

NOTES FROM: *On Writing*, by Stephen King

SUMMARY: This is one of the best-known books “on writing,” and it’s usually one of the first that I recommend, *regardless* of whether you’re a Stephen King fan or not.

On Writing is split into two halves, the first being more autobiographical, where we get a sense of how Stephen King developed into the young writer he became, as well as some of the formative experiences that contributed to his love of the written word. His mother was his very first fan, and *every* writer deserves to have a “first fan” like King’s mom!

The second half is more technical, where he raves about adverbs and editors - and of course *reading*, which activity is one of *the most important*, says King, for any writer to make time for in their schedule. The best writers, according to him, *read* a lot and *write* a lot. There’s really no substitute for either of them.

None of his advice is stuffy or staid, and the book is both hilarious *and* wise throughout. You get so much more than a passing glimpse into who he is, what made him, and what he overcame - specifically, a crippling drug and alcohol addiction, as well as being hit by a *van*, no less! There’s much more to him than you’d *ever* be able to get from his novels.

From beginning to end, you’re taken from his earliest days of discovering his love for the craft, through rejection after rejection after painful rejection, through the time where he was so fucked up on drugs and alcohol that he has *no recollection* of even writing *Cujo*, one of his most famous novels.

But he made it. In the end, he made it, and *On Writing* is a 320-page masterclass from one of the bestselling authors of all time, one I’ll keep returning to for as long as I still have something to say and still want others to hear it.

“The editor is always right.”

“No writer will take all of his or her editor’s advice; for all have sinned and fallen short of editorial perfection.”

King’s earliest memory, of being stung by a wasp while carrying a cinder block over his head: “It was the worst pain I had ever suffered in my short life, but it only held the top spot for a few seconds.”

King’s mother bought four copies of his first book for 25 cents each, which he wrote when he was a little kid, and sent them off to her four sisters.

“She said it was good enough to be in a book. Nothing anyone has said to me since has made me feel any happier.”

“Your job isn’t to find good, new ideas, but to recognize them when they show up.”

“After a while, the nail could no longer support the weight of the rejection slips nailed to my wall. So I replaced the nail with a spike and kept on writing.”

“I think I was forty before I realized that almost every writer of fiction and poetry who has ever published a line has been accused by someone of wasting his or her God-given talent.”

“If you write, someone will try to make you feel lousy about it.”

“When you write a story, you’re telling yourself the story. When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story.”

“And whenever I see a first novel dedicated to a wife (or a husband), I smile and think, ‘There’s someone who knows.’”

“The writer’s original perception of a character or characters may be as erroneous as the reader’s.”

“Stopping a piece of work just because it’s hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea.”

Stephen King’s mother: “We could hear the pause after each rasping breath she drew growing longer and longer. Finally there were no more breaths and it was all pause.”

The Hemingway Defense: “As a writer, I am a very sensitive fellow, but I am also a man, and real men don’t give in to their sensitivities. Only sissy-men do that. Therefore I drink. How else can I face the existential horror of it all and continue to work?”

“It’s been almost twelve years since I took a drink, and I’m still struck by disbelief when I see someone in a restaurant with a half-finished glass of wine near at hand. I want to get up, go over, and yell, ‘Finish that! Why don’t you finish that?’ into his or her face. I found the idea of social drinking ludicrous - if you didn’t want to get drunk, why not just have a coke?”

“The point of this intervention, which was certainly as unpleasant for my wife and kids and friends as it was for me, was that I was dying in front of them. Tabby said that I had my choice: I could get help at a rehab or I could get the hell out of the house. She said that she and the kids loved me, and for that very reason none of them wanted to witness my suicide. I bargained, because that’s what addicts do. I was charming, because that’s what addicts are. In the end I got two weeks to think about it. In retrospect, this seems to summarize all the insanity of that time. Guy is standing on top of a burning building. Helicopter arrives, hovers, drops a rope ladder. ‘*Climb up!*’ the man leaning out of the helicopter’s door shouts. Guy on top of the burning building responds, ‘Give me two weeks to think about it.’”

“At the end of my adventures I was drinking a case of sixteen-ounce tallboys a night, and there’s one novel, *Cujo*, that I barely remember writing at all. I don’t say that with pride or shame, only with a vague sense of sorrow and loss. I like that book. I wish I could remember enjoying the good parts as I put them down on the page.”

“Writing is a form of telepathy.”

"A prissy attention to detail takes all the fun out of writing. What am I going to say, 'on the table is a cage three feet, six inches in length, two feet in width, and fourteen inches high'? That's not prose, that's an instruction manual."

"This is what we're looking at, and we all see it. I didn't tell you. You didn't ask me. I never opened my mouth and you never opened yours. We're not even in the same YEAR together, let alone the same room...except we ARE together. We're close. We're having a meeting of the minds."

“Avoid the passive voice when you have the option of being more direct and forceful.”

“The reader must always be your main concern.”

“The adverb is not your friend.”

“I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops.”

“I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing.”

“Good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation.”

“While to write adverbs is human, to write ‘he said’ or ‘she said’ is divine.”

“Writing is refined thinking.”

“If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.”

“Quite often, the bad books have more to teach than the good ones.”

“Most writers can remember the first book he or she put down, thinking: ‘I can do better than this!’”

“What could be more encouraging to the struggling writer than to realize his or her work is unquestionably better than that of someone who actually got paid for their stuff?”

“You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you.”

“If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have time (or the tools) to write.”

“The trick is to teach yourself to read in small sips as well as in long swallows.”

"Reading at meals is considered rude in polite society, but if you expect to succeed as a writer, rudeness should be the second-to-least of your concerns. The least of all should be polite society and what it expects. If you intend to write as truthfully as you can, your days as a member of polite society are numbered, anyway."

"If god gives you something you can do, why in God's name wouldn't you do it?"

"And when I'm not working, I'm not working at all, although during those periods of full stop I usually feel at loose ends with myself and have trouble sleeping. For me, not working is the real work. When I'm writing, it's all the playground, and the worst three hours I ever spent there were still pretty damned good."

"Only under dire circumstances do I allow myself to shut down before I get my 2,000 words."

"The closed door is your way of telling the world and yourself that you mean business."

"The work is always accomplished one word at a time."

"For me, the music is just another way of shutting the door."

"In both writing and sleeping, we learn to be physically still at the same time we are encouraging our minds to unlock from the humdrum rational thinking of our daytime lives."

"Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day, and from when to when."

"The situation comes first, and as you watch what the characters do and how they respond, the story develops on its own."

"The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as 'what if' questions."

"Honesty in storytelling makes up for a great many stylistic faults."

"One of the cardinal rules of good fiction is never tell us a thing if you can show us instead."

"The best stories always end up being about the people, more so than the event."

"We all think that we are the protagonist, and if you bring that out in your fiction, your characters will be less one-dimensional."

"When your Ideal Reader is reviewing your manuscript, try and find out which passage they were reading when they set the book aside for a bit. What was so easy to put down?"

"The most important things to remember about backstory are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn't very interesting. Stick to the parts that are, and don't get carried away with the rest."

“There have been times when for me the act of writing has been a little act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair.”

"The air I'm taking in is very cold, but it's air, at least, AIR, and I keep breathing it. I don't want to die. I love my wife, my kids, my afternoon walks by the lake. I also love to write; I have a book on writing that's sitting back home on my desk, half-finished."

“When you’re badly hurt, everyone calls you by your first name, everyone is your pal.”

“The scariest moment is always just before you start.”