

# HOW TO BE A writer

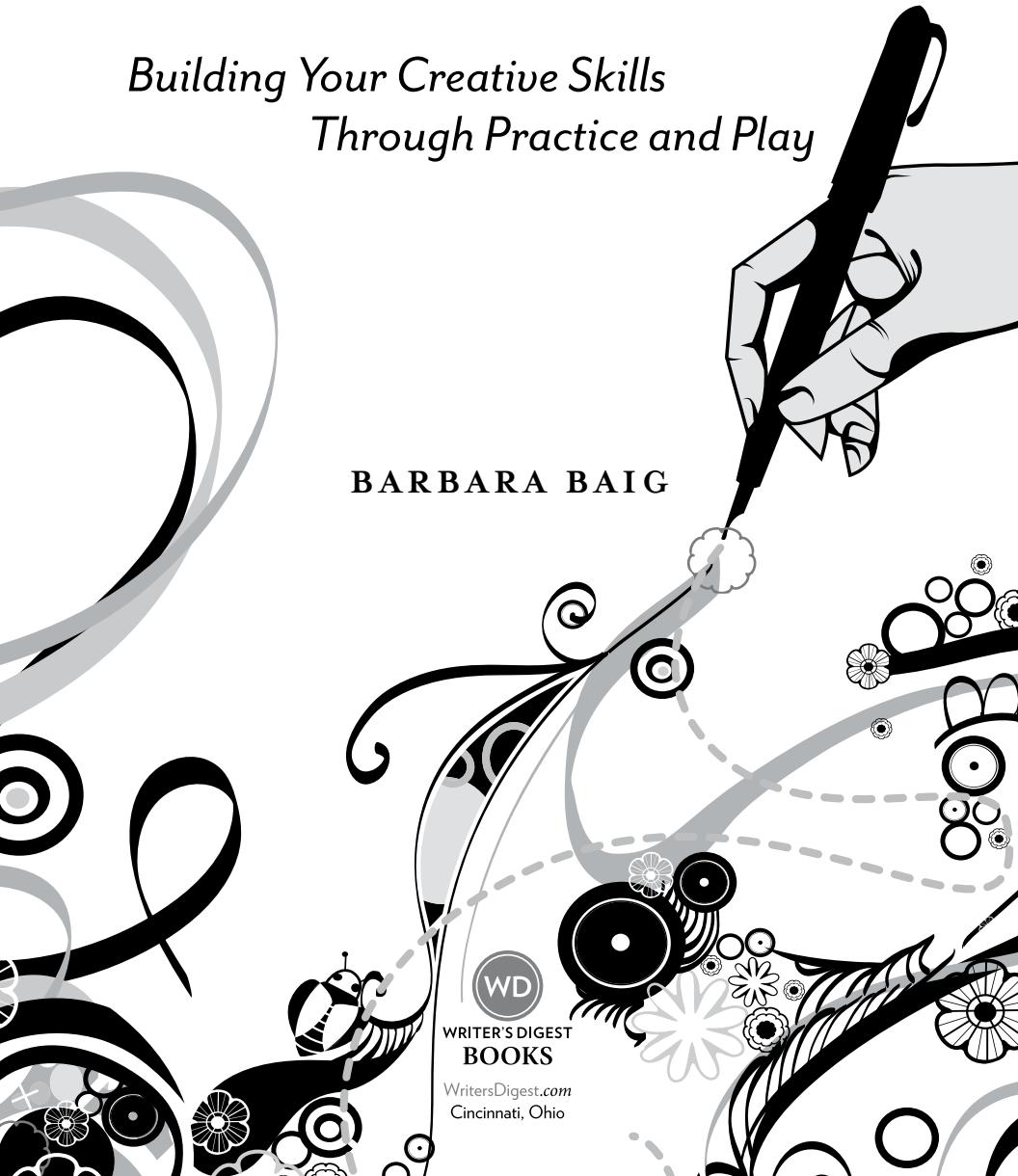
*Building Your Creative Skills  
Through Practice and Play*

BARBARA BAIG



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# Welcome

When many people write, they struggle and suffer. Perhaps you are one of them: If so, this book is for you.

Or perhaps you love to write and want to get better at it. This book is for you, too.

Or perhaps you long to explore the world of “creative writing” but aren’t sure where to begin. This book is for you as well.

This book is a guide to the basics of writing—a very different kind of guide from other writing books. It will not give you strategies for getting published, nor will it show you techniques for digging deep into your psyche. It will not teach you grammar or how to write a best-selling novel. Instead it will show you how to develop certain basic and essential skills that all writers need, whether they are just beginning to write or have gotten blocked or confused somewhere along the way.

What sets this book apart is that it sees writing as a certain kind of work, work that *anyone* can learn how to do, and to do well. You don’t need some magical quality called “talent” or “inspiration”; you need *skills*. Unfortunately, these skills are rarely taught in school, or even in most writing workshops. So when many people sit down to write, they are held back because they simply don’t have the skills they need. And then they usually blame themselves: *I don’t have any talent. I must be stupid.* But the fault is not theirs; the fault

lies with an educational system that has not provided them with the basic skills they need to do a writer's work.

Many people are also held back from developing their abilities as writers because of a pervading myth that the only "real" writers are those who are born with the skills they need. That's nonsense. Writing skills can be acquired by anyone who is willing to put time and energy into the process of acquiring them. You don't have to be born with writing skills: You can *learn* them. This book will show you how to do that.

## **THE REAL WORK OF WRITING**

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When we learn how to write, though, what exactly is it that we are learning? Answers to this question differ. Some people believe that all we need to learn are grammar and spelling, rules and formulas. Other people say that writing is thinking on paper. Still others are convinced that learning to write means "freeing your creativity" or "expressing yourself." I take yet another approach, one that I believe is both comprehensive and practical.

To write is to do a certain kind of work: the work of communication on paper. Skilled writers, in any genre, do not see themselves as producing texts—that's merely the academic view of writing. Nor do they see themselves as engaging only in self-expression; to light a candle, play some soothing music, and let the words flow can indeed be therapeutic, but it's unlikely to produce writing that anyone else will want to read. No matter what kind of writing they do, skilled writers see themselves as communicators; they have something to say, and they want to get that "something" into the minds of their readers.

As with any activity, if you want to do the work of writing, you need particular skills. A baseball player who wants to become a good hitter needs to know how to keep his eye on the pitched ball and how to swing the bat properly. A pianist needs to know how to

read music and move her fingers over the keyboard. Just like athletes or musicians, writers need particular skills.

First, writers need to know how to come up with content for a piece of writing. They need to be able to find subjects to write about and to discover the things they want to say about those subjects. No matter what kind of writing you are doing, whether it be a short story or a poem or an office memo, it must have content.

Second, writers need to be able to consider their readers. Skilled writers know how to grab their readers' attention and keep it, from the beginning of a piece to the end. They know how to make what they have to say clear to their readers; they know how to affect them, to make them laugh, or cry, or think. Skilled writers understand, and know how to make use of, what I call the natural relationship between writer and reader.

Third, writers need to know the form, or genre, they want to use to communicate. A novel works differently from a poem; a business report works differently from a short story. Skilled writers have a command of their chosen form.

Finally, writers need the ability to use language to get what's in their own minds (and, if appropriate, their hearts) into the minds (and hearts) of their readers. Skilled writers know how to use words and sentences and paragraphs to *transfer* material from their own minds into the minds of other people. And they also know how to use language to make things happen inside their readers, to make them laugh or cry, to inform them, to persuade them, to teach.

I have said that skilled writers "know" these things. But I hasten to point out that no writer, whatever his or her level of skill, was born with this knowledge. The skills we need to communicate well on paper are primarily *learned* skills. If you struggle to write, most likely that's because you were never given the opportunity to learn these skills.

In this book, I give you that opportunity for the first two skills (coming up with things to say and considering readers). I call these “content” skills, and in the chapters that follow you will learn, first, how to exercise and develop the faculties that enable you to come up with content for a piece of writing, and then, how to establish a natural relationship with your readers so that you can pass on that content to them, through the medium of your chosen genre.

This book does not give instruction in how to write in particular forms; there are hundreds of books available that will teach you how to write a novel or a poem or a business letter. Nor do I cover the craft of writing here. That’s because there’s so much to learn about how to choose words and put them together into sentences and paragraphs that I decided to write another book (now in progress) to teach these particular skills.

You might find it odd that a book about writing does not include instruction about genre and craft. Perhaps you wonder, *Isn’t writing all about using words?*

Yes, it is indeed true that skillful writing demands the ability to use language well—and, at the same time, it also demands the other skills I have described. People who are good writers are good, not simply because they can craft elegant sentences, but because they have something to say and because they know how to be in appropriate relationship to their readers. My experiences as a teacher have shown me that when I am reading a piece of writing that is weak or confusing—whether it be an academic paper, a short story, a business speech, or a poem—it’s not usually because the writer lacks language (though that is sometimes the case); it’s because he or she didn’t know how to come up with and develop content. After all, it’s pretty hard to write well if you have nothing to say! Skilled writers grab and keep the attention of readers, not just with words but with *content*—ideas or information, scenes or characters.

There's another reason I have chosen to teach only content skills in this book: The best way to learn a complex activity is to break it down into its component parts and then practice each one of those skills separately. When an aspiring baseball player learns to hit a ball, he might take hundreds of swings in practice focusing entirely on keeping his eye on the ball, and hundreds more focusing on keeping his wrists level. The same thing is true when someone learns to play a musical instrument, like the piano: A beginner might practice a piece many times using only her left hand, then many more using only her right hand. The best way to learn how to write is, I believe, to follow this model: to put all one's attention into learning first one skill, then another, then another, and so on. Finally, just as a batter eventually learns to keep his eye on the ball and keep his wrists level at the same time, and a pianist plays her piece with both hands at once, a trained writer becomes able to use all of a writer's skills.

The key to learning skills, whether one is an athlete, a musician, or a writer, is practice. No matter your age, no matter your cultural and educational background, if you are willing to practice, you can acquire these skills. All you need is desire, and some time to practice.

## **WRITING AS A LEARNING JOURNEY**

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My approach to writing has this belief at its core: To become a more accomplished, more confident writer is to take a learning journey. Learning through practice —repeating an activity over and over—has always been one of the main ways that humans learn; just remember how you learned to walk or to drive a car. To be on a learning journey as a writer means that you move forward from one place to another, taking steps one at a time to build your skills and your understanding of what you are doing.

You can embark on this learning journey with a particular goal in mind. Perhaps you want to write and publish a novel or a memoir or a collection of poems. The practices in this book will give you a solid foundation of skills and understanding from which you can then proceed to learn more about your chosen genre.

You need not have such a goal, though. You can choose to take a learning journey as a writer, to engage in the practice of writing, for the sake of the journey and the practice alone. The benefits of writing practice are the same whether you aim to become a professional writer or prefer to be an amateur.

Those benefits are considerable. The practice of writing keeps your mental faculties exercised, and so it is good for your brain, just as working out or playing tennis regularly is good for your body. Writing practice keeps your brain awake and alive; it improves your ability to concentrate. Whether or not you ever publish a thing, regular writing practice will give you skills you can use in your work and your personal life, and make you feel more empowered. It will improve your ability to communicate, stimulate your curiosity, and make you more aware of the world around you and the world of your imagination. Writing practice will also increase your enjoyment of what you read, because the more you practice, the more you will understand what professional writers are doing in their work.

The discipline of a writing practice will help you complete writing projects, and it can be transferred to other areas of your life. Writing practice, like any regular practice, provides a focus for your energies, a way to center and ground yourself. It can substitute for, or be an adjunct to, any other practice you enjoy, such as meditation or running.

When you learn, through practice, how to be a better writer, you can benefit others as well. Right now, people who can communicate on paper seem to be in rather short supply. The damage done by

bad writing can be found just about everywhere: from the poorly written office e-mail that confuses its recipients, to the unintelligible directions that come with the latest gadget, to the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant, caused, some say, by a badly written memo. Our world *needs* people who can communicate clearly and powerfully, imaginatively and passionately, through the written word.

Most of all, to become a practicing writer sets your feet on a path of lifelong learning. To write is, beyond everything, to be a learner, someone who is constantly discovering new things—about writing, about the world, about life. The discoveries you will make on your journey as a practicing writer are yours alone, a treasure that no one can ever take from you.

So while the practices in this book are certainly tools for developing writing skills, for training your writing “muscles,” they are also tools for learning—not school-based learning, but real learning—learning that can help you discover your genuine interests and your own path on this planet.

## **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

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There are two main kinds of writing: writing we want to do, and writing we have to do. In neither case can we rely on inspiration alone; we need well-trained writing muscles and an understanding of the work of writing. This book will provide you with a practice field where you can train these muscles—I prefer to call them a writer’s powers—and it will give you an understanding of the process of taking a piece of required writing from initial idea to finished product.

If what you need right now is to get something written, then the section called *Required Writing* will guide you, step-by-step, through that process. If you are writing something for which you have a deadline, then you will want to turn to that section first. Here I help

you overcome fears and anxieties about writing by making clear what you actually have to *do* to get from a vague idea in your mind to a finished piece of writing that communicates what you want to say to your intended audience. You will learn how to generate and develop ideas, how to avoid procrastination and use your time effectively, how to think about your audience and purpose, how to organize, and how to revise.

If, though, you are coming to this book because you love to write (or because you want to find or recover that desire within yourself), and if you have time to explore the world of writing without deadlines, then I invite you to move at your own pace through the chapters that follow. They will show you some fundamental tools you can use to learn writing skills. They will also introduce you to the mental faculties writers use to develop content for pieces of writing—creativity, memory and expertise, observation, imagination, curiosity, the subconscious—and they will show you ways to train these faculties so that you will be able to come up with ideas and material for pieces of writing anytime you want to. Other chapters will teach you to grow a piece of writing; that is, to develop its content beyond your initial ideas. You will also learn how to establish a natural relationship with your readers and how to practice using that relationship as you write, so that you can find your own voice on the page and communicate clearly and powerfully.

The practices in this book will be of use to you for any kind of writing you want to do, be it nonfiction or fiction, poetry or memoir. Done faithfully, these practices will build your skills and bring you pleasure in writing; they will give you the confidence that comes with knowing what you are doing when you write; they may even change your life.

I have organized this book as much like a workshop as possible, so you will probably get the most benefit from it by beginning at

the beginning. If you prefer, though, you can certainly start with whatever piece looks most interesting to you: Everything in the book is, at the deepest level, connected to everything else.

My workshops are always hands-on: There really isn't any way to learn about writing just by listening to someone talk about it. You have to *do* it. This book takes the same approach: Certainly you can benefit by simply reading through it. But if you really want to become a better, more confident writer, you need to practice, just as you would if you wanted to become a better basketball player or a better pianist.

I would never assume that I know everything that there is to know about writing or about teaching writing. For me, teaching, like writing itself, is a learning journey. As I do my own work, and guide others to do theirs, I continue to learn more about both activities. For years my students have been asking me to put what I teach them into a book; and here it is.

Welcome to the journey.