

CHAPTER 1

Breaking bad habits

All too often writers try to impress rather than inform. This bad habit usually results in writing that is needlessly complex. Why? Because if your priority is to show how much you know and the big words you can use, you will be less concerned about ensuring your reader understands your meaning.

Consider this unfortunate example of South African political-speak:

The public sector intellectuals and practitioners are currently engaged with finding responses to the pervasive question on whether it is entirely appropriate in all respects, given the difference in circumstances, values and goals between the public and private sectors to have borrowed so heavily from the tools, techniques and approaches of the private sector? ... What we can say without fear of contradiction is the fact that some of the approaches and management techniques that have found its way into the public sector through that paradigmatic shift of thinking that has come over the discipline of public administration, have resulted, to an extent, in improved operational effectiveness. I would like to be so bold as to categorically state that project management is one of the approaches that we have extended to the public sector that have much to offer to our effective functioning. And I can say this even in the knowledge that the full potential thereof have hitherto not been taken advantage of.¹

South Africa's then-Minister of Public Service and Administration uttered these unmemorable words at a 2003 conference in Johannesburg. This mélange of buzzwords, truisms, jargon and pseudo-intellectual phraseology can thankfully be reduced to its essence as follows:

As the discipline of public administration has evolved, so have management techniques. Project management approaches, including those borrowed from the private sector, have helped to improve public-sector effectiveness – and we can do more with these tools.

1 Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, "Project management in the public sector", 26 November 2003.

This example shows how much waffle can be cut away if you care about making your point clearly and concisely.

Even if your subject matter is complex or technical, you can still write about it clearly. What matters is your attitude to the reader. You need to connect with them, sharing what you know rather than making them think, “Wow, this person seems to know so much – but I’m not sure I understand what they’re saying.”

We often learn by example. Sometimes we learn to write in a way that is suitable for a very limited audience – for example, for your manager or the person who marks your assignments. The same is true if you work in an organisation where all your colleagues, particularly those more senior than you, are determined to sail the seas of jargon.

Take academic writing. It’s common for first-year university or college students to get back their initial assignments heavily marked up with their tutor’s red ink. And so students quickly learn to write in a more formal way – after all, your marks depend on it! You learn to avoid the first person (“I”) and colloquial expressions. You lengthen your sentences and use more academic phrases. You qualify every point you make. You hesitate to voice your own opinions. Your essays become a forest of references. In short, you imitate how your teachers write and, in the process, sacrifice clarity on the altar of complexity.

A major reason academic writing is often unfriendly to the reader is that academics aren’t trained to write simply and clearly, nor do they generally care to. As linguist and cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker points out in his article “Why academics stink at writing”, they have spent years writing things in a complex way and have been rewarded for doing so.² They write for their peers rather than students or non-specialists. If they keep doing this for years and nobody ever challenges them to write more accessibly, there’s no incentive for them to change.

This is true not only for academics, but for art critics, engineers, economists, lawyers, policy specialists – in short, anyone who specialises in a complex subject. It’s often easier to write in a convoluted way using a lot of jargon than it is to write simply. In some cases, the writer may not fully grasp what they are

2 Steven Pinker, “Why academics stink at writing”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 September 2014.

writing about and finds it easier to obfuscate than to clarify. It takes time and effort to write clearly; it also requires changing one's attitude so that the reader's understanding comes first.

Fortunately, there are signs of progress. Academic writing published on open access platforms (such as *The Conversation*) needs to be written in accessible language if it's to be understood by a general audience and shared widely.

Sharpening your ability to write clearly will serve you well, whatever your line of work. One of the most valuable intellectual skills is to ask questions – and your questions should extend to how you and those around you communicate. Even if you consider yourself a strong writer, some of the writing habits you formed at school, at university and in the workplace may need to be reconsidered and adjusted.

Let your incentive be this: your readers will be impressed not by how grand you sound but by how clearly you've communicated your ideas – and they will want to read more of your work.

The global standard: Plain language

When we talk about food, “plain” is generally accepted as a euphemism for “flavourless” (more on euphemism later). Many of us prefer things to be tasty rather than bland. But when the topic is technical writing, “plain” is a positive, highly desirable quality. A document written in plain language is one where the content, no matter how complex, will be accessible to a reader who is not an expert in the field.

Globally, there's a trend towards communicating in plain language in business and government. Plain language communications use everyday words and clear sentences to present information in a way that's easy for the reader to understand. This helps make technical or complex subjects accessible for a wide audience. Plain language is becoming increasingly common in fields such as law, insurance and finance, which are trying to shed their reputation for using highfalutin words and complex sentences to confuse, intimidate and exclude. (We'll have more to say about lawyers later, not all of it glowingly appreciative.)

In Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States, plain language is championed in the law. For example, the US Plain Writing Act (2010) requires federal agencies to use clear language to ensure the public can understand what they publish. The US Securities and Exchange Commission’s *A Plain English Handbook* (1998) provides guidelines for writing financial disclosures. It notes that the most common problems in disclosure documents are:

- Long sentences
- The passive voice
- Weak verbs
- Unnecessary words and detail
- Legal and financial jargon
- Abstract words
- Unreadable design and layout.

The authors explain that, in contrast to such documents, “[a] plain English document uses words economically and at a level the audience can understand. Its sentence structure is tight. Its tone is welcoming and direct. Its design is visually appealing. A plain English document is easy to read and looks like it’s meant to be read.”³ These points underlie the principles of clear writing that we discuss in Chapter 2.

One caveat: *plain* language and *clear* language are not always the same thing. You won’t always be able to use plain language, particularly when you’re writing about a complex subject. But you should be able to write about any subject, no matter how complex, in a way that is clear. Where plain language is not an option, ensure that your writing is lucid. If you fail this test, you are not communicating.

Transparency and protecting the interests of citizens

Using clear language isn’t a matter for arid academic debate: it has real-world consequences. After all, if your key message is lost on your audience – not because they aren’t paying attention, but because they can’t identify what your message is, or can identify it but can’t understand it clearly – then your writing is not fulfilling its purpose. And if the purpose is to inform and prompt action – for example, to advise people of their rights or to explain their income-tax obligations – then the consequences can be serious indeed.

3 Office of Investor Education and Assistance, *A Plain English Handbook*, p. 5.

Using clear language is particularly important in societies marked by high levels of inequality. Unambiguous, lucid writing helps citizens understand and exercise their rights.

In South Africa, the National Credit Act (2005) and the Consumer Protection Act (2008) advocate for plain language because it protects the consumer, particularly the poorer consumer who is at higher risk of exploitation. The consumer protection legislation says that a document is considered to be in plain language:

if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the notice, document or visual representation is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal experience as a consumer of the relevant goods or services, could be expected to understand the content, significance and import of the notice, document or visual representation without undue effort.⁴

Curiously, this clause takes a wide legal detour around plain language. But leaving aside the unnecessarily complex way it is presented, this passage gets across a valuable idea: all citizens should be able to understand what companies and governments communicate. An organisation risks costly litigation and damage to its reputation if it fails to comply with legislation protecting the rights of consumers.

In a 2012 court case, the Durban High Court ruled in favour of a customer who had purchased (and later returned) a defective vehicle.⁵ The court stated that the bank's credit agreement had not sufficiently informed the defendant of his rights and obligations as a consumer, because one or more clauses in the agreement were deceptive.

Organisations need to ensure that consumers can easily understand the terms and conditions in the contracts they sign. Clear language supports transparency and accountability, safeguarding the trust of the reader.

4 Government of Republic of South Africa, Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008, Chapter 2, Part D, subsection 22(2).

5 Standard Bank of South Africa Ltd v Dlamini (2877/2011) [2012] ZAKZDHC 64; 2013 (1) SA 219 (KZD) (23 October 2012). Case report accessed on website of the Southern African Legal Information Institute.

“Transparency” doesn’t mean your document should become a data dump, where every last detail is included for fear of leaving something unsaid. One way to lose or confuse your reader is to overwhelm them with information. Transparency, as the word suggests, is about providing *relevant* detail in a way that is clear and meaningful to the reader.

The dead giveaways of bad writing

Bad writing is hard to read and understand. But it’s not hard to find. It exhibits some common symptoms, including poor word choice, vagueness, jargon and misuse of punctuation. Here, we’ll look at three common problems: wordiness, long sentences and ambiguity.

Wordiness

Verbosity is a virus. And like Covid-19, it has its own nomenclature: circumlocution, garrulousness, logorrhoea, prolixity. Fortunately there is a vaccine, and it’s called brevity.

Why use words that lengthen your message without adding value? When we speak, we often emphasise a point with expressions like “and so on and so forth”, “each and every one” and “any and all” to no ill effect – but in writing, these same phrases lead to puffy, pompous prose.

Below are some wordy expressions contrasted with concise alternatives.

WORDY	CONCISE
in view of the fact that	given, considering
in the event of	if
in the not-too-distant future	soon
made a statement saying	stated, said
was of the opinion that	thought, believed, said
in the vicinity of	near, close to
take into consideration	consider

The wordy expressions shown above are also stuffier than the alternatives. Beware of overformality, which can sound awkward. Imagine that you're at work on a sweltering day. The air-conditioner is broken. Everyone is short-tempered. Then an email lands.

Kindly be informed that it has been brought to our attention that the air-conditioning units in the building are not functional. Technicians are currently engaged in repairing the system and envisage that the matter will be resolved by the end of the week. In the interim period, we have sought the use of mobile units to mitigate the current ventilation conditions and are considering the installation of permanent split units to lessen reliance on the centralised system. Please accept our sincere apologies for any inconvenience and discomfort caused.

So though you might crave a cool breeze, windiness will not help. And a phrase like “mitigate the current ventilation conditions” is not just stuffy – it's also abstract. Overly formal language risks leaving your reader confused about what you are trying to say. Wouldn't you prefer this crisper version?

We apologise for the discomfort caused by the faulty air-conditioning system. Technicians are working on the problem and hope to fix it by the end of the week. In the meantime, we have brought in mobile units and are considering installing split units to reduce the load on the central system.

In war, lives can depend on a clear message. In 1942, during the Second World War, US president Franklin Roosevelt recognised the importance of being specific when he read the following memo:

Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all federal buildings and non-federal buildings occupied by the federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination.⁶

What do you think government employees were being asked to do? The message doesn't exactly jump out. Which is why Roosevelt responded: “Tell them that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows.” The message is clear: obscure the windows (not the message).

6 William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 8.

Long sentences

Don't test your reader's patience. Sentences that pack in too much information are hard to follow, particularly if punctuation is used improperly. In the following example, in the left-hand column, the reader has to wade through a lot of detail and will struggle to spot the difference between the important and not-so-important points.

TOO MUCH DETAIL, LONG SENTENCE	LESS DETAIL, MORE CONCISE
<p>The International Monetary Fund projects global economic growth of 3.7% in both 2018 and 2019, reflecting a slight downward revision from earlier forecasts as a result of a slowdown in economic activity in some major advanced economies (particularly in the Euro area), the negative effects of escalating global trade tensions, as well as a weaker outlook for some key emerging markets and developing economies arising from country-specific factors, tighter financial conditions, geopolitical tensions, and higher oil import bills.</p>	<p>The International Monetary Fund projects global economic growth of 3.7% in both 2018 and 2019. This reflects a slight downward revision from earlier forecasts. This is due to a slowdown in economic activity in some advanced economies, escalating global trade tensions, and a weaker outlook for key emerging markets and developing economies.</p>

Long sentences often are the result of the writer feeling they need to cram in all the details. When deciding what should stay and what should go, it's vital that as the writer you use your judgement rather than leaving it to the reader to do all the work.

The passive voice also makes for longer sentences. A sentence in the passive voice focuses on the object of an action rather than the actor. Unfortunately, this sometimes leaves the reader wondering who performed the action, as in this sentence: "In the televised debate between the two US presidential candidates, a faux pas was made when Africa was referred to as a country."

Active voice sentences have the virtue of being shorter and more focused. Whereas passive voice sentences either omit the actor or relegate it to the end of the sentence, active voice sentences usually begin with the actor, as shown in the following example.

PASSIVE VOICE	ACTIVE VOICE
Land care and conservation projects focusing on the sustainable use of natural resources have been launched by the department.	<u>The department</u> has launched conservation projects focusing on the sustainable use of natural resources.

If you want to write to the point and show accountability by identifying the agent of an action, use the active voice. We discuss the active voice in more detail in Chapter 2, and in Chapter 5 we demonstrate how to vary your use of the active and passive voice to give your writing optimal flow and focus.

Ambiguity

Murky writing is often the result of unclear thinking and carelessness. Some sentences are confusing because they are ambiguous – they can be interpreted in more than one way. Consider the examples below.

AMBIGUOUS	REVISED
The water and electricity services capital budget is growing at a declining rate of -60% over the next three years.	The water and electricity services capital budget is <u>declining at a rate of 60%</u> over the next three years.
Apple unveiled an upgraded smartwatch that can detect heart problems at its annual product launch event in Cupertino on Wednesday.	<u>On Wednesday, at its annual product launch event in Cupertino,</u> Apple unveiled an upgraded smartwatch that can detect heart problems.

In the first example, the reader may ask: Is the budget growing or declining? In the second example, the word order suggests that the smartwatch can detect heart problems at the product launch. Apple events are famously exciting, but the organisers wouldn't want any product to be literally heart-stopping to a member of the audience. The problem is solved by simply adjusting the sentence structure.

Don't leave the reader guessing. Say what you mean.

The ingredients of good writing

Good writing considers the reader

Write to be read. This is not as easy as it sounds. Most writing can be read, but often it is not readable – in other words, it’s not easy for a reader to make sense of it. You might be an expert in your field, but if you bury your main points in clumsy sentences, overwhelm your reader with inessential detail or stuff your prose with big words that are hard to digest, then you’re not doing a good job of connecting with your audience.

Keeping your reader in mind is a key ingredient of good writing. This goes beyond ensuring that your sentences are grammatically correct, as Steven Pinker points out in a 2015 article for *The Guardian*:

Though bad writing has always been with us, the rules of correct usage are the smallest part of the problem. Any competent copy editor can turn a passage that is turgid, opaque, and filled with grammatical errors into a passage that is turgid, opaque, and free of grammatical errors. Rules of usage are well worth mastering, but they pale in importance behind principles of clarity, style, coherence, and consideration for the reader.⁷

Warren Buffett, one of the world’s most successful investors, is a good example of someone who writes with his reader in mind. He is the Chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, a multinational holding company. A strategy he uses when he writes is to pretend that he’s talking to his sisters:

I have no trouble picturing them: though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don’t need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.⁸

⁷ Steven Pinker, “Many of the alleged rules of writing are actually superstitions”, *The Guardian*, 6 October 2015.

⁸ Warren Buffett, Preface to *A Plain English Handbook*, p. 2.

Let's take a look at Buffett's approach. The following example is an extract from his Chairman's letter in 2000 to Berkshire Hathaway shareholders in which he explains the economics of property and casualty insurance. What features make it easy to understand?

Our core business – though we have others of great importance – is insurance. To understand Berkshire, therefore, it is necessary that you understand how to evaluate an insurance company. The key determinants are: (1) the amount of float that the business generates; (2) its cost; and (3) most critical of all, the long-term outlook for both of these factors.

To begin with, float is money we hold but don't own. In an insurance operation, float arises because premiums are received before losses are paid, an interval that sometimes extends over many years. During that time, the insurer invests the money. This pleasant activity typically carries with it a downside: the premiums that an insurer takes in usually do not cover the losses and expenses it eventually must pay. That leaves it running an "underwriting loss", which is the cost of float. An insurance business has value if its cost of float over time is less than the cost the company would otherwise incur to obtain funds. But the business is a lemon if its cost of float is higher than market rates for money.⁹

The extract contains short, simple sentences and varied use of punctuation. Technical terms are explained in ways that anyone can understand. The tone is direct and conversational, with a touch of humour. The extract still deals seriously with specialised financial terms, but it does so in a way that accommodates a non-specialist reader. (For more concrete guidance on considering your audience, see Chapter 3.)

Good writing is concise

"Brevity is the soul of wit," Shakespeare's Polonius says in *Hamlet* (an ironic remark given that in general Polonius talks far too much). To be concise, you need to strip your sentences down to their essential components. Writing concisely is not easy – it requires discipline and a commitment to clarity. Teju Cole, author of the novel *Open City* (2011), advises one never to use a big word when a small one will do. In his *Eight Letters to a Young Writer* (2010), he notes:

⁹ Warren Buffett, Chairman's letter, Berkshire Hathaway Annual Report 2000, p. 8.

There are many who use big words to mask the poverty of their ideas. A straightforward vocabulary, using mostly ordinary words, spiced every now and again with an unusual one, persuades the reader that you're in control of your language. Use simple words fortified by a few bigger ones, and along with this variation, vary, too, the rhythm of your sentences. Most of them should be short, but the occasional long one will give a musical and pleasing cadence to your writing.¹⁰

A good example of simple words used to great effect is *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which is widely considered Chinua Achebe's masterpiece. The novel tells the story of the demise of a great man, Okonkwo, against the backdrop of the colonial encounter between traditional Igbo society and European missionaries. This is the opening paragraph:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.¹¹

Achebe's sentences are short and to the point. Each word is carefully selected. Adjectives are used sparingly. The passage is informative without being dry. For Achebe, it was important for his narrator to maintain this matter-of-fact tone so that the reader could make their own judgement about the characters.

Concision is as useful for the novelist as it is for the journalist. Here, it's worth mentioning the formative experience of Ernest Hemingway, who had a notably lean writing style that drew on his newspaper experience. After finishing high school in 1917, he worked for six months as a reporter for *The Kansas City Star*. The newspaper's style guide advised journalists: "Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative."¹² These are important first principles that all writers can apply.

¹⁰ Teju Cole, *Eight Letters to a Young Writer*, p. 6.

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 1.

¹² Kansas City Star, "The Star Copy Style".

WHAT IS A STYLE GUIDE?

A style guide establishes a consistent framework for written communications. It sets out an organisation's approach to matters of grammar, punctuation, capitalisation, acronyms, terminology, voice, numbers, formatting and similar issues. Such guidelines help to prevent inconsistencies in written communications, and may also cover graphics and branding.

You may not be a journalist or typically need to write anything resembling a news article. Nonetheless, it's worth bearing in mind the purpose of good journalism, which is to inform (not impress) an ordinary reader by conveying relevant information. Whether you are writing a report, a press release or an email – anything to inform or prompt action – it's crucial that your key message is clear and concise.

Good writing is free of jargon

When everyone around you uses big, important-sounding words, it's easy to feel you need to do the same. And so, instead of saying "I'll talk to Sizwe about how we can improve this product", you say "I'm going to reach out to Sizwe to assess how we can optimise this value proposition", which certainly sounds grander.

To avoid dealing with an unpleasant issue, some companies avoid saying they are eliminating jobs. Instead, they serve up an unhealthy mix of jargon and euphemisms, declaring that they are conducting "an orderly ramp-down of about 3,000 persons" or making "investment lay-offs". This type of corporate guff is also used in marketing to exaggerate the qualities of products: for example, when technology entrepreneur Elon Musk says that Tesla is "laser-focused on achieving full self-driving capability on one integrated platform with an order of magnitude greater safety than the average manually driven car".¹³

Linguistic contortions confuse people, particularly where the idea being communicated is not complex. Equally, it's a mistake to assume that complex topics require complex sentences. For example, in a legal contract you might come across a sentence like this:

¹³ Lucy Kellaway, "Corporate jargon scales new heights", *Financial Times*, 8 January 2017.

The signatories hereof, being duly authorised thereto, by their signatures hereto authorise the execution of the work detailed herein, or confirm their acceptance of the contents hereof and authorise the implementation/ adoption thereof, as the case may be, for and on behalf of the parties represented by them.

This could just as well be written as, “In signing this document, we authorise the work described here.” This plain language version may lack gravitas, but it does have the virtue of being clear and to the point.

Lawyers will argue that legal writing is complicated because it needs to cover all contingencies. Fair enough, but this doesn’t need to be accomplished in one very long sentence loaded with Latin phrases, or – to paraphrase Hugh Masekela in a different context – roving, marauding phrases of no particular origin.¹⁴ Since laws apply to us all, we should all be able to understand them – *even* when written by a lawyer.

It’s possible to write clearly about complicated matters without sacrificing essential detail. This may involve shortening your sentences, simplifying your language, explaining technical concepts and using devices like bullet points and subheadings. However, doing so requires a shift in approach: to write clearly you need to put your reader’s understanding first.

What does it take to become a better writer?

Read widely

It’s not easy producing writing that is effortless to read. Professional writers are the first to admit this. The poet Maya Angelou said that to make her writing sound just right: “I try to pull the language into such a sharpness that it jumps off the page. It must look easy, but it takes me forever to get it to look so easy.”¹⁵

14 In “Stimela” (Coal Train) (1974), Masekela sings of migrant mineworkers who “think about the loved ones they may never see again / Because they might have already been forcibly removed / From where they last left them / Or wantonly murdered in the dead of night / By roving, marauding gangs of no particular origin”.

15 *The Paris Review* 116, Interview: Maya Angelou, *The Art of Fiction* No. 119 (Autumn 1990).

To become a better writer, you need to read widely and athletically. Read news, blogs and opinion pieces. Read fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Read writing of different genres and by people of diverse backgrounds. Read where your curiosity takes you. As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie observes, “I’m not sure that one can be a good writer without being a good reader. If you’re going to build a desk it’s very good to see what other carpenters have done.”¹⁶

If reading brings back bad memories of school, then it’s time to create a fresh association. In reading you will discover new worlds, see things from fresh points of view, forget yourself and be reminded of things you’ve forgotten.

As writer Lebohang Masango reminds us, “Written words will unlock a world of possibilities, if allowed. And possibilities can be abundant!”¹⁷ These possibilities include empowering yourself with knowledge, realising the diversity of human experience and becoming a more skilled communicator.

As you immerse yourself in words, your vocabulary will expand. You’ll pick up idioms and turns of phrase that you can use in your own writing.

Imitate and rewrite

A good way to learn is by imitation. But take care to imitate *good* writing habits! The process of writing itself can help you think clearly. How? Well, for words to fit together just right, one often has to try them out in different combinations. In this sense, writing is always a matter of rewriting – whether you’re revising as you write or editing a first full draft.

Getting a sentence to sound right is not just about the choice of words but how the sentence gels with those around it. There’s always a word that can be changed or added or removed. If you want to be a better writer, be prepared to revise your work extensively. This requires an open, constructive attitude to rewriting. Marvin Swift captures this attitude well:

¹⁶ From an interview with the *Stylist* Book Club. Quoted in Emily Temple, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on how to write and how to read”.

¹⁷ Lebohang Masango, “The importance of getting the African youth involved in promoting a culture of reading”.

Rewriting is the key to improved thinking. It demands a real openmindedness and objectivity. It demands a willingness to cull verbiage so that ideas stand out clearly. And it demands a willingness to meet logical contradictions head on and trace them to the premises that have created them. In short, it forces a writer to get up his courage and expose his thinking process to his own intelligence. Obviously, revising is hard work. It demands that you put yourself through the wringer, intellectually and emotionally, to squeeze out the best you can offer. Is it worth the effort? Yes, it is – if you believe you have a responsibility to think and communicate effectively.¹⁸

Be patient and persist

Many people have a romantic idea of writing that ignores the investment of time and energy that it demands. Make no mistake: writing is an exacting discipline. “Writing is a craft in the way that carpentry is a craft,” writes Megan Garber in a piece on Kazuo Ishiguro, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature. “There’s art to it, sure, and a certain inspiration required of it, definitely, but for the most part you’re just sawing and sanding and getting dust in your eyes.”¹⁹

Ishiguro recounts how he wrote the bulk of his masterpiece *Remains of the Day* (1989), a novel about the secret lives of servants, in a four-week period he calls “the crash”. During this intensive period, he wrote six days a week, from morning till night, with short breaks for meals. He focused on getting his ideas and words onto the page rather than making them sound perfect. “The priority,” Ishiguro says, “was simply to get the ideas surfacing and growing. Awful sentences, hideous dialogue, scenes that went nowhere – I let them remain and ploughed on.” This willingness to produce an imperfect first draft and then go back and refine it is a crucial ingredient in becoming a better writer.

As with most skills, developing your writing ability will take time. You won’t become a better writer overnight – it’s a challenging and rewarding journey that requires you to invest energy and have faith in yourself.

18 Marvin H. Swift, “Clear writing means clear thinking means ...”, *Harvard Business Review*, no. 73111, January–February 1973, p. 62.

19 Megan Garber, “Writing advice from a (newly minted) Nobel winner”, *The Atlantic*, 5 October 2017.