

**Finding Your Writing Style:
Tips and Prompts for Writing Students
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What defines “good writing” for academic or creative writing assignments?

- Strong wording...so what do you think I mean by strong wording?
 - Strong verbs. Do you use passive verbs too often? Is, was, are, were. Read through your work and see if you have weak verbs or strong verbs.
 - Fix this sentence: This room is noisy. (Can have multiple write answers.) Ex.: The clicking of the pens and the squeaking of the chairs filled the room.
 - Strong adjectives—don’t just go for the obvious color words or say things like *nice* or *sweet* or *ugly* or *rude*. Beef up your descriptions with things you would notice in more detail.
 - Strong adverbs go along with this—how is someone walking or sitting or talking or working? Make the scene come alive for me in both fiction and nonfiction.

- A flow: Have a clear pattern even if you are moving a reader between times. Example: In Sullivan’s Island, Dorothea Benton Frank alternates between 1999 and 1963. She puts the year in her chapter heading so you know immediately what era you are about to read about. If you are changing time periods within a chapter, make sure the reader has some way of following you. Never ever assume your reader knows the information you know—we can’t read the minds of authors.
 - If you are skipping a few years—example: start a story in a character’s childhood, then skip his teen years—make sure you are hinting to your reader that this is happening. Otherwise your reader may think your character got married at age eight or went to a nursing home at 16.

- Strong characters:
 - Unless you are doing a straight genealogy for your family, this is true for fiction or nonfiction. For nonfiction, write about interesting details and character strengths and flaws of who you are writing about. Think of what will draw a reader to your book and keep her reading it! Just because you are interested in the type of pen I write with does not mean anyone else is unless there is a very good story behind it.
 - For nonfiction, you are going to have to include some interesting trivia, a new perspective on a place or person, or breathe new life into an old tale. Tell a war story from a new perspective. Example: *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* shows a German concentration camp from the eyes of a child. See if you can find a true-to-life angle like that. (That particular book is fiction, but it illustrates my point.)
 - For fictional works, your characters must have exaggerated traits. If they are strong, they have to be almost unbelievably strong. Think of movies that have been popular lately that were inspirational, yet entertaining. Think of the characters that were based on reality, but still seemed larger than life in the films.
 - All books start with main characters that readers can sympathize with or relate to. Books and stories also need the supporting cast, however. These can be friends or enemies of the main character. Consider allies, enemies, and mentors to be the supporting characters in a story. Allies assist main characters in reaching their goal or overcoming challenges. Enemies or villains attempt to block characters from obtaining success or become obstacles to a goal. Mentors offer wisdom to characters along their journey.
 - Characters can move among the various roles. A secondary character in one scene can become a main character later in a story. A villain can have a change of heart. A mentor can fail at times. Transitions like these, however, have to be believable to the readers. A mean villain needs to have an enlightening moment that the readers can follow if the villain is to become an ally.

- A consistent purpose aimed at a particular audience: Consistency is the key. Think of your intended audience. Are you writing for friends, for potential customers, for unknown readers, for church members, for siblings? Your word choices will be different for different age groups and different social groups. Think of your purpose. Are you trying to inspire someone, cheer up someone, make someone laugh, make someone think deeply about a subject? Your tone affects your purpose.

Some of these exercises may seem elementary, but hang in there with me. I learned these at the beginning of my career from some professionals and have stuck with these methods through the years. I have been getting paid for my writing since I was in my 20s, so these techniques have gotten me through a lot of years! And remember that just as I tweaked them some to meet my own style and my own needs, you can tweak these once you are home to find what works for you. I am not trying to give you the 10 Commandments of Writing set in stone.

First, let's look at a free writing exercise that can be great to break writers block. It can be used at the beginning or in the middle of a project. I am currently using it to help me find a way to end my novel I am working on. I knew what was going to happen for most of the book, but now I have to end it.

- If you get stuck, try 30-second free writing exercises. What does that involve? Set a clock alarm or timer for 30 seconds. Write about your subject in pencil without stopping for the entire time. If you are writing about birds, for example, your writing may look like this:

Birds are colorful and musical. They live in my backyard. I saw an owl when I was hiking last week. My grandmother had a pet bird that was yellow. Some birds migrate depending on the season. Big Bird lives on Sesame Street. Robins live in our backyard. Our birdfeeder attracts hummingbirds. I can't think of anything else to say. I don't know how to identify bird calls. I saw a pelican by a pier on vacation. It ate a flounder.

(Notice that I kept writing even when I had no thoughts on birds--the topics change frequently--some thoughts are about food while others are about children's TV shows. But now I have some thoughts down on paper that may lead to paper ideas, poetry ideas, story ideas or ideas for an ad.)

Second—For fiction and nonfiction, you need depth to a character or person you are writing about. What gives you depth is not just your job title or marital status or what part of town you live in. We do need to know the basics of each character, but we also need personal more intimate details to make us relate to the character—readers need to care about the person we are reading about. Give details that readers can relate to.

Exercise for you: **Try to capture in words the sights, sounds, smells and tastes you have experienced in real life. Think of a recent really good meal at home or in a restaurant. List as many smells as you can in 20 seconds. List as many tastes as you can remember in detail. List as many sights as you can remember. What sounds do you remember?**

These will be different for each person even if you were at the same place at the same time. I may remember the tang of the dill pickles; you may remember the sweetness of the glaze of the honey baked ham. I may remember the perfume of the woman next to me. You may remember the smell of the smell of burnt bread coming from the kitchen.

Third—Characters cannot be flat, emotionless creations. To have strong writings, your characters need depth—they need to feel and to think. When we begin as young writers, we often tell our audience exactly what our characters feel. We simply say things like, "He was sad when he heard of her death." Consider how much stronger this statement is, however: "He wept uncontrollably as he ran from the house, feeling as if the walls were falling around him as

the words of her death filled the room.” This statement draws the reader into the emotion and paints a picture of grief.

Exercise: Write down eight quick words that describe your feelings about each of the following phrases or words:

- *muddy pawprints
- *summer car rides
- *burned dinner
- *new shoes
- *brown sculpting clay in your hands

If you are writing a short story or a book, get some of these *feeling* words in there. If you are stuck on what to say. Try this exercise with something the character is doing or seeing. What emotions would pop up? When you are stuck or just need the words to bring depth to a section, can you see how to use this exercise?

If you want to continue planning for a future novel or short story, write a character sketch for two of your main characters. In this sketch, discuss how their emotions may run throughout the book. Will these characters express strong emotions throughout the book? Will the emotions change as the characters develop throughout the story? Will the characters hide their emotions from others or be overly emotional in a crowd?

Remember—to improve your creative writing skills, write something every day. Write in a journal, blog, write a poem, or just get some thoughts down on paper by using a variety of writing exercises.

Some things to think about as you write: What inspires you? Do you write best after being in a quiet location or after an afternoon out with friends? Where do you write best? What do you do when you feel like you are stuck in a writing project with no direction? How do you handle writer’s block?

These are important questions to ask yourself if you are working on a paper or project that is challenging for you. Get to know your “writer” side. What conditions help you write freely? I write best to George Winston piano music playing on my computer as I write. Other writers prefer total silence. You have to find your own conditions that help you finish a writing project. If you feel blocked, are you trying some writing exercises to help get the words flowing again? At times, you may need to walk away from writing for a moment to refresh your mind and regain your writing momentum. After that, if you still feel haunted by writer’s block, try free writing on your topic for 30 minutes or try a writing exercise not related to your topic. Also, don’t forget that just going outside and daydreaming can be useful. Creativity does not always mean you are producing something. Daydreaming about what you will produce can be a key part of the creative process.

Fourth—a trick to help you decide what motivates your character: **Everyone has wishes based on things we want, things we need, or things we think we need. Fill in these blanks five times, thinking about your own wishes:**

If I had _____, I could _____.

Now fill in the blanks five times based on a fictional character you are writing or reading about.

Extra writing prompts:

1. Take thirty seconds to write about why your favorite character in a book is a strong character (remember I don't necessarily mean physical strength).
2. Write 10 strong action verbs that are noises like: clanked (the pan clanked against the side of the stove). Echoed, boomed, thundered, roared...
3. Write ten adjectives that describe something you saw this morning before arriving that are not colors (no blues, oranges, etc.)...bright, shiny, shimmering water, squawking duck, drooping child leaning over her cereal bowl...
4. Write ten sounds when hear when you are on the highway...
5. Write ten things you feel with your feet when walking barefoot in the summer.