

Tips to Improve Your Writing over Time

1. Read.

Read for pleasure. Read for fun. Read every day, if possible. Read authors you find especially engaging, including some who challenge you, and read everything they have published.

Spend time in the company of good writers. If all you ever read is mediocre writing, your chances of writing anything better are slim. If all you ever read is bad writing – well, you get the idea.

Reading develops your ear. It gives you a feeling for the rhythm and cadence and flow of language. It suggests the range of possible sentence structures and patterns. It helps you realize the possibilities for imaginative use of figurative language and various figures of speech. Perhaps most important, reading expands your vocabulary.

Just as you wouldn't try to be a musician without listening to music, don't try to be a writer without reading.

[What we read](#) (a blog on books read and discussed by Stephen Wilbers' book club)

2. Learn the rules of language so that you can write with confidence.

Be intentional about improving your writing. Identify your weaknesses and deficiencies. If there are gaps in your writing background – whether those gaps relate to the rules of grammar, punctuation, or usage – fill them. Learning the rules and conventions of language isn't rocket science, though it may require some effort, time, and attention.

If something prevents you from writing easily and with confidence, address the problem and do something about it. Don't fall into the trap (or the downward spiral) of avoiding writing because you lack confidence in your ability to do it well. Get the knowledge you need to be successful and to make positive assumptions about yourself as a writer.

Learn the rules, so that you can put them behind you. Learn the rules, so that you will know when you must follow them and when you may break them.

3. Learn the principles of effective writing.

Write with certain principles and guidelines in mind. For example, state your purpose clearly, decide on a persuasive strategy or point of view that is appropriate for your message and your audience, organize your material into a coherent sequence, and support your points with specific, relevant detail.

Concentrate on those principles you consider most significant, both for the particular writing assignment at hand and for your long-term development as a writer. Don't try to fix everything that might be wrong with your writing at once.

It's usually better to work on one principle at a time, such as Strunk & White's rule #16, "Use definite, specific, concrete language," or their rule #17, "Omit needless words." Following either rule would make a remarkable difference in many people's writing.

Other good principles to work on over time are William Zinsser's "articles of faith" ("humanity, clarity, simplicity, and vitality") or Somerset Maugham's three desired "qualities" ("lucidity, simplicity, and euphony").

4. Work with a partner or mentor.

One of the most useful things you can do to improve the quality of your writing, both on the short term and over time, is to do what creative and professional writers do: Work with a good editor. As William Zinsser puts it, "To be apprenticed to a good editor is the best way to learn how to write."

Find a colleague, friend, or mentor – someone you know will be positive and constructive in their criticism (preferably someone more skilled and experienced than you) – and work together proofreading and editing. Make a deal: You read their stuff, they read yours.

You might also consider forming a writers' group for the purpose of offering criticism and mutual support.

5. Study good writers and imitate their style.

Keep a file of good writing samples. Go back to them from time to time and remind yourself of what you liked about them. Then try to create the same effects in your own writing.

Years ago the editor and critic Malcolm Cowley recommended an exercise to my creative writing class at Vanderbilt. He suggested that we take a favorite passage – whether fiction, poetry, non-fiction, or everyday writing – and simply type it over. (Other writers maintain that the exercise works better if you copy the passage by hand.) The idea is to get close to the language, to approximate as nearly as possible the author's experience in choosing those particular words, to see how they feel in sequence and in relationship with one another, and to experience how the sentence structures unfold.

Try it sometime. It really works.

6. Practice.

If you want to be a good pianist, you have to practice playing the piano. If you want to be a good writer, you have to practice writing.

Write frequently. Better yet, write frequently and write in a variety of styles and genres, from informal e-mail notes and journal entries to executive summaries and long reports.

Some fiction writers like to write poetry on the side to keep their ears sharp, just as some jazz musicians like to play classical music to work on their technique.

Whether you are a musician, a writer, or a surgeon, you'll perform with more precision if you stay in practice.

7. Do some fun, relaxed writing to stay loose.

For many writers, writing on a regular basis is not a problem. They find plenty of occasions to write in a typical day or week. Staying loose may be another matter.

If everything you write must be precise and polished, you may find that over time writing becomes more and more of a chore.

Whatever your regular writing assignments, look for opportunities to do easy writing. Try to include some fun, relaxed writing in your regular schedule.