

George Orwell, Rudolf Flesch, Anne Lamott, Max Perkins, Louise Rosenblatt, Frank Smith, Tom Wolfe, and many more.

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WRITING TOOLS QUICK LIST



Use this quick list of *writing tools* as a handy reference. Copy it and keep it in your wallet or journal, or near your desk or keyboard. Share it and add to it.

Part One: Nuts and Bolts

1. Begin sentences with subjects and verbs.
Make meaning early, then let weaker elements branch to the right.
2. Order words for emphasis.
Place strong words at the beginning and at the end.
3. Activate your verbs.
Strong verbs create action, save words, and reveal the players.
4. Be passive-aggressive.
Use passive verbs to showcase the "victim" of action.
5. Watch those adverbs.
Use them to change the meaning of the verb.

6. Take it easy on the -ings.
Prefer the simple present or past.
7. Fear not the long sentence.
Take the reader on a journey of language and meaning.
8. Establish a pattern, then give it a twist.
Build parallel constructions, but cut across the grain.
9. Let punctuation control pace and space.
Learn the rules, but realize you have more options than you think.
10. Cut big, then small.
Prune the big limbs, then shake out the dead leaves.

Part Two: Special Effects

11. Prefer the simple over the technical.
Use shorter words, sentences, and paragraphs at points of complexity.
12. Give key words their space.
Do not repeat a distinctive word unless you intend a specific effect.
13. Play with words, even in serious stories.
Choose words the average writer avoids but the average reader understands.
14. Get the name of the dog.
Dig for the concrete and specific, details that appeal to the senses.
15. Pay attention to names.
Interesting names attract the writer — and the reader.
16. Seek original images.
Reject clichés and first-level creativity.
17. Riff on the creative language of others.
Make word lists, free-associate, be surprised by language.
18. Set the pace with sentence length.
Vary sentences to influence the reader's speed.

19. Vary the lengths of paragraphs.
Go short or long — or make a turn — to match your intent.
20. Choose the number of elements with a purpose in mind.
One, two, three, or four: each sends a secret message to the reader.
21. Know when to back off and when to show off.
When the topic is most serious, understate; when least serious, exaggerate.
22. Climb up and down the ladder of abstraction.
Learn when to show, when to tell, and when to do both.
23. Tune your voice.
Read stories aloud.

Part Three: Blueprints

24. Work from a plan.
Index the big parts of your work.
25. Learn the difference between reports and stories.
Use one to render information, the other to render experience.
26. Use dialogue as a form of action.
Dialogue advances narrative; quotes delay it.
27. Reveal traits of character.
Show character-istics through scenes, details, and dialogue.
28. Put odd and interesting things next to each other.
Help the reader learn from contrast.
29. Foreshadow dramatic events and powerful conclusions.
Plant important clues early.
30. To generate suspense, use internal cliffhangers.
To propel readers, make them wait.
31. Build your work around a key question.
Stories need an engine, a question that the action answers for the reader.

32. Place gold coins along the path.
Reward the reader with high points, especially in the middle.
33. Repeat, repeat, and repeat.
Purposeful repetition links the parts.
34. Write from different cinematic angles.
Turn your notebook into a camera.
35. Report and write for scenes.
Then align them in a meaningful sequence.
36. Mix narrative modes.
Combine story forms using the broken line.
37. In short works, don't waste a syllable.
Shape short writing with wit and polish.
38. Prefer archetypes to stereotypes.
Use subtle symbols, not crashing cymbals.
39. Write toward an ending.
Help readers close the circle of meaning.

Part Four: Useful Habits

40. Draft a mission statement for your work.
To sharpen your learning, write about your writing.
41. Turn procrastination into rehearsal.
Plan and write it first in your head.
42. Do your homework well in advance.
Prepare yourself for the expected — and unexpected.
43. Read for both form and content.
Examine the machinery beneath the text.
44. Save string.
For big projects, save scraps others would toss.
45. Break long projects into parts.
Then assemble the pieces into something whole.
46. Take an interest in all crafts that support your work.
To do your best, help others do their best.
47. Recruit your own support group.
Create a corps of helpers for feedback.

48. Limit self-criticism in early drafts.

Turn it loose during revision.

49. Learn from your critics.

Tolerate even unreasonable criticism.

50. Own the tools of your craft.

Build a writing workbench to store your tools.

For more information on *Writing Tools*, see the Web sites for the Poynter Institute (www.poynter.org/writingtools) and Little, Brown and Company (www.HachetteBookGroupUSA.com). To purchase a copy of *Writing Tools*, visit your local or online bookstore.