

## YOUR ALPHABET OF WRITING SUCCESS

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Successful writers everywhere know that great writing is the product of many skills. Few writers possess all of the skill sets needed to produce an acceptable finished work. However, your fellow writers in FWA can help. Editorial focus (critique) groups are springing up all over Florida. If your local writer's group doesn't have a focus group attached to it, you may want to consider starting one.

As in life, there are also rules for writing well. You might want to think of them as the "A, B, Cs of Writing."

**A stands for 'accurate.'** Whether you write fiction, non-fiction, technical, or any genre, you must be factually accurate in all aspects. With non-fiction, that's pretty obvious. Check and double check all facts and sources. Clearly identify any assumptions. Accuracy in fiction is also necessary, yet it is sometimes less prominent in the writer's mind. Fiction writing requires you to remain true to the situation you have created. If you create a town called "Happy Hollow," you must know details of that town: characteristics, culture, people living there and their basic belief systems. All of that consistently accurate background supports your story and makes it more real.

**B might relate to 'believable.'** Every part of your writing, regardless of genre, must be believable within the framework of your story. A non-fiction work on the life of an Eskimo must take the reader into the life and emotions of an Eskimo and make them believe that people exist in that culture and have that kind of lifestyle. If you write a novel or other fiction, the setting for your story should take the reader to a place they believe really could exist. Even in "Star Trek" there exists an element of believability because the characters are so thoroughly integrated into their way of life, science, and language that it appears hard sometimes to recognize they are not real.

**C leads you to 'critique.'** No one writes their best on the very first draft. Sometimes you don't even know that what you have written can be improved. Read it aloud – either to yourself or others – and listen to the cadence of your story. Share it with a critique group for input and tips on general improvements you can make. When writing non-fiction, have your work critiqued by other professionals who are knowledgeable in the subject area of your book. Facts should be verified and properly credited through foot notes or end notes.

**D brings us to 'delivery.'** Your delivery must reach the intended audience. Who is the intended reader of your writing? Write in the style they will accept. Couch your words and phrases in a structure they will be comfortable reading. Mediocre writing can lead to a sermonized style of putting words to paper, but better writers can use words to draw the audience into reading and make them feel like they are part of the unfolding story. If you are writing fiction, remember that the speech and actions used by your characters must be part of their identity. Don't allow all characters to use the same slang or react the same way; they will lose their individuality. Delivery is also important in non-fiction. Technical writers often face the daunting task of writing a report or magazine article with fairly dull facts and figures. Ratchet your delivery up a notch. Use a colored chart or graph rather than rows of numbers. Create a narrative paragraph instead of just spouting a sequence of figures. And of course, you don't want to forget about the 'hook'

in that interesting first sentence and paragraph. A stimulating, tight delivery of that lead-in will draw in your audience to continue reading what you write.

**E represents 'enthusiasm.'** That's the felt but unseen extra added to your work. Everyone who reads your work knows whether you are enthusiastic about what you write. In fiction, you must love your characters, your setting, and your plot. Handle your enthusiasm with care, let love grow while you nurture it, and allow the story to evolve on its own much like a child growing up. Non-fiction allows its own kind of enthusiasm to show through your work. When you are excited about your topic, you do better and more thorough research, use more active terms, and interpret more useful applications.

**F is for the 'fresh voice' of perspective** you need to bring to your work. Fiction lends itself to your perspective easily. Each of your characters and settings will be uniquely yours and will represent your fresh voice. Non-fiction is sometimes a little harder. The facts are the facts. If you decide to write a non-fiction book, be sure you can bring a fresh voice to those facts. What is your slant on the data? How can you use it to set forth a conclusion that has not already been shared by anyone else?

**G reminds you of the tremendous importance of 'grammar.'** Grammar includes all the elements of language. Sometimes it is also called 'style.' Poor grammar styles may have distractingly strange punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphing, spelling, or any unacceptable use of language making writing unpleasantly hard to read and understand. Good grammar is imperative. Publishers will not get excited about a book written with poor grammar. Editors will charge you a fortune to properly edit your book, and that includes using proper grammar. If necessary, find a place to take a course at a local college or high school. It will return to you an increased value for all your writing. Nothing you write will carry the importance you place on it unless other people can interpret it in a grammatical style that appeals to them.

Most every fiction work has either a **'hero' or a 'heroine' – your H**. Some writers fall so much in love with their fictional protagonist, they present no flaws. View your characters as human; give them endearing qualities like a dimple when they are especially tickled or a turned up nose. But you should also give them flaws like a limp from an old injury, a quick temper that gets them into trouble, or a language barrier they don't want to or cannot eliminate. As you write, you may want to base your characters on real people you know so you can include flaws as well as endearing qualities.

Every good work has times when the unexpected happens; that **'impossible situation' is your I**. Don't let the protagonist have an easy time of reaching her goal; throw road blocks in his way; make them struggle to triumph. If you are writing non-fiction, talk about hopeless or impossible situations that have been turned around with new inventions or some good old-fashioned ingenuity. Paint an accurate, factual picture, then contrast what would have been a fatal ending in the past with what is now an upbeat and positive outcome.

Life is not a continuous stream of either positive or negative, and neither should your novel run smoothly. Use **the J for 'juxtaposition'** in your writing, constantly changing from good to evil, from pure to sinful. In non-fiction, contrast the known with the unknown, the possibilities with the impossible.

Your story must be different. Even though there are a limited number of plots for fiction and rarely anything new in nonfiction [unless you write in the scientific field], your story must be out of the box. **For K, think of flying a kite**. Make your story soar

with unexpected developments, look for a new and different way of approaching a topic. A kite doesn't always fly into a tree the same way; neither should your story progress along anticipated lines. When I sit at my desk, gazing out the window of my tenth floor office, I often watch sea gulls float through the air as my mind struggles for the next word, the next plot twist, the next keystroke I want to make. Soar with the sea gulls, fly with kites, get out of the traditional box.

**L leads us to *long sentences; the bane of editors and readers alike.*** Keep your sentences short. Short sentences built tension. Long ones drag action down. Readers most likely will not slog along through a story that is not fast-paced action. Remember, you don't get paid by the word, you get paid by the word that works. Make all your words work.

**M is the all-important *marketing.*** Develop your audience in your mind during the writing process. Know where to find them, how to reach them, what to say to entice them to buy. Plan your marketing campaign before your book or story is published. No publisher does all the marketing; it is up to you, the writer to promote yourself and your book. Even fiction writers are encouraged to develop a comprehensive marketing plan including book signings, talks at book stores and local libraries, and author appearances anywhere you can get an audience.

**N is all things *new.*** Use new concepts, new ideas, a new approach or, if you are writing fiction, a new mythical place. No one wants to read the same old thing over and over; they want new excitement, a new adventure. Even when endearing characters are the same from one book to the next, your readers still want new escapades to unfold as they turn the pages. Tracy Akers has created such a new mythical place in her series for young adults and actually immerses herself in this world visually when she writes. Her office is a collection of things from the world she created.

**O stands for *originality;*** the all-important key that keeps you from getting sued for plagiarism and the word that makes you stand tall when the world of readers embraces and endorses your works. Keep thoughts and ideas original. If you use someone else's opinions or judgments, give them credit. Even the most well-known authors borrow – with credit – from others who have said exactly what they want to say.

**P can have so many meanings within the context of writing: *point of view, plot, or punctuation.*** For this article, focus on *punctuation.* Even though the others are important, it's the little things like commas and periods that can stop a reader cold when they are not used properly. If they are missing, it forces the reader into a web of confusion as they read over your words for the second or third time, trying to make sense of a gobbledy-gook of vocabulary. Use proper punctuation, or use a good editor. FWA will soon have an editing service to help you if you don't have an editor of your own already. Critique groups also help.

**Q is the letter that sends you on a *quest for your best.*** Don't give up searching until you know what you have written is the best you can do, that each word and sentence carries the story forward, that there is no fluff to be removed, and that all facts have been double- and triple-checked. Tim Dorsey prints his story out on file cards, paragraph by paragraph. He checks for flow and rearranges them when needed or eliminates them if one doesn't move the story forward.

**R sends you to the Internet or the library for *research.*** I recently listened to Blaize Clements talk about research in connection with her series of books on pets. It was

amazing how much research she did into the life of a pet sitter so she could write about it authoritatively. Even if you write about what you know, do your research. Make sure there are no new developments in that area if it is nonfiction. Look for a sense of completeness if you write fiction; make sure everything you know is somewhere on the pages.

**S reflects style.** Both your individual style and the use of style manuals for good editing and writing. As you write – whether fiction or nonfiction – you will develop your own style of writing. Before my retirement, I wrote instructional books on property management, including the text books currently used by the national trade association to teach their accreditation classes for community managers and owners. Even though it was a text book, it was easily identifiable as my writing, because I used the same chatty style that I used when writing articles for trade publications.

**T is a biggie when we refer to time.** This is both time period and place in time. For time period, think about the year of your story. If it takes place in 1950, there won't be cell phones or microwaves or e-mail. If it takes place in 2004, you'd be hard pressed to not use those things. Historical works must be even more precise about the daily conveniences that your characters have and don't have. Place in time mostly refers to your characters. It is easy to get so caught up in writing that the timeline of the story gets confused. Keep a good spreadsheet to track character locations and events. If you have a character in New York wondering why a friend in California hasn't written and a phone call is made, be sure to take into account the three-hour time difference in your dialog. If you are having trouble keeping track of what all your characters are doing at a certain time, send me an email and request my free Timeline Workshop materials. I'll email them to you . . . if you are on dial-up, please let me know so I separate the files into more than one email. If you have a Mac, you'll need to get someone to help you with the spreadsheet conversions, or send me a self-addressed, stamped 9 x 12 envelope with \$4.50 of postage on it.

**U is for urgency.** Even if there is no publisher or agent pushing you to finish your manuscript, you need to set a deadline and create urgency for yourself. Over the years, I've heard hundreds of folks tell me they are "writers" or that they are "writing a book." Yet, when I ask how many pages they have finished, or how many hours a day they work on it, they shake their heads. It's a quick shake, then they look off to the side and tell me that they are going to write it, they're still working on finding a place to set-up a desk, time without interruptions, or some other reason. I say to you that you are not a writer if you don't write. Hence, the need to create some sort of *urgency*. It is for yourself. If you don't start, you won't finish. If you start, and stop every little bit, then take a long time to start again, you won't finish. *Urgency* can fit with your lifestyle, but it must be something that drives you; such as two hours every morning, an hour every evening. Once you commit yourself to a time schedule, it has to be important in your lifestyle and to others who care about you. Guard your writing time and don't allow interferences. You'll soon see the results in your work and your output.

**V reminds you to create value** in your content. Why are you writing? Who is your target audience? Who will buy this book? Why should an agent be interested in your manuscript? Where is the *value* in what you write? If you are writing non-fiction, *value* is most often in the new information you share, the new techniques you bring to light, or in the way you present the topic that resonates with those who need it. For fiction writers,

*value* may well be just that you provide a few hours of escape from the hardships of life for your readers. *Value*, however, has another, stronger meaning for you as an author. When you write, think of creating multiple streams of income from your work. Who wants to do something and get paid for it once when you can get paid for it many times—and it's all the same work! Think about different methods of distribution for your work. Utilize e-books, books on CD, and the most important of all—create a series. Hook your readers on your topic, your characters, or a unique method of presentation. Then utilize that same hook to create a series that will earn you loyal readers. And, as new readers find you in years to come, all your earlier books will be new to them and you'll have more sale.

**W is for those all-important words** and how you use them that set you apart. There are thousands of words in the English language; use as many as you can. Find different ways to say things; avoid clichés and become a master of all that Webster and others have to offer. Use a thesaurus frequently. Consult a dictionary for synonyms—and antonyms that will bring new life to your work. One of the other standard reference works on my desk is a reverse dictionary. Published by Random House, it is titled “Word Menu” and provides a unique way to look at our language by subject matter in the way we understand it, use it and remember it. A priceless tool.

**X actually brings us two words that will help strengthen your writing.** *X-ray* reminds you to have that special type of vision that can look inside your work and ferret out the weaknesses that no one else might see. It also brings to mind the clinical setting where others use this as a tool to look inside your body. Several other people look at those diagnostic films. Allow the same with your work. Have others read your work; use an editor, join a critique group, read aloud to get the feel and tone of your manuscript and take constructive criticism positively. While we're thinking of a medical setting, also **think of *xyster*** – that surgical instrument used for scraping bones. Be ruthless in cutting your writing down to the bare bones of the story you are telling. Keep the things you need to move the story along, but make sure every single word, phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph, and scene do indeed move your story along. Try taking out one of these and see if the manuscript still advances. Yes, I know cutting is painful; these words are your babies, and you hate to throw them away. I was recently at an anniversary dinner for Pinellas Authors and Writers Organization and in chatting with another writer, she revealed a recent five thousand word cut right off the front of her novel-in-progress. Several of us had the same reaction: “You cut it, but you didn't really delete it, did you? You saved it, didn't you?” The intensity of our questions made all of us laugh. Yes, she saved it; those five thousand words were her babies. But, her novel is much stronger without them and she's glad she made the cut.

**Y prompts you not to *yabber***, a synonym for jabbering or talking foolishly. Don't randomly just type words that are not needed in your story. Don't allow all of your characters to wander all the way to China and back in their conversations and even in their mental ruminations. One of your characters might be a doddering older person without all their mental faculties, but not all of those in your book. Nor should the narrative portions of your book include any *yabber*. Writer's block is sometimes cured by just sitting down to a blank screen and forcing yourself to type anything that comes to mind. This exercise in *yabber* may have some productive and useful function. But you should keep it to a minimum in your writing.

**Z is to bring *zeal* and *zest*** to your work. Show your enthusiasm by being excited about the craft of writing as well as your individual manuscript. Forced energy, approaching your deadlines with dread rather than with *zest* will be evident on the finished page you submit. Keep your work alive through your sense of enjoyment and liveliness of spirit.

We have wandered through the entire alphabet; have you picked up any new tricks or techniques to help your writing? Do you now have that itch in your fingers that drives you to the keyboard or pen and makes you want to write to the exclusion of all else? Welcome to the world of writers. We all get those itches. Our muse takes control and we can do naught but follow along, and oh, what a ride it is!

Thanks for spending part of your day with me; let me know if you have any other specific areas of writing or issues about writing you would like to see addressed in future issues.