

Are you sick of “just writing”?

Tired of getting unhelpful
feedback in writing workshops?

Of buying how-to books that repeat the same old advice?

THE MASTERY PATH FOR WRITERS

A New Approach to Building Your Skills

There's
another, more
effective way
to become a
writer: The
Mastery Path.

Here you'll find an overview of the Mastery Path. You'll see how it substitutes intentional learning for the myth of innate talent. And you'll take your first steps on your own path to writing mastery.

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If art is the bridge between what you see in your mind and what the world sees, then skill is how you build that bridge.

—Twyla Tharp, choreographer, dancer, writer

So, you're a writer. You've taken Annie Lamott's advice and produced one sh-tty first draft after another. You've followed Natalie Goldberg down the road of endless freewriting. You've dug deep into your psyche with Julia Cameron. Your teachers have all told you, "Just keep writing, you'll get better." You put in your two hours every day—or when you can manage it. You brag to your fellow writers over latte about how many words you've produced, how many manuscripts you've sent out, how many rejections you've received. You're writing, aren't you? Therefore, you *must* be a writer.

And yet ... and yet ... somewhere deep down, perhaps there lurks a doubt: *Maybe ... ah, just maybe ... I'm not a very good writer?*

Yes, my friend, that is probably the truth.

But before you panic, before you tip your coffee cup in the direction of your laptop, before you start to mouth the words, "Oh, my God! I have no talent," let me tell you something you might never have heard before:

Being a writer is not about who you are; it's about the skills you have.

"But," you will protest, "all those great writers—their vision, their heart, their suffering ..."

Yes, of course every writer will bring to his work elements of who he is, and those elements will help make his work different from that of another writer. To take an example from another area, when David Ortiz hits a home run, it lifts in a different kind of arc from a home run hit by Dustin Pedroia. But here's what the two major-leaguers have in common: they both have the skills to *hit* those home runs.

Skills—not talent, heart, or digging deep into your psyche—are what separate the pros from the amateurs. And here's the good news: in writing—as in baseball, music, business, or any other field—those skills can be learned.

In sports, in painting, in music—nobody expects to achieve professional results without years of learning skills. Yet, somehow, these days, in the world of creative writing, aspiring writers are simply told: "Go write." It's advice that has doomed countless thousands to frustration, despair, and the wasting of enormous amounts of time.

Fortunately, there is another way: I call it the Mastery Path. It lets you

set aside the need to produce pages and drafts and instead spend your time learning the skills you must have to write well. This approach is very simple. It's also very hard work, demanding persistence, discipline, and focus. That's because learning skills can only be done through dedicated, deliberate, repeated practice. That's how professional baseball players or opera singers learn their skills. Writers can learn theirs the same way.

But before we set foot on the path towards mastery, let's clear some misconceptions out of the way.

Workshopping: Why It Doesn't Work

These days, most people who want to write assume they must join a writing workshop—either a course for credit at a college, or a more informal group that meets in someone's home. That's because today, in the world of creative writing, the writing workshop has taken over almost completely as the accepted model for learning and teaching writing. The workshop model is simple in design: students bring work-in-progress to the group and the teacher, and their work is discussed, given feedback, or critiqued. This response is supposed to provide students with ideas for revision.

But the workshop model rests upon several questionable assumptions about teaching and learning, assumptions that never seem to be examined:

1. It's assumed that all students will benefit from presenting work-in-progress to the group. But when students are forced to share their work, there may be negative consequences. For example, inexperienced writers often suffer anxiety about how their work will be received. In this anxious state, it's very difficult for them to learn.
2. It's assumed that all students in the class have developed sufficiently as writers to be able to benefit from critique. But most students in introductory or intermediate creative writing classes rarely know how to assess the comments their work receives.
3. It's assumed that all students in the class have developed sufficiently as writers to be able to *give* helpful response to someone's work-in-progress. This is often not the case. Since workshop participants often know little about writing excellence, how helpful can their comments possibly be?
4. It's assumed that the teacher knows how to provide useful feedback on student work-in-progress. Sometimes this happens; there are certainly good teachers around. But the

vagueness and lack of standards of the workshop model make it possible for just about any writer, no matter how unskilled, to lead a workshop. And even skilled writers don't necessarily know much about how to *teach* writing.

5. It's assumed that *talking about* writing will make people better writers; in most writing workshops, there's very little actual doing of writing or teaching of skills. But you don't learn how to become a better writer by talking about writing. (Would an aspiring baseball player spend all his time talking about hitting?) You become a better writer by *doing writing*.
6. Because workshops are filled with writers (and sometimes teachers) who lack skills, the feedback given often tends towards the latest clichés of writing advice: *Show, don't tell! Eliminate all adverbs! Never use the passive voice!* Such edicts do not help people become better writers; they only act to narrow their options.
7. Many workshops are also driven by an attitude of "writing is all about *me*, the writer." In such workshops, writers are praised for their "honesty," their willingness to "dig deep," and so on—but little or no attention is paid to

developing the skills expert writers must have. (Once again, imagine a group of aspiring baseball players sitting around talking about themselves instead of taking batting practice...)

The writing workshop model is popular, I think, because it's so easy. It's also very personal: in a writing workshop your ego can be stroked or shattered, your relationships with other members of the group comforting or contentious. Many people enjoy the personal drama that a writing workshop can provide.

But there's one key problem with the writing workshop model: most of the time, participants don't learn very much, if anything, about how to write.

Before I introduce you to an alternative model for learning to write—one that really does work—let's address another misconception about writing.

The Talent Myth

If you have bought into the prevailing idea that being a writer is something you *are*, a function of your "self," then the concept of "talent" probably lurks in your mind, threatening to overwhelm your fragile self-confidence. Most people believe that great writers are born, not made; that they are

Every day you don't practice you're one day further from being good.
—Ben Hogan, master golfer

If I don't practice for one day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, my wife knows it. If I don't practice for three days, the audience knows it.

—Vladimir Horowitz, virtuoso pianist

special individuals gifted at birth with a magical ability for putting words on paper.

In general, when we ask the question, *What makes certain people really great at what they do?* we are all likely to give the same answer: talent. When we think of a world-class athlete like Ted Williams, or a major composer, like Mozart, we assume that his greatness is the result of talent he was born with. It's an easy assumption to make, for it has deep roots in our culture and our educational system.

There's just one problem: it's not true.

Before I explain that startling statement, let me tell you a little bit about how I got interested in the subject of talent in the first place.

My Story

I'm a writer whose passion is the teaching of writing. I've taught writing classes and workshops to undergraduates, graduate students, and adult learners for nearly thirty years. And what I have long told my students about talent is this: *Talent is the assumptions we make about other people's abilities that keep us from developing our own.*

I came to this definition of talent through my own learning as a writer and through my work as a teacher.

What makes some people better writers than others? How can I help those who struggle with writing to improve? For years I thought—you might even say obsessed—about these questions.

When answers arrived, they came, not from writing, but from two unexpected sources. One was music; the other, baseball. In my forties, I took up the piano, an instrument I hadn't played since childhood; and I began to listen to the Red Sox games on the radio. And gradually it dawned on me: How do musicians learn to play an instrument?

Through practice. How do baseball players learn to play the game well enough to get to the major leagues? Through practice.

And then I realized what is missing in the way we learn to write: We almost never get an opportunity to *practice*.

That's because most of us learn how to write in school, and there writing takes place under what I've called "performance conditions": It *counts*. It's going to be read and judged and graded. The same thing is true in most creative writing workshops: We're writing pieces that will be critiqued, pieces we want to make "good enough" to get published. But when we do something only under performance conditions, we're not likely to be able to *learn* anything

about how to do it well; performance conditions create anxiety and stress that block learning. After all, would an aspiring pianist decide to rent Carnegie Hall and give a concert, without ever practicing? Would the Red Sox play games without ever practicing? The notions seem absurd; yet, having to demonstrate our writing abilities in performance situations, without first having had a chance to practice, is the experience most of us had with writing in school.

And so I came to the conclusion that, if we want to write, or to become better writers, what we most need is the opportunity to practice. Learning through practice, after all, is how we humans learn how to do everything, from learning to walk to learning to fly a plane. So it made perfect sense to me that taking the time to develop our writing abilities through practice would make us better writers. Athletes and musicians spend much more time practicing than they do performing. I thought that writers should do the same thing. And so I developed a practice-based approach to learning to write, which I've been teaching in workshops and courses for a number of years, and which provides the foundation for my books and articles about writing.

And then one day I just happened to come across a book by Geoff

Colvin, a senior editor at *Fortune* magazine. The book is called *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everyone Else*; in it Colvin explores the research done by scientists in the field of expertise studies, who have been trying to answer the question, *What makes some people really great at what they do? Their answer? The factor that seems to explain the most about great performance is something the researchers call deliberate practice.*

In Colvin's book I learned about a man named K. Anders Ericsson, the preeminent researcher in the field of expertise development. Ericsson, now a professor in Florida, has spent three decades studying great performers in many fields. In one study, he and some colleagues studied violin students at a prominent music school in Berlin. The students had been divided by their teachers into three groups according to their abilities: in the top group were the students who would go on to careers as top solo performers; in the bottom group were the ones who would not be performers but would teach music in schools. Ericsson wanted to find out what it was that landed each student into one of these groups rather than the others. What, in other words, made some of these students into great performers while the others were not? The answer, it turned out, was quite simple: what differentiated the best violinists from those not so good was how much time they spent practicing. The students had all begun their study of the violin at

around the same age—six or seven. But by the age of twelve, those students who would end up in the top group were practicing an average of two hours a day. The students who ended up in the bottom group practiced only about fifteen minutes a day. And those disparities only increased as the students got older: By the time they were in their early twenties, the students in the bottom group had spent four thousand hours in practicing; the students in the top group had spent almost three times that much.

While researchers like Ericsson were collecting their data, other people were investigating the Hollywood-type stories so often associated with great performers. The Talent Myth depends on such stories. Take Mozart, for instance. We've all heard the stories about *him*: Mozart, the "divine genius," who was composing masterpieces as a child. But these stories aren't true. Here's the *real* story about Mozart: He was born into the right family at the right time.

Mozart's father was an intensely ambitious musician, an assistant concertmaster, and, most importantly, a dedicated teacher of the violin who wrote a book on violin instruction. Mozart's father was also a composer, and, perhaps most significantly, he could not advance in his own career because the post of concertmaster was not going to be available for the foreseeable future. So, like many

parents, Mozart's father transferred his ambition to his children.

He began with Mozart's older sister, Nannerl, teaching her how to play the violin and the harpsichord. With this teaching and lots of practice, Nannerl became an exceptional instrumentalist for her age. But Nannerl was a girl; and in that era, girls did not perform in public. Then Mozart came along, and like most younger brothers, he wanted to do everything that Nannerl did. He was fascinated by the harpsichord she was practicing on; he wanted to play, too.

So Leopold Mozart transferred the intensity of his teaching to his son. He made the decision to focus on building Mozart's career, rather than his own. He knew that, as a child prodigy, Mozart could bring in a lot of money.

From the time he was three, then, Mozart was in training with his own personal "coach" who lived right in his own home. Leopold "corrected" his earliest compositions; the first of Mozart's concertos and symphonies are clearly imitations of other composers; and his first work today regarded as a masterpiece was composed when he was twenty-one—after he had been training and learning and practicing for eighteen years.

So it turns out that even those people we call geniuses don't have some miraculous innate ability that sets them apart from everyone else. They were simply lucky enough to get started practicing at a much

The factor that seems to explain the most about great performance is something the researchers call deliberate practice. —Geoff Colvin

earlier age than most people.

Mozart's story is not unique. Tiger Woods's father began teaching him golf when Tiger was a toddler. Ted Williams, starting when he was six or seven, would go to a nearby park every day and hit baseballs until it got dark. The Brontë sisters spent hours and hours in their childhood writing stories. What's special about these and other great performers is not their innate talent; it's the fact that, by the time they were adults, they had put in thousands of hours of practice at their chosen activity.

Anders Ericsson, who studied the violin students, is only one of many scientific researchers in the field of expertise studies who, for decades, have been examining great performers in various fields. What these scientists have learned has shown, conclusively, that what we think we know about talent is completely wrong. The scientists have studied chess players and writers, artists and firefighters, tennis players and nurses, and people in many other fields—and in none of these studies did they find evidence of *anyone* who was “born great” at something. Three British researchers in this field have concluded: “The evidence we have surveyed ... does not support the [notion that] excelling is a consequence of possessing innate gifts.”

To put this another way: Talent, that innate natural gift, that ability to achieve great results without effort, is a myth.

After learning about the work of the expertise researchers, I was elated: now I had evidence to support my own intuitions about talent! Now I had more information to help me develop an approach that would really make my students better writers.

Giving Up the Talent Myth

If you subscribe to the talent myth, you put yourself into a very tough position. Either you're one of the lucky ones born with natural talent ... or you're not. But how do you know? Most people just keep writing, keep sending out work, keep trying to get feedback from teachers and other writers, keep hoping that the talent they're not sure they possess will be recognized by someone. It's a very nerve-racking and draining way to live.

But if you're willing to abandon the talent myth, then your eyes can open to the reality of how experts in any field become great. It's very simple: they're not born with their skills—they *learn* them.

Ted Williams *learned* to be a great hitter; those violin students *learned*

to be professionals. In any field, the people who become really good are the ones who devote lots of time and energy to *learning* their skills.

When you think about this for a minute, it's only common sense, isn't it? How could anyone make it to the major leagues—or to a major concert hall—without learning skills? But in the world of creative writing workshops and courses, there isn't much opportunity to learn skills: we're too busy churning out works-in-progress.

And there's another important element at work here, too, one I've mentioned earlier and want to stress: in many creative writing classrooms, there's an assumption (acknowledged or not) that writing is about the writer's self. So much of the teaching of creative writing these days focuses on “freeing the authentic self,” or “finding your true story,” or “discovering your real voice.” For many reasons, I believe that this kind of teaching is extremely damaging to aspiring writers. For one thing, it makes you waste immense amounts of time on needless introspection, and, for another, it doesn't teach skills.

So, to make my position absolutely clear, I state that writing is not just “self-expression.” Writing is

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communication; writing is using language to make things happen in other people—our readers. If you are writing for yourself alone, there's nothing wrong with “expressing yourself” on the page; to do that, you don't need any skills. But if you want to be read, if you want your stories, your visions, your ideas to be transferred through language from your mind to your reader's, if you want to *move* your readers—to make them laugh or cry or hold their breath—if you want them to keep turning the pages, then you need all the skills you can possibly learn.

These days, aspiring writers are told that writing is easy: just get something down on the page. Well, sure, anyone can do that—just as anyone can sit down at a piano and bang out some random notes. But that person at the keyboard is not making music; and that so-called writer is probably not producing words anyone else will ever want to read.

The truth is that, to achieve excellence in writing (as in any other field) requires lots and lots of hard work. Some writers won't be interested in this kind of effort. But over my three decades of teaching I have met many, many writers who really *want* to get better—but don't know how.

To these writers I say: there *is* a way. First, forget about talent. Second, stop focusing on yourself. Third, understand that writing is a complex activity requiring mastery of a whole repertoire of skills. Fourth, and most important, know that you can *learn* these skills.

When you take this approach to writing, you put yourself in the company of top athletes and musicians, who have always taken this attitude towards developing their ability. Like them, you put yourself into training, learning one skill at a time, then putting them together. Now, instead of floundering, wondering if you're really any good, you begin to *know* that you have certain skills you can depend on; as your skills improve, you become more confident, more sure of what you can do on the page. You are on your way to becoming an excellent writer. To begin your learning journey, all you need to do is set your feet on what I like to call the Mastery Path—an alternative approach to learning to write.

The Mastery Path

The Mastery Path is very simple: it's the road we walk as we learn and develop our skills. A writer and aikido teacher named George Leonard wrote a whole book about the Mastery Path. In it he defines mastery as “the mysterious process during which what was at first

difficult becomes progressively easier and more pleasurable through practice.” The Mastery Path, Leonard says, is available to everyone, regardless of age, sex, or experience. “Mastery isn't reserved for the supertalented or even for those who are fortunate enough to have gotten an early start. It's available to anyone who is willing to get on the path and stay on it.”

That's because the Mastery Path is the path of patient, continuous learning. This ability to learn is our most important human characteristic—and it's available to everyone. So, as you take your first steps onto the Mastery Path, keep in mind that you are embarking on a journey of *learning*.

You may also need to remind yourself of the difference between the kind of learning that results in knowledge and the kind of learning that results in know-how.

Most of our school years are devoted to the acquisition of knowledge: we learn *about* various subjects. But writing is a practical craft, like cooking or fixing a car; and when we learn in this field, we want to acquire, not knowledge about it, but actual know-how. Just as an aspiring baseball player isn't content with being able to *talk* about home runs—he wants to hit them—we writers don't want to

learn how to *talk* about good writing; we want to *produce* it.

With that goal in mind, we must make use, not of abstract thinking and intellectual discussion, but of a learning tool that is not much valued in the academic world.

When we look elsewhere, though, to fields where people are focused on learning and developing skills, we find that this learning tool is *always* at the center of any journey towards mastery.

And what is this powerful learning tool?

Practice.

Learning through Practice

In study after study, expertise researchers have found that, in any field, the people who achieve great skill have one thing in common: they devoted themselves to learning through practice.

Naturally, this meant a lot of hard work. Some researchers have even quantified the amount of effort involved. They call it “the ten-thousand-hour rule”: if you want to be great at an activity, you have to put in at least ten thousand hours of deliberate practice. (And, by the way, that’s a lot of hours: if you want to be great at something within ten years, you have to put in about three hours of practice every single day for that entire period.)

But the researchers also found that simply putting in the hours—even ten thousand of them—wasn’t enough. The key to greatness, they discovered, lies in *how* you use your practice time.

When most of us think of practice, we probably think of hitting a tennis ball against a wall, or the kind of arithmetic drills we may have sat through in elementary school. We think that practice is just boring, mindless repetition. But those who are truly dedicated to developing their skills engage in a different kind of practice; the researchers call it “deliberate practice.”

Deliberate practice is not just hacking around. It’s not playing a game of tennis with a friend. It’s not noodling at the piano. And it’s *not* mindless.

Deliberate practice is activity explicitly designed for a specific purpose: to improve a particular skill. Deliberate practice is the teenaged Larry Bird getting up at 6:00 a.m. every morning in high school and taking five hundred free throws. Deliberate practice is a pianist playing a C# minor scale twenty-five times a day, every day, with the intention of getting the fingering correct. Deliberate practice is a writer sitting down *every* morning to do a writing practice like collecting material or

writing fifty declarative sentences. Deliberate practice is highly focused and intentional. It’s designed in such a way that we can learn a new skill or improve one we already have.

Anders Ericsson has pointed out that when most people practice, they spend their time on things they already know how to do. But deliberate practice, he says, “entails considerable, specific, and sustained efforts to do something you *can’t* do well—or even at all.”

This is a crucial distinction. If you want to become really good at something, you have to keep training the skills you have—and you have to build new ones. Ericsson says: “Research [across many different fields] shows that it is only by working at what you *can’t* do that you turn into the expert you want to become.”

But here’s the catch: when you do something new for the first time—or the second, or the tenth—you’re probably not going to do it very well. One of the biggest differences between people who become great in a field and the rest of us is not innate talent; it’s how they handle the experience of *not* being good at a task.

When most people try something new—say, they try to write a poem or paint a picture—and it doesn’t

Don’t study an art; practice it.

—Japanese proverb

Deliberate practice entails considerable, specific, and sustained efforts to do something you can't do well—or even at all.

—K. Anders Ericsson

come out the way they hoped, they give up. They say, “I’m not any good at this. I guess I have no talent.”

But people who become experts are willing to keep practicing those things they can't do, to keep practicing until they *can* do them. One way to describe such people is that they are not afraid of failure. Another way to describe them is that they are willing—in fact, eager—to learn. People who engage in deliberate practice are willing to move outside their established comfort zone of achievement and to put themselves in a “learning zone,” where they are continually challenging themselves to reach for goals that lie just beyond their current abilities.

“Oh, those talented ones,” we tell ourselves, “it all comes easily to *them*.” But constantly challenging oneself to improve is *not* easy. Anders Ericsson points out that great performers *always* have “this incredible investment of effort.” They “generally invest about five times as much time and effort to become great as an accomplished amateur does to become competent. It’s not,” he says, “something everyone’s up for.”

How is it that deliberate practice has such immense effects on our abilities? The answer lies in what

neuroscientists refer to as “brain plasticity.” That means that our brains respond to the demands made upon them, and that they actually change in response to those demands.

The effects are broadly similar to what happens to a set of muscles when we exercise them regularly over time. Just as those muscles get stronger, so, when we put ourselves into training with a particular mental activity, the corresponding part of our brain adapts and gets stronger. For example, one researcher studied taxicab drivers in London, where getting a license to drive a cab requires two years’ intensive study of London’s maze of streets. She measured the brains of aspiring cab drivers before and after they began to study for the licensing exam, and she learned that the brains of the drivers who eventually passed it showed definite growth in areas associated with activities like reading maps and negotiating complicated street patterns.

Neuroscientists tell us that brain plasticity is available to us not only when we are young, but also as we age; so we can, if we wish, begin training our mental abilities through deliberate practice anytime we want to. In fact, many people who achieve greatness do so late in

life, and give us examples of the cumulative effects of decades of deliberate practice. Winston Churchill, for instance, is considered to be one of the world’s greatest orators, and he gave many of his famous speeches when he was well over sixty. He used to spend hours practicing his speeches in front of a mirror.

No matter the field, whenever we find great performers, when we look behind the talent myth, we find people who have devoted themselves to deliberate practice. The Beatles became great in part because they had the opportunity, as unknowns, to play 1,200 times, in rock clubs in Hamburg, for shows that often went on all night. Bill Gates programmed computers for thousands of hours in high school. During his years with the Boston Celtics, Larry Bird was famous for getting on the court an hour or two before his teammates to practice his shots.

Now, not all of us are lucky enough to discover what we want to do early in life; we are unlikely to have ten thousand hours to spare. *But that doesn’t matter.* All of us, because of our brain plasticity, have the potential to develop our abilities *to some degree.* So, no matter how old we are, or how limited our skills may be right now, we can still use the age-old techniques of

learning through practice to become better writers. Here's a place anyone can begin:

Practice as Play

The expertise researchers haven't yet figured out what makes certain people willing to devote themselves to years of deliberate practice. One way to describe that motivation is that it is a kind of passion. The Brontë sisters spent thousands of hours in childhood writing stories, purely for their own pleasure. Ted Williams, remembering the hours he spent in childhood hitting baseballs, called it "a storybook devotion." Larry Bird used to finish team practices by sitting in the stands and shooting free throws. Someone once asked Bird's agent why he did that, and the answer came back, "Larry just loves to play basketball."

So I think that before we take on the intensity of deliberate practice, we need to begin where those who become great do: by falling in love with the *doing* of the activity. It has to be something we *choose* to do, not something we are forced into. Even as adults we can find—or uncover—a passion for writing. Before we can put ourselves into training using deliberate practice, we first need to make a place in our lives for this activity we love. We need to protect and encourage our passion by letting ourselves approach improving our skills the way children come to any activity they love: in the spirit of play.

And so, when I teach writing to adults, I encourage them to begin writing practice in a spirit of experimentation, a spirit of "let's see what happens when I try *this*," so they can make a deep connection with the *activity* of writing and let go of their attachment to producing brilliant final drafts. With any activity, if we do this kind of playful practicing for a while, and we find we enjoy it, *then* we may develop the kind of passion for the activity that makes us want to focus more intensely on developing our skills.

Practice as Training

Once we've learned to enjoy ourselves doing writing practice, we can take the next step along the Mastery Path and start to really *develop* our skills, to put ourselves into training, as athletes and musicians do. It can be difficult for adults to embrace this kind of training. After all, we have lives now: work, families, responsibilities. And yet, some of us still do it—just look at all the adults who've decided to get in shape, and who regularly engage in some kind of vigorous exercise.

If we want to become better writers, eventually we need to approach writing practice with that same attitude of determination we've used to get physically fit. We need to make a place in our lives for our practice, and bring ourselves to it on a regular basis.

One important way we can do this is by changing our attitude about what we are doing when we sit down to write. When most adults write, they put themselves into performance conditions: they are trying to produce a finished product, something *good*. But athletes and musicians—even the professionals—spend most of their time *practicing*. We writers need to spend our writing time in the same way. Here's how to do it:

When athletes and musicians learn their skills through practice, they are taught to take complex skills—like hitting a baseball—and break them down into component parts, then practice each part separately. We writers can do exactly the same thing when we practice. We can practice skills like using our imagination or our power of observation or our curiosity. We can practice establishing a natural relationship with readers. We can practice coming up with different kinds of words. We can practice putting those words into phrases and clauses and sentences. We can imitate how our favorite authors do all of those things. Through such practice we can train our writing abilities, and *then*—when we want to produce a finished piece—those trained abilities will be there to serve us.

In practice, we can give ourselves permission to try things and fail, to experiment, because practice writing (unlike the writing we do for a workshop) is always *private*

writing: no one will see it unless we choose to show it to them. This privacy makes practice writing a very safe place for learning.

What Should I Practice?

An aspiring baseball player or singer is lucky. In their fields, learning through practice is the norm. So coaches and teachers have, over the years, developed a substantial repertoire of skill-building practices that they teach their students. It's partly due to these improved training regimens that today's young athletes and musicians are routinely able to perform at levels undreamed of a century ago.

Sadly, we writers are not so fortunate. In our field, there are few established standards of excellence, and teachers rarely make use of the learn-through-practice model. So, if you want to learn in this way, if you want to walk the Mastery Path, you will need to take some initiative.

Your first task is to assess your present skills. What do you do well as a writer? Get a piece of paper and list everything you can think of. You might write, for instance, "I can create vivid characters," or "I'm good at dialogue."

Now get another piece of paper and list all the skills you feel you need to *learn* or to get better at. Your list might include things like,

"I need a better vocabulary" or "My writing doesn't have much suspense" or "I need to learn more about grammar."

Your second list will probably be much longer than your first. Don't despair! This just gives you lots of things to practice. It's also possible that your second list will be quite short; chances are good that's because you don't know that you are lacking particular skills.

In this, you are certainly not alone. Because most writing instruction (in the classroom or in books) does not focus on skills, many writers simply aren't aware that they don't have the skills they need. So let me give you a general picture:

Writing, like singing a Puccini aria or hitting a 95-mph fastball over the Green Monster, is a *complex* skill. Like any complex skill, it is made up of a large number of component skills. I group these skills into two main categories: content skills, and craft skills.

Content skills are the ones you use to come up with material for pieces of writing. To develop these skills, you need to train, through practice, various mental faculties, including your power of observation, your imagination, your subconscious, and your curiosity. If you want to write, but find yourself struggling to come up with things to say, then you will want to do lots of

practicing with these faculties. I also include among the content skills the ability to establish a natural relationship with your readers.

If you feel that you would benefit from training your content faculties, then I recommend you get a copy of my book, *How to Be a Writer: Building Your Creative Skills Through Practice and Play*. It's filled with practices that will make you feel much more confident in your ability to come up with and develop your ideas or stories.

Along with the content skills, you need craft skills. There are two kinds: one, the "large" craft skills, involve knowing how your chosen genre works. A mystery works much differently from an op-ed piece; they both work differently from a lyric poem. Most how-to writing books focus on genre: you will have to do a lot of browsing and comparing to find the ones that will teach you the skills you need in a way that's right for you.

The second kind of craft skill I call the "small" craft. This is the ability to choose words and arrange them into powerful, eloquent, spellbinding sentences. For expertise in this craft, you need to train, not your content-mind, but your word-mind.

It's at this level of the craft of using language that the talent myth

Genius must be built.

—Eric Kandel

often gets in the way. Aspiring writers usually understand that they need to learn the structure of a mystery novel or a narrative poem, but they often assume that skill with words is something a person either has or doesn't have. But here again the talent myth is—just a myth. *Anyone* can develop expertise in using language, and all aspiring writers should put a lot of time and energy into doing so. That's because when you have skill with words, you can make magic on the page: you can make people and places and events come alive in your reader's mind; you can keep your readers spellbound and turning the pages. When you have skill with words, you develop your own distinctive style, your own voice.

If you need to develop your skills with language—and almost all aspiring writers do—then I encourage you to immerse yourself in *Spellbinding Sentences: A Writer's Guide to Achieving Excellence and Captivating Readers*. It provides hundreds of practices, tested for years in an MFA Program in Creative Writing, to help you train and develop your word-mind.

It may be that you also lack skill in the fundamentals of grammar and punctuation. You may assume that, if you can write an exciting story, some editor will be happy to fix all your mistakes. But the truth is that grammatical errors make you look like an amateur, and editors and publishers are looking for pros. So, if you need to review

grammar basics, take a look at Patricia Osborn's *How Grammar Works* or *English 3200* (a self-teaching guide).

In addition to all these skills, you need to find a writing *process* that serves you when you are working on a piece you want to finish. You need to understand the work of creating a draft, as well as the work of revision and editing. There are many books available that will give you tips out how this process works.

At this point you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed by the number of skills you need to learn. Take a deep breath, and relax. You have lots of time to learn these skills, and you don't need to learn them all at once. Instead, you'll choose the ones you want to focus on first, and from there you'll move forward, step by step.

How to Practice

If you love to write, nothing feels better than the act of writing: the rush of ideas, the pen speeding across the page (or the fingers over the keyboard), that sense of being in the grip of a power greater than oneself. So you may find it difficult to take time away from that often-ecstatic activity in favor of the more mundane task of writing practice.

Ask yourself, though, if those times when your writing is going well aren't often outweighed by the times when it goes badly: when you sit staring out the window, or

writing a sentence, then deleting it. Ask yourself if inspiration, wonderful as it is, isn't also rather undependable. And now ask yourself if you wouldn't rather have solid, dependable skills you could rely on—*every* time you sit down to write—skills that would provide an even better home for Lady Inspiration when she decides to visit?

The truth is that just sitting down to write, without having first trained our skills, is a sure route to frustration and despair. This doesn't mean that, while we are in training, we can never put time into work-in-progress; it means that we take *some* of our writing time and energy, on a regular basic, to practice specific skills.

Here's how such practice might work:

Doing Writing Practice: Some Examples

The key to effective practicing is to choose or design practices that help you develop a particular skill—and then to do those practices over and over and over. *Repetition is the key to building skills.*

Suppose I've decided that I need to train my imagination. I will turn to the "Imagination" chapter in *How To Be a Writer* and do a couple of the practices there, such as using my senses to picture things in my imagination. Then I will make a couple of notes to myself about how the practices went. I might say, for instance, that I could easily

Mastery is the mysterious process during which what was at first difficult becomes progressively easier and more pleasurable through practice.

—George Leonard

use my sense of sight, but that I had a hard time hearing sounds in my imagination. I will make a note to myself that I need to do more practicing with hearing sounds.

If I actually *do* more of this practice of hearing sounds (and not just think about doing it), I will be engaging in what Anders Ericsson calls the key to deliberate practice and skill improvement. “Deliberate practice,” he says, “is about changing your performance, setting new goals, and straining yourself to reach a bit higher each time. It involves you[r] deciding to improve something and setting up training conditions to attain the skill.” The key to those training conditions is repetition, with focused attention, so if I persevere over time with this practice, eventually I will be able to hear sounds in my imagination.

I might also look at other writing how-to books that offer exercises, and choose an exercise or two I think will help develop my imagination. Again, it’s important to pick something simple (or to break the exercise down into its component parts) and to keep repeating the practice.

You can also make up your own practices. This is what top athletes and musicians eventually do: they become their own best coaches.

Suppose (to take another example) that I want to learn more about nouns. *Spellbinding Sentences*, or a good grammar book, will tell me about the different kinds of nouns available in English. My first practice will be simply to collect as many nouns as I can come up with:

winter	summer		
painting	color		
amethyst	rose	daisy	
leaf	pine		
spruce	truth	miracle	
grass	sky	sun	

If you like, try this practice now for five or ten minutes. Every time you do the practice, you are training your word-mind to give you nouns, so that when you are in the middle of a story or a poem, your well-trained mind will give you the nouns you need.

You can then choose some of these nouns and make sentences with them. You can check your dictionary for the meanings of any words you’re unsure of, thereby building your vocabulary. You can also see if you can distinguish different kinds of nouns (e.g. common, proper, collective), or consider whether your nouns are general or specific, abstract or concrete. You may decide that you can easily come up with abstract nouns (justice, truth, beauty), but

you have a hard time with concrete nouns (grass, leaf, tree). This tells you that you need to do more practice with concrete nouns.

In this way, you find out *from your own practice* what you need to keep practicing, what you should work on next. In this way, you don’t rush headlong through your learning journey, but instead you take one sure step at a time along the Mastery Path.

Learning through Imitation

When athletes and musicians try to improve their skills, they always find models of excellence to imitate. A young pitcher might imitate Roger Clemens or Pedro Martinez; a young pianist might listen over and over to the recordings of Vladimir Horowitz. Imitating a model of excellence is a time-honored, proven way to learn. Unfortunately, it’s not an approach common in writing instruction, and aspiring writers usually don’t have any idea how to use this valuable learning tool. Here’s how it works:

Read something by one of your favorite writers—perhaps a paragraph, perhaps a few pages or a chapter. If you have not read this piece before, you’ll need to read your selection more than once. Now see if you can jot down what it is this writer can *do* on the page

that makes you admire this piece of writing. Has he created a great character? Do you like the way he uses verbs, or the way he varies sentence length? Now see if you can find a way to write some sentences of your own, imitating one of these techniques. If the technique seems too complicated, try breaking it down into its component parts. Do this several times, over a number of practice sessions, until you feel you are starting to understand the technique. Now try using the technique on your own, in a passage that is not an imitation.

How do you identify the techniques a writer uses? Look for how-to books that present excerpts from work in your genre and analyze them. You can often take someone's observation about a work—"Author X uses lists of nouns to create a sense of abundance"—to invent a practice for yourself (in this case, practicing using lists of nouns). *Spellbinding Sentences* provides you with many techniques to look for in the work of your favorite authors, as well as relevant practices. Keep a list of the practices that work well, and return to them often.

Practice with Intention

One of the best things about the Mastery Path is that it helps you take control of your own learning. While teachers and how-to books

can certainly be helpful, they may not always provide you with the guidance you need. But as soon as you start practicing, you'll discover all the things you didn't know you needed to know. For some of you, this will be a moment of despair; for others, of exhilaration. It all depends on how much you love to learn.

To make sure your learning journey is as productive as possible, you need to keep thinking about what you want to be learning right now: to keep lists of practices, to keep moving around between the things you can do well and the ones you can't do well at all. Most of all, you need to practice with intention.

This means that, when you sit down to practice, you bring to this activity a focused mind. It means that you know exactly what you are trying to practice—"I'm exercising my curiosity" or "I'm writing simple declarative sentences"—and that you will not allow your ever-restless mind to lead you someplace else.

To practice with intention, on a regular basis, does more than build your skills; it helps strengthen your powers of concentration, which must be well-trained if you hope to get anything accomplished when you're writing.

Practicing with intention also gives you, when you're ready, a door to the world of combining skills. Once you've mastered a couple of skills (say, choosing nouns and writing simple declarative sentences), you can give yourself the challenge of a practice that combines both.

Just as important, when you have learned to practice with intention, you can also practice "in the work." This means that as you write a draft, you are *also* trying to use one of the techniques you have practiced on its own. For instance, you might say to yourself, "As I write this section of my story, I'm going to concentrate on nouns." Here, too, you are combining mental faculties, asking them to work at the same time: one part of your mind is coming up with ideas for your story, while another part (already trained with nouns) is coming up with names for things.

How Much Time Does It Take?

At this point you may be thinking, "Sounds great, but I don't have time for this." But, in fact, you do.

That's because successful practicing depends on two things: being organized, so you have a list of practices to choose from, and practicing with intention. The actual practicing doesn't have to take a lot of time for any one

Research [across many different fields] shows that it is only by working at what you can't do that you turn into the expert you want to become.

—K. Anders Ericsson

On the path of mastery, learning never ends.

—George Leonard

session. Ten minutes here, fifteen minutes there: if you're really concentrating, you can get an amazing amount accomplished in a short period of time. What counts is not how much time you spend at any particular session; what counts is how many times you repeat the practice and how carefully you assess your practice exercises. (And just think how much practicing you could get done in the time you might otherwise have spent at a writing workshop or support group.)

The Value of the Mastery Path

Anyone who's played a sport, or a musical instrument, has an intuitive understanding of how practice works and why it's so valuable. Others may be skeptical. Unfortunately, you can't really "get" practice by reading about it; you have to *do* it. So, I encourage you to pick a practice from a book, or invent one you think will be useful to you, and give it a try—ideally more than once.

You won't see the effects of your practicing all at once. It takes quite a lot of repeated practicing of a particular technique before you realize that, as you write, you're using the technique without even thinking about it. But once you experience the thrill of being able to do something on the page that you couldn't do before, you'll

understand why practice is so helpful: as the neuroscientists have pointed out, practice quite literally changes your brain, so that as you write, it provides you with ideas or visions, words or sentence structures, that it just didn't have available before. (One brain scientist, Eric Kandel of Columbia University, won a Nobel prize in 2000. He showed "that both the number and strength of the nerve connections associated with a memory or skill increase in proportion to how often and how emphatically a lesson is repeated. So focused study and practice literally build the neural networks of expertise. Genetics may allow one person to build synapses faster than another, but either way the lesson must still be learnt. Genius must be built.")

So when you get yourself firmly launched on the Mastery Path, you'll realize that you'll never again have to wonder whether you have talent: walking the Mastery Path is the best antidote I know to the insecurity from which so many aspiring writers seem to suffer. You'll start to feel confidence in the skills you have, and—even more important—you'll feel sure that you can learn the skills you don't yet have. Instead of wondering, "Do I have any talent?" you'll be able to say, "I can *learn* how to do this."

And although the Mastery Path—the path of learning through practice—has its times of frustration, it also provides us with a kind of deep pleasure and satisfaction that cannot be attained anywhere else. That's because, as George Leonard says, "On the path of mastery, learning never ends."

Six Key Principles of Deliberate Practice

Expertise researchers study the world's greatest experts, athletes, and performers. But their findings also reveal how *all* of us can improve our skills and put ourselves on the path to mastery. Here's how:

1. Know your domain. As Geoff Colvin points out, studying literature is not the same as learning how to write well. If you want to write, then you need to step away from literary analysis and appreciation and instead spend your time practicing the skills used by great writers.

2. Decide which skills you need to master. Sit down with a work by one of your favorite writers. What makes this writing powerful? Make a list of everything this writer does well—for instance, does he or she create memorable characters, tell a compelling story, evoke a place, command a large vocabulary, or write eloquent sentences? From this list of skills, choose the ones you need or want to master, and consider how you will learn them. Expert writers are champion learners: they read books on writing and interviews with authors; they use dictionaries and grammar books and style guides.

3. Identify micro-skills. The skills required for expert writing are complex, and the best way to learn a complex skill is to break down the skill into its component parts and practice each micro-skill separately. Start with one of the skills you want to acquire—say, the ability to tell a compelling story—and break it down into its constituent parts, such as plot, dialogue, character, and sentence structure. Study and practice each micro-skill separately until you feel comfortable using it—for instance, practice inventing plots until you can do that easily—then practice putting the micro-skills together.

4. Direct your own learning. People who become masters in a field almost always have a great teacher or coach to show them what and how to practice. You may find such a guide at a writing workshop or conference, or you may choose to “apprentice” yourself to a master writer by studying and imitating his or her work. In either case, you will need to design your own practice exercises (perhaps adapted from writing-instruction books) and monitor your progress by comparing your practice efforts with passages from the work of writers you select as your models of excellence.

5. Be aware of the difference between practice and performance. Experts don't expect their practice sessions to produce performance-level work—and neither should you. Experts use practice to train and strengthen specific skills, so that when they enter the realm of performance—for writers, that means producing professional-quality work—those skills will serve them well. Use your practice sessions to focus your attention on one particular micro-skill at a time, remembering that the key to deliberate practice is repetition.

6. Apply what you have learned. What separates experts from accomplished amateurs is the ability to make conscious use of an acquired skill. Colvin calls it “practicing in the work.” Many amateurs tend to do the same thing over and over without understanding why it works or doesn't work. Experts, on the other hand, having trained their skills in practice, can then deliberately use those skills as they write and revise a piece intended for publication. While inspiration plays a role in producing great writing, it must be supported by consciously-developed skills.

RESOURCES

You can find free, practice-based writing lessons at my site, www.WhereWritersLearn.com.

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