

“WRITE A SENTENCE AS CLEAN AS A BONE” AND OTHER ADVICE FROM JAMES BALDWIN

<https://lithub.com/write-a-sentence-as-clean-as-a-bone-and-other-advice-from-james-baldwin>

Write to find out.

When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Spurn self-delusion.

I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living: and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford. His subject is himself and the world and it requires every ounce of stamina he can summon to attempt to look on himself and the world as they are.

—Introduction, *Nobody Knows My Name*

Use every experience.

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.

—“Autobiographical Notes,” *Collected Essays*

Read as much as you can.

I read everything. I read my way out of the two libraries in Harlem by the time I was thirteen. One does learn a great deal about writing this way. First of all, you learn how little you know. It is true that the more one learns the less one knows. I'm still learning how to write. I don't know what technique is. All I know is that you have to make the reader see it. This I learned from Dostoyevsky, from Balzac.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Travel.

The story of what can happen to an American Negro writer in Europe simply illustrates, in some relief, what can happen to any American writer there. It is not meant, of course, to imply that it happens to them all, for Europe can be very crippling, too; and, anyway, a writer, when he has made his first breakthrough, has simply won a crucial skirmish in a dangerous, unending and unpredictable battle. Still, the breakthrough is important, and the point is that an American writer, in order to achieve it, very often has to leave this country.

“The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American”, *Nobody Knows My Name*

Write with recklessness.

I find writing gets harder as time goes on. I'm speaking of the working process, which demands a certain amount of energy and courage (though I dislike using the word), and a certain amount of recklessness.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Trust the editing process.

Sometimes it comes very quickly. Seems almost to come from the top of my head. But in fact, it's been gestating for a long, long time. Most of the time it's not like that. Usually it's a matter of writing, recognizing it ain't right or it won't move. You tear it up and do it again and again. And then one day something happens—it works.

—Interview with Jewell Handy Gresham (1976)

But know when to stop.

When you've finished a novel it means, "The train stops here, you have to get off here." You never get the book you wanted, you settle for the book you get. I've always felt that when a book ended there was something I didn't see, and usually when I remark the discovery it's too late to do anything about it.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Fight the conspiracy against you.

Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent—which attitude certainly has a great deal to support it. On the other hand, it is only because the world looks on his talent with such a frightening indifference that the artist is compelled to make his talent important. So that any writer, looking back over even so short a span of time as I am here forced to assess, finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only because he was hurt in a certain way; and his help is simply to be enabled to move from one conundrum to the next—one is tempted to say that he moves from one disaster to the next.

—"Autobiographical Notes," *Collected Essays*

Writing is hard.

Every form is difficult, no one is easier than another. They all kick your ass. None of it comes easy.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Don't be too ironic.

You are speaking to an old rat. I find much of so-called avant-garde writing utterly trivial. If there is no moral question, there is no reason to write. I'm an old-fashioned writer and, despite the odds, I want to change the world. What I hope to convey? Well, joy, love, the passion to feel how our choices affect the world . . . that's all.

—Interview, *The New York Times* (1979)

Don't describe it, show it.

[My first drafts] are overwritten. Most of the rewrite, then, is cleaning. Don't describe it, show it. That's what I try to teach all young writers—take it out! Don't describe a purple sunset, make me see that it is purple.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Look deeply.

It is part of the business of the writer—as I see it—to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source.

—“Autobiographical Notes,” *Collected Essays*

Simplicity is king.

You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Write towards truth.

I certainly can't imagine art for art's sake . . . that's a European approach, which never made any sense to me. I think what you have to do, which is the difficult thing about a writer, is avoid slogans. You have to have the [guts] to protest the slogan, no matter how noble it may sound. It always hides something else; the writer should try to expose what it hides.

—Interview, *The New York Times* (1979)

Talent is less important than diligence.

Talent is insignificant. I know a lot of talented ruins. Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but, most of all, endurance.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Keep your distance.

Social affairs are not generally speaking the writer's prime concern, whether they ought to be or not; it is absolutely necessary that he establish between himself and these affairs a distance which will allow, at least, for clarity, so that before he can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back.

—“Autobiographical Notes,” *Collected Essays*

Write what you see.

I don't try to be prophetic, as I don't sit down to write literature. It is simply this: a writer has to take all the risks of putting down what he sees. No one can tell him about that. No one can control that reality. It reminds me of something Pablo Picasso was supposed to have said to Gertrude Stein while he was painting her portrait. Gertrude said, “I don't look like that.” And Picasso replied, “You will.” And he was right.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

Remember why you write.

The bottom line is this: You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. In some way, your aspirations and concern for a single man in fact do begin to change the world. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you can change it.

—Interview, *The New York Times* (1979)

Just keep writing.

Write. Find a way to keep alive and write. There is nothing else to say. If you are going to be a writer there is nothing I can say to stop you; if you're not going to be a writer nothing I can say will help you. What you really need at the beginning is somebody to let you know that the effort is real.

—Interview, *The Paris Review* (1984)

I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done.

—“Autobiographical Notes,” *Collected Essays*

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words.
Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

—Gary Provost

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Sometimes music is needed.

Sometimes silence.

A novel, like all written things, is a piece of music, the language demanding you make a sound as you read it.

Writing one is like remembering a song you've never heard before.

I have written them on subways, missing stops, as people do when reading them.

They can begin with the implications of a situation.

A person who is like this in a place that is like this, an integer set into the heart of an equation and new values, everywhere.

The person and the situation typically arrive together.

I am standing somewhere and watch as both appear, move toward each other, and transform.

Alice looking through the looking glass, who, on the other side, finds herself to be an Alex.

Or it is like having imaginary friends that are the length of city blocks.

The pages you write like fingerprinting them, done to prove to strangers they exist.

About my interests: I don't know if I have any, unless the morbid desire to own a sixteen-millimeter camera and make experimental movies can be so classified.

Otherwise, I love to eat and drink---it's my melancholy conviction that 've scarcely ever had enough to eat (this is because it's impossible to eat enough if you're worried about the next meal)--and I love to argue with people who do not disagree with me too profoundly, and I love to laugh.

I do not like bohemia, or bohemians, I do not like people whose principal aim is pleasure, and I do not like people who are earnest about anything.

I don't like people who like me because I'm a Negro; neither do I like people who find in the same accident grounds for contempt.

I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright.

I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done.

I want to be an honest man and a good writer.