



## Secrets of Writing

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### Abstract

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Research over the last few decades leads to conclusions that conflict with established practice: We don't acquire language by study, and we don't become better writers by writing more. Input counts, not output. But actual writing can help us solve problems and make us smarter. This happens largely through revision, rereading what we have written and making improvements. As playwright Neil Simon put it, "mediocre writers write, good writers rewrite."

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## Introduction

I begin this paper with a note of thanks to researchers in the area of writing. I have not contributed to much of the research I cite in this paper, but I have benefited enormously from it. Over the last four decades I have been studying the research in “the composing process,” experimental studies and case histories, along with excellent advice from writers themselves. Every day I think about what Peter Elbow, Kurt Vonnegut, Neil Simon, Ernest Hemingway, Irving Wallace, Robert Boice and many others have taught me. My hope is that you will profit from their wisdom as I have.

I have presented them as “secrets of writing.” There has been no deliberate attempt to keep these insights from us, but they are, unfortunately, not well-known. My goal is to make them known to a few more people, and I am confident that this will result in more wisdom and far less suffering for these writers. I thus hope to contribute to both the actual knowledge base in Research in Language and Education, and also to the process of contributing to our research base.

### Secret #1

*More writing will not result in better writing form: writing form is the result of reading.* This may seem like a violation of common sense, but study after study suggests we do not learn to write by writing. In several articles and books (Krashen, 1994, 2004, 2011), I cite studies showing that increasing student written output does not increase competence in first and second language development. But increasing input does increase competence: Those who read more, write better: they spell better, have larger vocabularies, better grammar and a more acceptable writing style.

### Secret #2

*Writing itself, while it does not develop better writers in terms of style and grammatical accuracy, spelling, etc., has tremendous benefits.* Writing can help us solve problems and can make us smarter. As you write, you come up with new ideas and better versions of your old ideas. As Peter Elbow puts it, “Meaning is what you end up with, not what you start out with.” (Elbow, 1973). This happens through revision, the next secret.

### Secret #3

Revision is the core of what is called “the composing process.” Seeing the need to revise means you are about to learn something new. It is not a sign of failure but the beginning of intellectual progress. In fact, Neil Simon, perhaps the most successful American playwright of all time, summarized it this way: “mediocre writers write, good writers rewrite” (Meeham, 1978, p. 72).

This is what I have learned from Neil Simon: When I feel I have to rewrite, I am not upset that the writing is taking so much time. Instead, I am happy, because it means I am about to learn something new.

From Kurt Vonnegut I have learned that revision happens slowly, a little at a time: “..writing allows even a stupid person to seem halfway intelligent, if only that person will write the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit each time.. a lot like inflating a blimp with a bicycle pump. Anybody can do it. All it takes is time.” (Vonnegut, 1984)

The enemy of intellectual progress is feeling that you need to get everything, ideas and form, right the first time, that even the first draft has to be of high quality. Ernest Hemingway cured me of this with this insight, for me the most valuable observation anybody has said about writing: “The first draft of anything is shit.”(for the history of this quote, see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/09/20/draft/>). Now I accept that the first draft will not be good, and that it will get better “just a little bit” with each revision.

**Secret #4**

If we accept that revision is the source of improvement and better ideas, we must enthusiastically agree with the old saying, “There’s nothing wrong with being wrong.” Recognizing that something is wrong is the invitation to revision and progress.

We sometimes have the impression that great ideas emerge fully formed. Not so. In fact, Charles Darwin wrote that “I cannot remember a single first-formed hypothesis which had not after a time to be given up or greatly modified” (Darwin, 1941, p. 151.) Our most brilliant thoughts need revision.

Cohen (2018) described remarks world-famous mathematician John Tate made to students in an honors calculus class when asked how he spent his work day: “I spend 50% of my time working hard and not getting anywhere, but maybe 10% of my time making some progress; and 40% of my time wondering how I can be so unproductive 90% of the time” (p. 269). Cohen notes that “even smart people struggle and waste time worrying about it.” But this is the way it is for all creators, and it is important that we realize this: “.. too many potential creators are inhibited by a belief that gifted others solve problems directly” (D.T. Campbell, in Simonton, 1988, p. 190).

**Secret #5**

*Encourage incubation.* Different writing experts have come to similar conclusions about how we solve problems. In 1926, Graham Wallas stated that problem-solving often requires “an interval free from conscious thought” (p. 87) to allow the free working of the subconscious mind: Over 70 years later, Tolle (1999) came to the same conclusion: “All true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness ... breakthroughs came at a time of mental quietude” (p. 20).

It was Henri Poincare and Graham Wallas who helped me tap the power of the subconscious: Poincare described his own creative process in doing mathematics: when he came to a block, a problem that was difficult to solve, he took a break, “free from conscious thought”, eg a walk on the beach (cited in Simonton, 1988, p.29) to allow the free working of the subconscious mind.

I use washing dishes as incubation time. I bring my computer into the kitchen and start work. Within a few minutes, as usual, I have a writer’s block. I then stop and wash and dry a few dishes, then return to the work. When I get back to work, I see that a few of the blocks have begun to loosen up. At the end of the evening, the kitchen is clean and I have made some progress with my paper. (I have found that it is important not to take long breaks; in fact, I have developed a sense of when it is time to return to work). I have also found that incubation does not occur when I try to fill the break with a different kind of creative work, e.g. a different scholarly paper. I have concluded that Wallas and Poincare are right: incubation requires “the free working of the subconscious mind.”

I suspect that we invoke this state when we need it for incubation. Do you remember the time when you were about 11 years old and you were supposed to be working on a math problem in class, and it confused you? The next thing you knew, the teacher was asking you if the answer was on the ceiling..... In fact, it was – you were incubating.

**Secret #6**

*The real composing process.* The cycle goes like this: write, encounter blocks (problems), take short mindless breaks, the solutions arrive. You write it down, then move on in your project, and write some more. And encounter more problems, more blocks.... In this way, “inspiration (usually) comes during work, not before it” (Madeleine L’Engle, see below). Inspiration is the dissolving of the writer’s block, the solution to the

problem you have discovered. Creativity is the result of engaging in the composing process: write, block, break/incubate/dissolve block, and then write some more (and run into more blocks.) This is how we make progress.

Every year I write a musical for my synagogue, a light-hearted way of celebrating the holiday of Purim, the story of how Queen Esther saved the Jews in Persia. For those interested, the plot is The Book of Esther in what Jews call the Bible, and what Christians call the Old Testament. I write it in the style of Weird Al Yankovic, using melodies from songs from movies and changing the words. The cast is nearly the same every year, members of the synagogue choir. When the choir meets for rehearsals for the New Year and Yom Kippur, starting around the end of August, my colleagues in the choir ask me about the Purim play – which movie will it be based on? (One year we did “Purim Rhapsody,” based on Bohemian Rhapsody, another year we based the play on Moana). Of course, I generally have no idea what the play will be about, and realize that “just thinking about it” and waiting for inspiration has not worked. I remember then Madeleine L’Engle’s advice: “Inspiration usually comes during work, rather than before it” (Engle, 1974) and of course, most valuable, I expect the first draft to have problems, as Hemingway warned us.

And here is where the next secret is revealed and applied:

### Secret #7

*Daily regular writing, which really means DAILY REGULAR BLOCKS AND PROGRESS.* Irving Wallace is of course best known as a novelist: I have only read two of his many novels (*The Man, The Prize*) and I thought they were very good. Wallace also wrote nonfiction. (I confess that I have read *The Intimate Sex Lives of Famous People*). Relevant to us, he and a colleague published a report on the writing habits of writers. Their conclusion: “. . . the vast majority of published authors have kept, and do keep, some semblance of regular daily hours...” (Wallace and Pear, 1971, pp. 518-9). Some write for a certain amount of time, some have a daily quota of words or pages, but they all did daily regular writing. All came to the same conclusion that children’s book author Kate DiCamillo did: “When I turned 29, I had an epiphany: I’d never get published if I didn’t actually write” (Cruger, 2004, p. 35). She began a two-page per day routine, which resulted in success.

A series of studies by Robert Boice provides strong empirical confirmation for the value of daily regular writing. In one study (Boice, 1982), junior faculty members who had a “regular, moderate habit of writing,” were compared to those who were “binge” writers (“... more than ninety minutes of intensive, uninterrupted work”) over a six-year period. The differences in productivity were amazing: The regular writers produced more than five times as much, and all got tenure or promotion. Only two of the binge writers got tenure.

John Steinbeck also endorsed the value of moderate amounts of daily writing and made this recommendation: “Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.” (The Paris Review, Fall, 1975.)

The “regular” aspect of daily regular writing is important. “If Charles Dickens missed a day of writing, “he needed a week of hard slog to get back into the flow.” (Hughes, in Plimpton, 1999, p. 247).

So I started daily regular writing of the Purim play. The first draft was exactly as Hemingway said it would be. But after three weeks of daily regular writing and revising (and revising), the first draft was done.

These are some of the secrets of writing. There are more. These insights have allowed me to write hundreds of papers, and, of course, without them, I would never have finished this one.

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**Stephen Krashen** has published over 500 articles (540 at last count) and a dozen scholarly books in the fields of literacy, language acquisition, neurolinguistics, and bilingual education. Many of these publications are available for free download at [sdrashen.com](http://sdrashen.com) and some are posted at [researchgate.net](http://researchgate.net). He no longer writes books because nobody can afford them. Nevertheless, he is the most frequently cited scholar in the field of language education. In addition, he was the 1977 Incline Bench Press Champion of Venice Beach (181 pound class) and until recently trained at Gold's Gym in Venice, California. He is best known for the Comprehension Hypothesis, the idea that we do not acquire language by speaking or writing, or by studying grammar rules. We acquire language when we understand what we hear and what we read, when we get "comprehensible input." The ability to acquire language in this way does not disappear at puberty or at bar mitzvah: It remains strong our entire lives. He has arrived at his conclusions from research, both his own and others, and through case histories, including his own. When he was in high school, his French teacher gave him a passing grade in French under the condition that he never take a French class again at that school. Today, he speaks French and several other languages quite well.