

NOTES FROM: *The Writing Life*, by Annie Dillard

SUMMARY: You can finish this book in just a few hours (it's only about 90 pages long) and if you're a writer, or you think you might want to *be* one, it will stay with you for a *very* long time. That was the case for me, as I kept coming back to my notes on this book for *weeks* after I finished it.

The Writing Life is one of the top "advice for writers" books, right alongside *Bird by Bird, On Writing* (Stephen King and Charles Bukowski - different books, same title), *Draft No 4*, and *Consider This*, among others. Dillard won a Pulitzer Prize for another book of hers, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and she's been writing up a storm for decades. Novels, narrative nonfiction, essays, etc. In this book, she shares her absolute *best* tips and tricks.

She's been described as a "gregarious recluse," as she's far more comfortable out in her cabin on the West Coast of the US than in the city, but she welcomes you right in as a fellow writer, artist, and creative, and lets you in on everything she's been thinking about when it comes to crafting the perfect sentence, connecting to readers, *seeing* as a writer, dealing with the monotony of the writing life, and everything else that comes with dedicating oneself to words.

I really don't see how, if you want to be a writer, you can't just devote, like, a couple of hours to reading one of the *best books* out there on how to be a *better* writer. She'll explain the real purpose of setting a schedule and sticking to it, the differences between and advantages of several competing writing styles, how to dig deeper in your writing and come up with insights and lessons that are unavailable to those unable to sit still and wait, and how to deal with the vicissitudes of the writing life.

Even if you're *not* a writer, you should *still* read it, if for no other reason than to see how a master craftswoman does it.

Emerson: "No one suspects the days to be gods."

Goethe: "Do not hurry; do not rest."

"Be prepared to sacrifice even the parts of your book that you worked the hardest for."

"Your work isn't necessarily a completed book, or a completed text of some kind, but rather to keep the work itself going."

MK: Graham Greene noticed that since a novel takes perhaps years to write, the author is not the same man at the end of the book as he was at the beginning.

“The long poem, John Berryman said, takes between five and ten years. Thomas Mann was a prodigy of production. Working full time, he wrote a page a day. That is 365 pages a year, for he did write every day - a good-sized book a year. At a page a day, he was one of the most prolific literary writers who ever lived. Flaubert wrote steadily, with only the usual, appalling, strains. For twenty-five years he finished a big book every five to seven years. If a full-time writer averages a book every five years, that makes seventy-three usable pages a year, or a usable fifth of a page a day. The years that biographers and other nonfiction writers spend amassing and mastering materials match the years novelists and short story writers spend fabricating solid worlds that answer to immaterial truths. On plenty of days the writer can write three or four pages, and on plenty of other days he concludes he must throw them away. These truths comfort the anguished.”

MK: Saint-Pol Roux used to hang the inscription, “the poet is working” from his door while he slept.

“The reason to perfect a piece of prose as it progresses - to secure each sentence before building on it - is that original writing fashions a form. It unrolls out into nothingness. It grows cell to cell, bole to bough to twig to leaf; any careful word may suggest a route, may begin a strand of metaphor or event out of which much, or all, will develop.”

“The reason not to perfect a work as it progresses is that, concomitantly, original work fashions a form the true shape of which it discovers only as it proceeds.”

“The written word is weak. Many people prefer life to it. Life gets your blood going, and it smells good. Writing is mere writing, literature is mere. It appeals only to the subtlest senses - the imagination's vision, and the imagination's hearing - and the moral sense, and the intellect. This writing that you do, that so thrills you, that so rocks and exhilarates you, as if you were dancing next to the band, is barely audible to anyone else. The reader's ear must adjust down from loud life to the subtle, imaginary sounds of the written word. An ordinary reader picking up a book can't yet hear a thing; it will take half an hour to pick up the writing's modulations, its ups and downs and louds and softs.”

Plato: “What if the man could see Beauty Itself, pure, unalloyed, stripped of mortality and all its pollution, stains, and vanities, unchanging, divine,...the man becoming, in that communion, the friend of God, himself immortal...would that be a life to disregard?”

"I was working hard, although of course it did not seem hard enough at the time - a finished chapter every few weeks. I castigated myself daily for writing too slowly. Even when passages seemed to come easily, as though I were copying from a folio held open by smiling angels, the manuscript revealed the usual signs of struggle - bloodstains, teeth marks, gashes, and burns."

"This night, as on most nights, I entered the library at dusk. The building was locked and dark. I had a key. Every night I let myself in, climbed the stairs, found my way between the tall stacks in the dark, located and unlocked my study's door, and turned on the light. I remembered how many stacks I had to hit with my hand in the dark before I turned down the row to my study. Even if I left only to get a drink of water, I felt and counted the stacks with my hand again to find my room. Once, in daylight, I glanced at a book on a stack's corner, a book I presumably touched every night with my hand. The book was *The World I Live In*, by Helen Keller."

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."

"A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days."

"Jack London claimed to write twenty hours a day. Before he undertook to write, he obtained the University of California course list and all the syllabi; he spent a year reading the textbooks in philosophy and literature. In subsequent years, once he had a book of his own under way, he set his alarm to wake him after four hours' sleep. Often he slept through the alarm, so, by his own account, he rigged it to drop a weight on his head. I cannot say I believe this, though a novel like *The Sea-Wolf* is strong evidence that some sort of weight fell on his head with some sort of frequency."

"The fanaticism of my twenties shocks me now. As I feared it would."

"It should surprise no one that the life of the writer - such as it is - is colorless to the point of sensory deprivation. Many writers do little else but sit in small rooms recalling the real world."

"At once I noticed that I was writing - which, as the novelist Frederick Buechner noted, called for a break, if not a full-scale celebration."

"Where next?' I knew where next. It was within my possibilities. If only I could concentrate. I must quit. I was too young to be living at a desk. Many fine people were out there living, people whose consciences permitted them to sleep at night despite their not having written a decent sentence that day, or ever."

"I do not so much write a book as sit up with it, as with a dying friend. During visiting hours, I enter its room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better."

"You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment."

"Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed? Can the writer isolate and vivify all in experience that most deeply engages our intellects and our hearts? Can the writer renew our hope for literary forms? Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power? What do we ever know that is higher than that power which, from time to time, seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered?"

"He goes because he must, as Galahad went towards the Grail: knowing that for those who can live it, this alone is life."

"The impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes."

William James: "If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight."

Julian Barnes: "It's easy, after all, not to be a writer. Most people aren't writers, and very little harm comes to them."

"Purity does not lie in separation from but in deeper penetration into the universe."