ernest Lawrence Thayer established. Again, keep in mind that this is poetry, and while general writing can't quite match these precise rhythms, it's beneficial to make your writing sound as good as it possibly can.

In Summary

To conclude this chapter, note the words of Elmore Leonard, who wrote: "I'm very much aware in the writing of dialogue, or even in the narrative too, of a rhythm. There has to be a rhythm with it . . . Interviewers have said, 'you like jazz, don't you? Because we can hear it in your writing.' And I thought that was a compliment."

Note, by the way, some aspects of Leonard's quote that give it rhythm. He skillfully used commas in the first sentence to begin to create a beat: the word count, separated by commas, is a precise 9-6-3. He consecutively started sentences with "because" and "and." This added pace, speeding things up. Because those words act as connectives, they made the pause at the periods seem just a little more brief. He threw in a question. His sentence length was descending: as he continued, he used shorter sentences.

By the way, if it's true that you can hear distinct types of music in an author's work, you might hear lots of '60s and '70s music in my writing. Musically, I'm sort of stuck, but happily so, in those glorious decades. But whatever your taste, put the sounds and rhythms of music in your writing. Your readability will soar.

End Quote:

"To write is to create music. The words you write make sounds, and when those sounds are in harmony, the writing will work.

"So think of your writing as music. Your story might sound like the 'Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2,' or it might sound like 'Satisfaction.' You

decide. But give it unity. It should not sound like a musical battle between the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and the Rolling Stones.

“Read aloud what you write and listen to its music. Listen for dissonance. Listen for the beat. Listen for the gaps where the music leaps from sound to sound instead of following as it should. Listen for sour notes. Is this word a little sharp, is that one a little bit flat? Listen for instruments that don’t blend well. Is there an electric guitar shrieking among the whispers of flutes and violins? Imagine the sound of each word as an object falling into the eardrum. Does it make a soft landing sound like the word ‘ripple,’ or does it land hard and dig in like the word ‘inexorable’? Does it cut off all sound for an instant, like the word ‘brutal,’ or does it massage the reader’s ear, like ‘melodious’?”

“There are no good sounds or bad sounds, just as there are no good notes or bad notes in music. It is the way in which you combine them that can make the writing succeed or fail. It’s the music that matters.” – Gary Provost, 100 Ways to Improve Your Writing



Chapter 5

Your Writing Voice

Chapter 5's Main Takeaway: You don't have to search for a writing "voice." You already have one. It's the same voice as your unique style of speech, the one you've been using your entire life.

"We're always being told 'find your voice.' When I was younger, I never really knew what this meant. I used to worry a lot about voice, wondering if I had my own. But now I realize that the only way to find your voice is to use it. It's hardwired, built into you. Talk about the things you love. Your voice will follow." – Austin Kleon

Many beginning writers are concerned about finding their writing voice. What is a writer's voice? How does the writer find it?