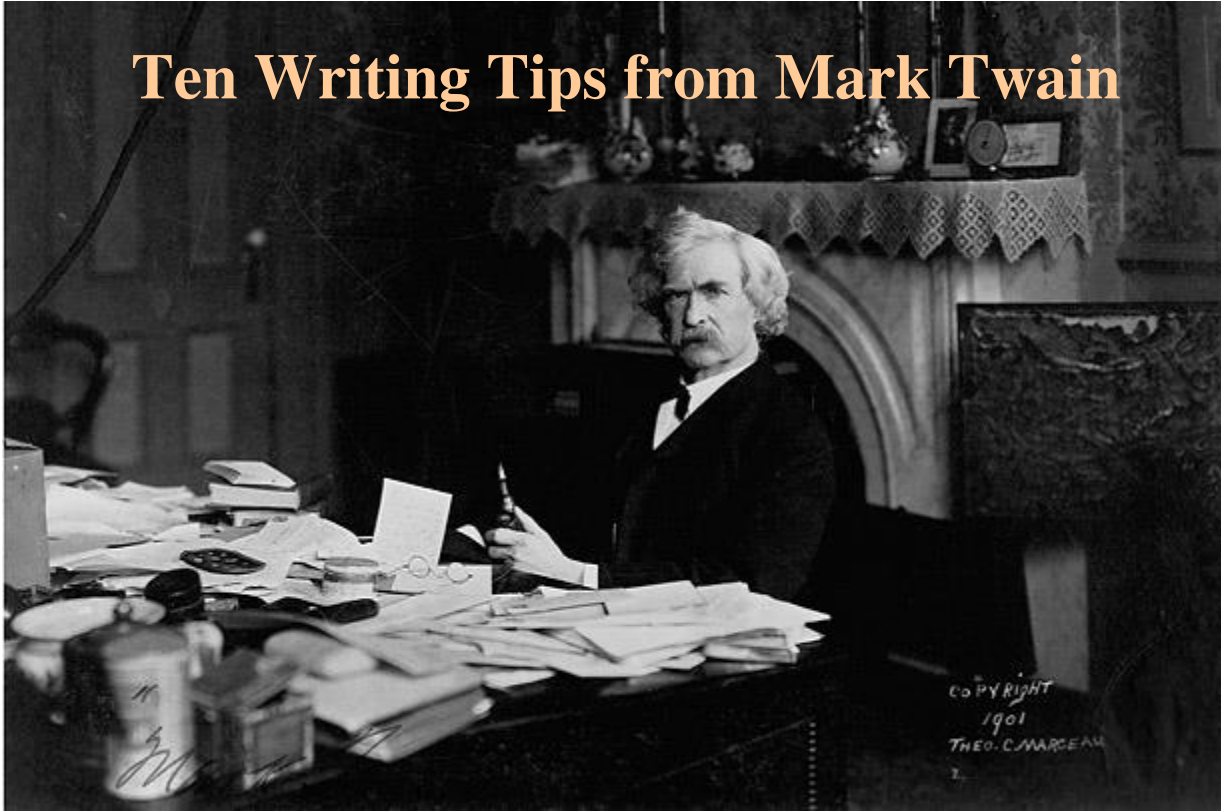


Ten Writing Tips from Mark Twain



“YOU don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly -- Tom's Aunt Polly, she is -- and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

“Now the way that the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. We got six thousand dollars apiece - - all gold. It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up. Well, Judge Thatcher he took it and put it out at interest, and it fetched us a dollar a day apiece all the year round -- more than a body could tell what to do with. The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back.”

It's one of the most famous openings to a book in literary history, and you should study it closely because Sam Clemens – aka Mark Twain – manages to engage the reader in no less than a dozen stories and subplots. He wrote in slang, which was a great literary invention of his, and it has been imitated over and over again. Take, for example, *Forrest Gump*. I'm sure you've seen the movie, but if you read Winston Groom's book, you'd

discover that it was one of the most biting, sarcastic, and politically “incorrect” novels of the 20th Century. Here’s the opening paragraph (and the only reference to the misquoted sound-bite, “My momma always said, ‘Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re gonna git.’”):



“Let me say this: BEIN A IDIOT IS NO BOX OF CHOCOLATES. People laugh, lose patience, treat you shabby Now they says folks sposed to be kind to the afflicted, but let me tell you - it ain’t always that way.....

I been a idiot since I was born. My IQ is near 70, which qualifies me, so they say. Probably, tho, I’m closer to bein a imbecile, or maybe even a moron, but personally, I’d rather think of myself as like a *halfwit*, or somethin -- an not no idiot -- cause when people think of a idiot, more’n likely they be thinkin of one of them *Mongolian idiots* -- the ones with they eyes too close together what look like Chinamen and drool a lot an play with theyselves.”

When I teach people how to write, I begin with a golden rule that all MFA writing programs, and all great artists – from the ancient Chinese potters to the masters of the Renaissance – insist upon: copy the best works of your teacher before you create your own. The same holds true for writing the perfect book proposal: don’t reinvent the wheel. There’s maybe a dozen templates out there that have been proven to “wow” the publisher, so imitate them as closely as you possibly can.

You should also apply the same principle when you write the opening paragraphs for each chapter in your book. Find the best example that comes closest to the topic you want to write about – a book that was not only a best seller but received accolades for the quality of the author’s writing – and imitate it’s structure and style. Tweak it to fit your own message and then when you revise it, tweak it some more as you slowly bring your own voice into your outline and introductory chapter. Through imitation we learn how to see through the master’s eyes. We learn how to paint like Da Vinci. We learn how to sculpt like Michelangelo. And we learn how words *feel* when we emulate the style of the authors who have impressed us the most.

Writing is not an art; it’s a craft. And the more you imitate, the better you get, especially if you are a beginning writer. When I read *Forrest Gump*, I laughed my head off, but when I discovered that he lifted the style from Mark Twain, I decided to try it as well, as an exercise to get into the head of two great masters of the craft. Here’s what I composed:

Let me say this: BEIN A RITER IS NO BOX OF CHOCOLATES. People laugh, lose patience, treat you shabby. Now they says folks sposed to be kind to the afflicted, but let me tell you -- it ain’t always that way.

I been a riter since I was born. My IQ is near 70, which qualifies me, so they say. Probably, tho, I’m closer to bein a novelist, or maybe even a poet, but personally, I’d rather think of myself as a biographist -- an not no riter -- cause when people think of a riter, more’n likely they be thinkin of one of

them edjukated riters like Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, or Billy Clinton -- the ones with they legs too far apart, drool a lot, an play with theyselves.

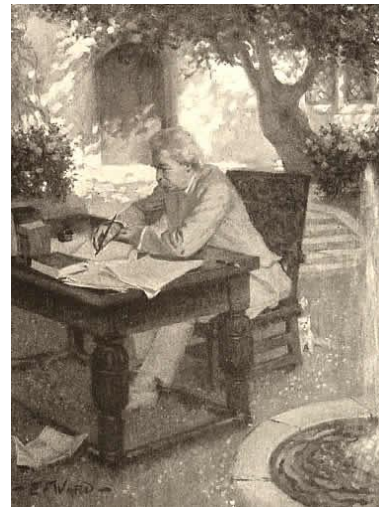
I wrote an entire chapter for my anthology, *The Spirit of Writing*, using this style, but my editor trashed it. "Had to go," she said, or she wouldn't publish the book. I was enraged (and you'll be too when they trash *your* favorite chapter, concept, and title), but you'll need to follow most of their suggestions. First, they're usually right, and even when they're not, if you become a "difficult" author, they won't to put any effort or money into marketing your book. That's the NY Rule: Publish it *their* way, or publish it yourself.

Here's a writing tip: whenever you come across a book with a great paragraph that you love, write it down, verbatim. Then ask yourself this question: "How might I use this style in my own book?" Then rewrite it, using one of the topics of your book. And take a few minutes to study these writing tips from Mark Twain. They're just as true today as they were a century ago. Then stretch that truth just enough to entertain the reader!

Ten Writing Tips from Mark Twain

This first piece of advice has been echoed by nearly every great writer and teacher of the 20th Century, and it is embraced by every New York nonfiction editor I've met:

1. "I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English - it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them - then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice." (Letter to D. W. Bowser, March 20, 1880)



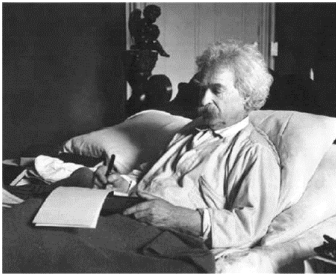
2. "You need not expect to get your book right the first time. Go to work and revamp or rewrite it. God only exhibits his thunder and lightning at intervals, and so they always command attention. These are God's adjectives. If you thunder and lightning too much, the reader ceases to get under the bed!"

3. "As to the adjective: when in doubt, strike it out."

4. "The more you explain it, the more I don't understand it."

5. "Great books are weighed and measured by their style and matter, and not the trimmings and shadings of their grammar."

6. “I like the exact word, and clarity of statement, and here and there a touch of good grammar for picturesqueness.” (*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 1924)



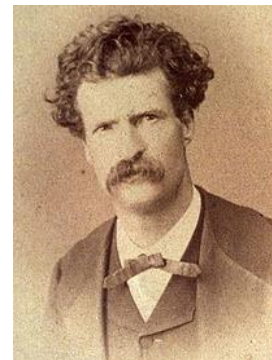
7. “To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement. To condense the diffused light of a page of thought into the luminous flash of a single sentence, is worthy to rank as a prize composition just by itself...Anybody can have ideas--the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph.” (Letter to Emeline Beach, February 10, 1868)

8. “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

9. “Let us guess that whenever we read a sentence and like it, we unconsciously store it away in our model-chamber; and it goes, with the myriad of its fellows, to the building, brick by brick, of the eventual edifice which we call our style.” (Letter to George Bainton, October 15, 1888)

10. “It was by accident that I found out that a book is pretty sure to get tired along about the middle and refuse to go on with its work until its powers and its interest should have been refreshed by a rest and its depleted stock of raw materials reinforced by lapse of time.”

Archaic though it may sound, this last piece of advice is important. You’ll often hit dry spots where no words come, or you just don’t have the desire to write. You may even turn sick, wondering if you were an idiot, like Forrest Gump, to ever pick up that damned pen in the first place (Twain also suggested that you use the word “damn” as often as possible, just to give the editor something to take out that you didn’t really care about – and yes, I’ve done this little trick myself, leaving in things that I didn’t really care that much about). Here’s how Twain handled the problem when the energy for a book ran out:



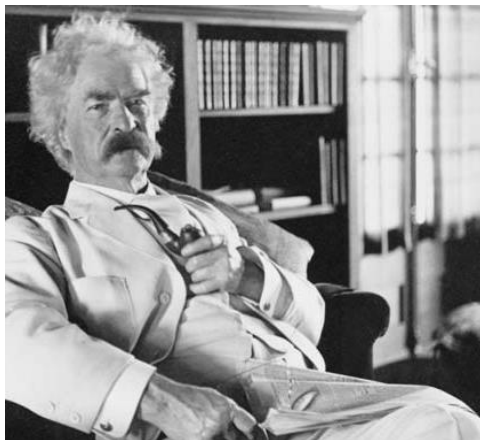
“It was when I had reached the middle of Tom Sawyer that I made this invaluable find. At page 400 of my manuscript the story made a sudden and determined halt and refused to proceed another step. Day after day it still refused. I was disappointed, distressed and immeasurably astonished, for I knew quite well that the tale was not finished and I could not understand why I was not able to go on with it. The reason was very simple -- my tank had run dry; it was empty; the stock of materials in it was exhausted; the story could not go on without materials; it could not be wrought out of nothing.

When the manuscript had lain in a pigeon hole two years I took it out one day and read the last chapter that I had written. It was then that I

made the great discovery that when the tank runs dry you've only to leave it alone and it will fill up again in time, while you are asleep -- also while you are at work on other things and are quite unaware that this unconscious and profitable cerebration is going on.

It is my habit to keep four or five books in process or erection all the time and every summer add a few courses of bricks to two or three of them, but I cannot forecast which of the two or three it is going to be. It takes seven years to complete a book by this method but still it is a good method: gives the public a rest.”

But I, like every writer and publisher, also believe that there are exceptions to every rule, and thus I encourage you to break them whenever it feels right. Take, for example, Mark Twain’s 11th “rule: “Write what you know.” I, however, prefer to write about what I *don’t* know, and collect the research and answers along the way. That way the discovery stays fresh, for me, and for the reader. Over time, every writer finds their own voice, but if you stick to that voice, New York will often reject your next book. They expect you to be original every time, especially if they’re giving you a big advance. Why? Because they know that readers often tire of the same author. Thus people like Scott Peck, John Gray, and James Redfield – each of whom sold millions of copies of their first books – often received tiny advances for books written later in their life. Rarely do we get to repeat the clichéd “fifteen minutes of fame.”



Samuel Clemens worked as a riverboat captain, which gave him the expertise to write his stories. He was a journalist and newspaperman, which gave him the skills for writing brisk, tight prose. “Mark Twain” was a measurement of the river’s depth (12 feet), which meant “safe.” If you want to get the large advance from New York, you must follow the rules, but you can never write in a manner that would be considered “safe.”