

the
WRITER
says

*Quotes, Quips,
and Words
of Wisdom*

compiled & edited by Kevin Lippert

Also available in the
Words of Wisdom series:

The Architect Says

Laura S. Dushkes

The Designer Says

Sara Bader

The Filmmaker Says

Jamie Thompson Stern

The Chef Says

Nach Waxman and Matt Sartwell

The Musician Says

Benedetta LoBalbo

The Inventor Says

Kevin Lippert

the
WRITER
says

*Quotes, Quips,
and Words
of Wisdom*

compiled & edited by Kevin Lippert

Princeton Architectural Press, New York

This is the seventh volume in our informally named Words of Wisdom series, which includes collections of quotes and quips from architects, designers, musicians, filmmakers, chefs, and inventors. Typically, these are library research projects (the series was inspired by librarian Laura Dushke's collection of quotes from architects, which became *The Architect Says*). The process involves finding, verifying, and organizing quotes, a sometimes painstaking effort. This book, however, was more akin to filling a Dixie cup from a fire hose, so large is the universe of advice to and from writers, in the form of books, articles, interviews, websites, and courses. Writers don't agree about what to write about, or how, but do seem to agree there's always room for one more book on the shelf of writing advice.

The quotes come from many different kinds of writers, including novelists, personal essayists, grammarians, academics, and journalists, but certain threads are common: the necessity of a good work space, a diligent work schedule, and perseverance (Annie Lamott's oft-quoted dictum "Butt in chair," from her wise and funny *Bird by Bird*, is repeated in many iterations), the need for a good editor (I've

been extremely fortunate to have one of the best in the business, Sara Stemen, as mine), and the absolute necessity of reading in general—widely, often, and carefully. Whether or not you're a writer and use this book for inspiration, fun, or not at all, this exhortation to read is music to a publisher's ears, and I'm delighted you've made room in your reading and writing schedule for this slim volume. I hope you find some nuggets to invigorate and amuse, as I did.

While this is by no means a how-to book, it draws from much of the landscape of books about writing, from the ups and downs of the writing life (as in Dani Shapiro's heartfelt and honest *Still Writing*) to discussions of what makes fiction effective (E. M. Forster's witty *Aspects of the Novel*) to the mechanics and poetics of wordsmithing (Verlyn Klinkenborg's *Several Short Sentences about Writing* and Richard Goodman's *The Soul of Creative Writing*). Indeed, anyone interested in writing and the power of language will be richer for diving into any of the sources here.

Kevin Lippert

Hudson, New York

November 2017

**WRITING
IS AN
ACT OF
COURAGE.**

Ta-Nehisi Coates (1975–)

What writing is: telepathy, of course.

Stephen King (1947-)

The great power
of literature...
is that if 1,000
people read the
same book,
the book reads
each of them
differently.

David Grossman (1954–)

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are stored with other meanings, with other memories, and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past.

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)

*Beware
of a writer
quoting
too much;
he may be
quoting all
he knows.*

Alfred Kazin (1915–98)

*YOU CAN
ONLY BECOME
A BETTER
WRITER
BY BECOMING
A BETTER
READER.*

Verlyn Klinkenborg (1952–)

What I wrote when I was very young had some of the characteristic qualities of every writer I had any feeling for. **It takes a while before that admiration sinks back and becomes unconscious.** The writers stay with you for the rest of your life. But at least they don't intrude and become visible to the reader.

William Maxwell (1908–2000)

My childhood was aberrant and peculiar and nomadic and absolutely unpredictable....The mixture of solitude and uncertainty fertilized the situation enormously.... Inevitably I was making up stories to myself, retreating into myself.

John le Carré (1931–)

Writing for me is to a large extent self-entertainment, and the only child is driven to do that. For example, I'm an expert whistler...but that takes hours of practice, the sort of thing one hasn't got time for if one's part of a large family, I imagine.

Kingsley Amis (1922–95)

When I was between fourteen and eighteen I was a delinquent teenager, **always in trouble, breaking the law, doing drugs. Then I became a successful writer, and it has sort of worked out.**

Hanif Kureishi (1954–)

**IF I HADN'T WRITTEN,
I PROBABLY WOULD
HAVE DONE SOMETHING
STUPID THAT WOULD
HAVE LED TO MY DEATH.**

Octavia Butler (1947–2006)

Some kids liked to play tennis, I liked to write. I wasn't out hanging out or doing a lot of stuff teens were doing, because what I liked to do was be in my room and type.

S. E. Hinton (1948-)

*I... looked back to myself as a sixteen-year-old and how much I loved reading and **how a book could completely change my life...** so I just like the idea of trying to write for all those versions of me out there, wherever they are.*

Sherman Alexie (1966–)

I STARTED WRITING MY OWN THINGS WHEN I WAS TWELVE, THIRTEEN, AND I KNOW WHY I DID IT—MAINLY BECAUSE I HAD FINISHED ALL THE ADVENTURE NOVELS, MUSKETEER NOVELS, AND DUMAS THAT I WAS READING AT THE TIME. THEN I FOUND OUT I COULD WRITE THEM MYSELF.

Javier Marías (1951–)

Finally, after all these years of reading books, editing books, working in libraries, I thought, “Wait a minute, there’s no book in there about me!” So if I wanted to read it, I would probably have to write it.

Toni Morrison (1931–)

My family has been the biggest thing in my life. It is much more than just a resource for my writing. I have always felt like the son in some ways. I think that's true of all extended families, as true of Italian or Jewish families as Indian ones. You never gain independence. In your imagination, you are always someone's child, long dead though they may be.

Vikram Seth (1952–)

Your mother will not make you a writer. My advice to any young person who wants to write is: **leave home.**

Paul Theroux (1941-)

I decided to become a writer. It was a good idea. Having had no experience whatever in writing, except writing letters and reports, I wasn't handicapped by exaggerated notions of the difficulties ahead.

Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961)

I JUST KNEW
I WOULD
BE A WRITER.
IT JUST
SEEMED THE
ONLY SENSIBLE
THING TO DO.

Jane Gardam (1928–)

If you get right out of college and expect (or want) to get a job as a writer, you might be making a mistake. You might be better off working on a merchant ship or a cannery or a hospital—something new, something where you might learn a thing or two.

Dave Eggers (1970–)

Do something else. Because what's going to happen in the next five years if you stay within your niche is already so circumscribed and predictable. And what can happen if you leave it and do something else is unknown, and therefore bigger. Experiences like these, and the people you'll meet, can inform your work in the future in so many ways.

Chris Kraus (1955–)

You can teach people a lot about craft and various techniques, and you can certainly teach them to appreciate, but *you cannot give them spirit or soul if it's not there.*

Mary Gaitskill (1954–)

Understand that everyone has 1,000 pages of bad fiction in him or her, and before you can do anything, you probably have to just write your thousand pages of crap.

Jennifer Finney Boylan (1958–)

***THE FIRST
THING A
WRITER
HAS TO DO
IS FIND
ANOTHER
SOURCE
OF INCOME.***

Ellen Gilchrist (1935–)

**I FEEL THAT I HAVE NOT TALENTS
WHATSOEVER IN MONEY AND
BUSINESS MATTERS. SO MAYBE
I OUGHT NOT TO DO WITH IT AT ALL.
I GET TOO THOROUGHLY IMMERSSED
IN MY DREAMS. BUT SOMEHOW
LIFE IS SO ORGANIZED THAT I FIND
MYSELF TIED TO MONEY MATTERS
LIKE A GRAZING HORSE TO A STAKE.**

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960)

**I don't think I've
ever felt, before
or since, anything
like the elation
of realizing
I was going to
be published.**

J. K. Rowling (1965–)

**I really felt I
peaked when
I saw my first
novel in print.**

Herman Koch (1953–)

I like Hollywood....
Honestly, if I were a
generation younger,
I probably would
have started with
TV instead of books.

Gary Shteyngart (1972–)

*Let me not imply
that there are no
writers of authentic
ability in Hollywood.
There are not many,
but **there are not
many anywhere.***

Raymond Chandler (1888–1959)

I THINK OF MYSELF AS
A NEW YORK WRITER
EVEN WHEN I AM NOT
IN NEW YORK, AND BY
THAT I MEAN, I THINK
THE VALUES AND
THEMES OF NEW YORK—
UNIQUENESS, AMBITION,
OUTSIDERS/INSIDERS,
FAILURE, GRANDIOSITY,
AND HUMILIATION—
ARE DEEPLY INGRAINED
IN MY POINT OF VIEW.

Min Jin Lee (1968–)

AS A NATIVE
NEW YORKER,
REAL ESTATE
IS ALWAYS,
ALWAYS
INTERESTING
TO ME.

Emma Straub (1980–)

The longer I work at the craft of writing, the more I realize that there's nothing more interesting than the truth.... Who could invent all the astonishing things that really happen? I increasingly find myself saying to writers and students, **"Trust your material."**

William Zinsser (1922–2015)

I love the details of a novel. For research, I like to go to the location of the places in the novels. The first thing that I do is involve my senses: I notice the smells; I open the trash cans and look at what people have thrown away.

Natsuo Kirino (1951–)

I don't think I've ever written about a part of the world which I myself haven't visited. But you see, I was a reporter for a long time. I have a reporter's eye and sense of locality, and I add to this by taking notes and buying road maps wherever I happen to be.

Ian Fleming (1908–64)

**WE'VE ALL READ NOVELS
WHERE YOU PLOW THROUGH
THREE PAGES ON THE
MANUFACTURE OF RUBBER
AND YOU REALIZE THAT
THE WRITER HAS BEEN
TO SINGAPORE TO SEE
A RUBBER PLANTATION
AND BY GOD ARE WE GOING
TO HEAR ABOUT IT.**

William Boyd (1952-)

If you want to find a magical situation, magical things, you have to go deep inside yourself. So that is what I do. People say it's magic realism—but in the depths of my soul, **it's just realism.** **Not magical.** While I'm writing, it's very natural, very logical, very realistic and reasonable.

Haruki Murakami (1949–)

There's not a line
in any of my books
which I can't connect
to a real experience.
There is always
a reference to a
concrete reality.

Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014)

**ONE WRITES OUT
OF ONE THING
ONLY—*ONE'S
OWN EXPERIENCE.*
EVERYTHING
DEPENDS ON HOW
RELENTLESSLY ONE
FORCES FROM THIS
EXPERIENCE THE
LAST DROP, SWEET
OR BITTER, IT CAN
POSSIBLY GIVE.**

James Baldwin (1924–87)

**CROSSING BORDERS MEANS
THAT AT TIMES I SHARE THINGS
THAT I DON'T WANT TO SHARE.
BUT IF YOU REALLY SEE YOURSELF
AS A WORKER FOR FREEDOM,
THEN THE CHALLENGE IS ALSO
ON YOU TO SACRIFICE WHATEVER
NOTIONS OF PRIVACY THAT
MANY OF US WOULD WANT
TO HOLD ON TO.**

bell hooks (1952–)

*I really want to
escape myself as
much as I can—
myself as the artist,
or as the writer,
or as the thinker.*

Chang-Rae Lee (1965–)

**The best way
for me to solve
problems in
my own life is
to write about
them.**

Peter Straub (1943–)

I don't write for my friends or myself, either; I write for *it*, for **the pleasure of *it***. I believe if I stopped to wonder what so-and-so would think, or what I'd feel like if this were read by a stranger, I would be paralyzed.

Eudora Welty (1909–2001)

**DON'T WRITE
TO TRENDS,
AND LET THE
MARKETPLACE
COME TO YOU.**

Jeff VanderMeer (1968–)

Historically, the books that have persevered **in our culture and in our memories and our hearts** were not the literary fiction of the day but the popular fiction of the day.

Jodi Picoult (1966–)

**You don't have
to burn books to
destroy a culture.
Just get people to
stop reading them.**

Ray Bradbury (1920–2012)

There are few things that depress me more than hearing the word “great” followed by a nationality and then the word “novel.”
There is no such thing as the great anything novel.

Marlon James (1970–)

THERE'S NO
GREAT LITERARY
TRADITION.
THERE'S ONLY
THE TRADITION
OF THE EVENTUAL
DEATH OF
EVERY LITERARY
TRADITION.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)

The good writer seems to be writing about himself (but never is) but has his eye always on **that thread of the Universe which runs through himself, and all things.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82)

I've never felt narcissism to be a sin....I think it's necessary to be absolutely in love with ourselves. It's only by reflecting on myself with attention and care that I can reflect on the world. It's only by turning my gaze on myself that I can understand others, feel them as my kin.

Elena Ferrante (unknown)

*I approach [writing]
as if I'm a priestess.
I understand that
all the forces are
being called upon to
help me deliver what
is **most useful and
most nourishing for
whoever is reading.***

Alice Walker (1944–)

**I am fortunate and
blessed to be the
flute, but I recognize
and acknowledge
I am not the music.**

Sandra Cisneros (1954–)

*Why is one
compelled
to write? To set
oneself apart,
cocooned, rapt
in solitude,
despite the
wants of others.*

Patti Smith (1946–)

I DIDN'T APPLY FOR GRANTS OR WRITERS' CENTERS. I DIDN'T JOIN WRITERS' GROUPS. I JUST COULDN'T DO IT. IT DIDN'T SEEM AN HONEST WAY TO WRITE TO ME. WHEN YOU WRITE ON YOUR OWN, YOU CAN WRITE THE EXTREMES. NO ONE ELSE IS WATCHING AND YOU CAN REALLY GO AS FAR AS YOU NEED TO.

Kiran Desai (1971-)

I've referred to a novel as a job. But it can also be much more fantastic than that: **an alternative universe** you enter through concentration and writing. But of course it's difficult to set your life up to accommodate an alternative universe, which is why writing one can take a long time.

Lorrie Moore (1957-)

Surely it is a magical thing
for a handful of words,
artfully arranged, to stop
time. To conjure a place,
a person, a situation, in all its
specificity and dimensions.
To affect us and alter us,
as profoundly as real people
and things do.

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967–)

I HAVE A LOT OF FAITH
IN WHAT CAN BE ACHIEVED
WITH A WELL-POLISHED
ENGLISH SENTENCE.
NOT THAT I TRY TO
MAKE THE LANGUAGE
OLD-FASHIONED, BUT
I LIKE A CLEAN SENTENCE.

Teju Cole (1975–)

I am not particularly interested in language. Or rather, I am interested in what language can do for me, and I spend many hours each day trying to ensure my prose is as simple as it can possibly be.

Nick Hornby (1957–)

**I'M GLAD
YOU LIKE
ADVERBS—
I ADORE
THEM.**

Henry James (1843–1916)

**WHEN YOU
CATCH AN
ADJECTIVE,
KILL IT.**

Mark Twain (1835–1910)

*If any ideas are to be found in what I write, those ideas came after the writing. I mean, I began by the writing, I began by the story, **I began with the dream**, if you want to call it that. And then afterwards, perhaps, some idea came of it. But I didn't begin, as I say, by the moral and then writing a fable to prove it.*

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear....What is going on in these pictures in my mind?

Joan Didion (1934–)

IT'S AMAZING WHAT
HAVING AN IDEA
FOR A NOVEL WILL
FORCE YOU TO DO,
AND THE WORLDS
THAT YOU WILL
ENTER. YOU'LL
HAVE TO LEARN TO
BE CONVINCING
TO PEOPLE WHO
KNOW THOSE
WORLDS REALLY,
REALLY WELL.

Peter Carey (1943–)

I always have these ideas, and I think, “That would be really good; if I was a better writer, I could pull it off.” And then I try to become a better writer to do it justice.

Colson Whitehead (1969–)

**IF YOU HAVE A THOUGHT,
AN IDEA, A CHANGE, DON'T
EVER DELAY PUTTING
IT DOWN—NOT EVEN FOR
THREE SECONDS.**

**IT WILL ESCAPE FOREVER.
NO AMOUNT OF PLEADING,
PRAYER, OR CURSING
WILL BRING IT BACK.**

Richard Goodman (1945–)

**I tried to keep
[a notebook],
but I never could
remember where
I put the damn
thing. I always say
I'm going to keep
one tomorrow.**

Dorothy Parker (1893–1967)

To me, writing is entirely mysterious. If I didn't believe it was a mystery, the whole thing wouldn't be worthwhile. I don't know not just how something is going to end but what the next couple of lines are going to be.

William Trevor (1928–2016)

Confusion
is the
best place
to start
a story.

Amy Tan (1952–)

The first draft is torture! It's so hard for me. Once I've written the first draft, I have the pieces to the puzzle, and I love to put it together and make it into a whole.

Judy Blume (1938-)

The restless condition in which I wander up and down my room with **the first page of my new book before me** defies all description. I feel as if nothing would do me the least good but setting up a Balloon. It might be inflated in the garden in front—but I am afraid of its scarcely clearing those little houses.

Charles Dickens (1812–70)

BEFORE I START A BOOK I'VE USUALLY GOT FOUR HUNDRED PAGES OF NOTES. MOST OF THEM ARE ALMOST INCOHERENT. BUT THERE'S ALWAYS A MOMENT WHEN YOU FEEL YOU'VE GOT A NOVEL STARTED. YOU CAN MORE OR LESS SEE HOW IT'S GOING TO WORK OUT. AFTER THAT IT'S JUST A QUESTION OF DETAIL.

P. G. Wodehouse (1881–1975)

WRITING A NOVEL IS AS IF
YOU ARE GOING OFF ON A JOURNEY
ACROSS A VALLEY. THE VALLEY
IS FULL OF MIST, BUT YOU CAN SEE
THE TOP OF A TREE HERE AND
THE TOP OF ANOTHER TREE OVER
THERE. AND WITH ANY LUCK
YOU CAN SEE THE OTHER SIDE
OF THE VALLEY. BUT YOU CANNOT
SEE DOWN INTO THE MIST.
NEVERTHELESS, **YOU HEAD FOR
THE FIRST TREE.**

Terry Pratchett (1948–2015)

A piece of writing has to start somewhere, go somewhere, and sit down when it gets there. You do that by building what you hope is an unarguable structure. Beginning, middle, end.

John McPhee (1931–)

When structure is done well, it should be like architecture: you sense the overall feel of the building—tall, or airy, or strong—but you’re not looking at the buttresses that hold it up or the seams where parts are fastened together.

Celeste Ng (1980–)

I conceive my subjects like a man—that is, rather more architectonically and dramatically than most women—and then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction and breadth, the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterization, I mean.

Edith Wharton (1862–1937)

It's **the small, unlovely places of life** that have always called most eloquently to me: they're the ones that traditional histories tend to overlook, but they often provide the settings for some of our most intense personal dramas—especially, perhaps, if we are women.

Sarah Waters (1966–)

Men write dark stories all the time, and rarely is that darkness obsessed over. But when women write dark, all of a sudden it's a thing. It's like:
Why so dark?

Roxane Gay (1974–)

IF YOU CAN MAKE
A PIECE OF WRITING
FUNNY, YOU CAN GET
AWAY WITH ALMOST
ANYTHING—YOU
CAN GET VERY DARK,
YOU CAN MOCK THE
VERY POWERFUL,
AND YOU CAN TRICK
PEOPLE INTO EAGERLY
CONSUMING IDEAS
THAT ARE NORMALLY
VERY THREATENING.

Lindy West (1982–)

I HAVE NEVER FULLY
EXORCISED SHAMES
THAT STRUCK ME
TO THE HEART AS A
CHILD EXCEPT
THROUGH WRITTEN
VIOLENCE, SHADOWY
CARICATURE, AND
DARK JOKES.

Louise Erdrich (1954–)

Perhaps writing
in general is
shame management.
Certainly female
writing has to
radically address
this problem.

Anne Enright (1962–)

The thought of a married woman writing a story about a marriage gives me a kind of queasy, embarrassed feeling. What a clichéd waste of time! And therein lies the challenge: **this shame.**

Miranda July (1974–)

*ALL LITERATURE
IS ABOUT LOVE.
WHEN MEN DO IT,
IT'S A POLITICAL
COMMENT ON HUMAN
RELATIONS. WHEN
WOMEN DO IT, IT'S
JUST A LOVE STORY.*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-)

I write about love because it's the most important thing in the world. I write about sex because often it feels like the most important thing in the world. But I set these personal private passions against an outside world—sometimes hostile, usually strange—so that we can see what happens when inner and outer realities collide.

Jeanette Winterson (1959–)

*My heroines are
always virgins.
They never go to
bed without a ring
on their fingers—
not until page
118 at least.*

Barbara Cartland (1901–2000)

I try to keep deep love out of my stories because, once that particular subject comes up, it is almost impossible to talk about anything else. Readers don't want to hear about anything else. **They go gaga about love.** If a lover in a story wins his true love, that's the end of the tale, even if World War III is about to begin, and the sky is black with flying saucers.

Kurt Vonnegut (1922–2007)

**Love, like death,
is congenial to a
novelist because
it ends a book
conveniently.**

E. M. Forster (1879–1970)

I HAVE A COLD
ATTITUDE TO MY
CHARACTERS.
AND I DON'T
PREPARE READERS
FOR SOMETHING
TERRIBLE. I JUST
BRING IT OUT.
I PREFER SHOCK
TREATMENT.

Muriel Spark (1918–2006)

**I have this
tremendous
urge to push
the characters
off a cliff, which
I have to hold
back from.**

Alan Hollinghurst (1954–)

I suppose you could say there is an element of the laboratory about all fiction writing. To some extent they're thought experiments....

There is that slightly chilly aspect to writing fiction—you do have to be slightly detached to say: How would human beings respond in this situation?

Kazuo Ishiguro (1954–)

There is
a splinter
of ice in
the heart
of a writer.

Graham Greene (1904–1991)

**YOU MUST
BE ABLE TO
SUMMON EMPATHY
FOR ALL YOUR
CHARACTERS,
EVEN AND
ESPECIALLY THE
DESPICABLE ONES.**

Hanya Yanagihara (1974–)

I have a fondness for all of my characters, even the bad guys who are bad because they are selfish or dumb or lazy. I only had one really evil guy, I thought, and I didn't care much for him...his mother was nice to him, you know, but he wasn't nice to his mother.

Elmore Leonard (1925–2013)

People act out of selfishness and a desire to avoid pain, but sometimes they act in ways that are mysterious to themselves....Terrible things happen and nobody learns anything. I wanted to move away from notions of what a character has to earn or realize, and **aim for some kind of truth** that has more to do with life as I know it.

Emma Cline (1989–)

THERE'S SOMETHING
DISHONEST ABOUT
BEING KIND TO MY
CHARACTERS, BECAUSE
THE WORLD, SO OFTEN,
ISN'T KIND TO THEM.
I THOUGHT ABOUT
THAT WITH ALL MY
CHARACTERS. IT WAS
CONSTANTLY ON MY
MIND. **I HAD TO BE
HONEST. I HAD TO
BE RUTHLESS.**

Jesmyn Ward (1977–)

The story doesn't want
to be told what to do.

You have to enter into
this process with a high
level of trust that the
many hours of choosing
that you're doing every
day will gradually clarify
the narrative for you.

George Saunders (1958-)

**MY
CHAR-
ACTERS
ARE
GALLEY
SLAVES.**

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977)

The legacy of the fairy story in my brain is that everything will work out. In fiction it would be very hard for me, as a writer, to give a bad ending to a good character, or give a good ending to a bad character.

Kate Atkinson (1951-)

**THE STORY OR THE
CHARACTERS HAVE
A LIFE OF THEIR OWN.
I CAN'T CONTROL THEM.
I WANT THE CHARACTERS
TO BE HAPPY, TO GET
MARRIED, AND TO HAVE
A LOT OF CHILDREN
AND LIVE HAPPILY EVER
AFTER, BUT IT NEVER
HAPPENS THAT WAY.**

Isabel Allende (1942–)

To write, I like a room with a view, preferably a long view. I dislike looking out on gardens. I prefer looking at the sea, or ships, or anything that has a vista to it. Oddly enough, I've never worked in the mountains.

Norman Mailer (1923–2007)

Appealing workplaces are
to be avoided. One wants
a room with no view,
so imagination can meet
memory in the dark.

Annie Dillard (1945–)

**Don't write in
public places.....
It should
be done only
in private,
like any other
lavatorial
activity.**

Geoff Dyer (1958-)

In a newspaper office, you realize **you don't need to be in a quiet room to write.** You have to write in a park or a pub or in a telephone box to get out of the rain. You short-circuit those sensitivities that writers develop. Proust would have saved money on his cork-lined bedroom had he worked for a while at *Le Figaro*.

Michael Frayn (1933–)

*I STARTED DRINKING
SHORTLY AFTER
I STARTED WRITING.
AND THEN I KIND OF
GOT IT IN MY HEAD
THAT I NEEDED TO
BE DRINKING WHILE
I WROTE.... I DON'T
KNOW WHY I WAS SO
CONVINCED OF IT—
IT'S LIKE SAYING
“I CAN'T SING
UNLESS I HAVE
A BLUE SHIRT ON.”*

David Sedaris (1956–)

**I work from 10:30 am
to mid-afternoon,
not stopping for lunch.
I drink lots of coffee
and smoke cigarettes.
Smoking is so tied
to writing I could
not give it up.**

Martin Amis (1949–)

I FOUND THAT **THREE HOURS A DAY IS ABOUT ALL I CAN DO** OF ACTUAL COMPOSING. I COULD DO POLISHING PERHAPS LATER. I SOMETIMES FOUND AT FIRST THAT I WANTED TO GO ON LONGER, BUT WHEN I LOOKED AT THE STUFF THE NEXT DAY, WHAT I'D DONE AFTER THE THREE HOURS WERE UP WAS NEVER SATISFACTORY. IT'S MUCH BETTER TO STOP AND THINK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE QUITE DIFFERENT.

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Two
thousand
words
is a good
day's
work.

Evelyn Waugh (1903–66)

How to write: *butt in chair.*
Start each day anywhere.
Let yourself do it badly.
Just take one passage
at a time. Get butt back
in chair.

Anne Lamott (1954–)

I... venture to advise young men who look forward to authorship as the business of their lives... to avoid enthusiastic rushes with their pens, and to seat themselves at their desks day by day as though they were lawyers' clerks — and so **let them sit** until the allotted task shall be accomplished.

Anthony Trollope (1815–82)

BE A GOOD STEWARD OF YOUR GIFTS. PROTECT YOUR TIME. FEED YOUR INNER LIFE. AVOID TOO MUCH NOISE. READ GOOD BOOKS, HAVE GOOD SENTENCES IN YOUR EARS. BE BY YOURSELF AS OFTEN AS YOU CAN. WALK. TAKE THE PHONE OFF THE HOOK. WORK REGULAR HOURS.

Jane Kenyon (1947–95)

Get a dog....

Being a dog owner requires a similar form of discipline [to writing]. You wake up every morning. You walk the dog. You do this whether you're tired, depressed, broke, hung over, or have been recently dumped. You do it.

Jennifer Weiner (1970–)

Here's a short list of what not to do when you sit down to write. Don't answer the phone. Don't look at e-mail. Don't go on the Internet for any reason.

Dani Shapiro (1962-)

***DON'T
HAVE
CHILDREN.***

Richard Ford (1944–)

*It wasn't the housework or the children that dragged me down. I'd done housework all my life. It was the sort of open rule that women who tried to do anything so weird as writing were **unseemly and possibly neglectful.***

Alice Munro (1931-)

Composition
seems to
me Impossible,
with a head
full of Joints of
Mutton and
doses of rhubarb.

Jane Austen (1775–1817)

YOU CAN ONLY WRITE
REGULARLY IF YOU'RE
WILLING TO **WRITE**
BADLY. YOU CAN'T
WRITE REGULARLY
AND WELL. ONE SHOULD
ACCEPT BAD WRITING
AS A WAY OF PRIMING
THE PUMP, A WARM-UP
EXERCISE THAT ALLOWS
YOU TO WRITE WELL.

Jennifer Egan (1962–)

***You can
always fix
bad pages.
You can't fix
no pages.***

Harlan Coben (1962–)

I do not rework poems,
but let them go at first
sitting, because if I have
lied originally, there's
no use driving the spikes
home, and if I haven't
lied, well hell, there's
nothing to worry about.

Charles Bukowski (1920–94)

I REALLY ENJOY
REVISING MORE
THAN WRITING.
I LOVE TO CROSS
THINGS OUT
AND CUT A PAGE
DOWN TO ONE
PARAGRAPH.

Beverly Cleary (1916–)

**For me
[writing is]
mostly a
question of
rewriting.**

James Thurber (1894–1961)

THERE'S A POINT
AT WHICH YOU'RE
NOT MAKING IT
BETTER; YOU'RE
JUST MAKING IT
DIFFERENT. YOU
HAVE TO BE GOOD
AT RECOGNIZING
THAT POINT.

Salman Rushdie (1947-)

You know when a piece is finished, because you can't pull out a single sentence or change a word or syllable.

Charles Johnson (1948–)

Any piece of writing is just the last proof; it's the one we had to let go of because the deadline is here.

Roger Angell (1920–)

It's never a day job;
it's always a tremendous
challenge. People always
ask me, "Do you ever
start a book and then
put it aside and do
something different?"
And, unfortunately, no,
I always write everything
right to the bitter end.

Edmund White (1940–)

**THEY CAN'T YANK
[A] NOVELIST LIKE
THEY CAN [A] PITCHER.
[A] NOVELIST HAS TO
GO THE FULL NINE,
EVEN IF IT KILLS HIM.**

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)

*YOU ARE
ABSOLUTELY
A BEGINNER—
EVERY DAY.
YOU HAVE NO
RIGHT TO ASSUME
THAT YOU’LL BE
ABLE TO WRITE
BECAUSE YOU
COULD WRITE
YESTERDAY.*

Hilary Mantel (1952–)

The scary thing about writing novels is that they're all different. What worked last time, won't this time, and there's always that little voice that whispers to you that this time you've bitten off more than you can chew, located the very story that will show you who's boss (not you).

Richard Russo (1949–)

I DON'T HAVE ANY ANXIETY ABOUT WRITING. NOT REALLY. IT'S SUCH A PLEASURE, AND OUR LIVES ARE SO RELATIVELY EASY COMPARED TO PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY OUT THERE IN THE WORLD WORKING HARD AND SUFFERING.

Joyce Carol Oates (1938–)

Anyone who
writes or chooses
a writing life
is walking off
the edge of the
universe into
the big dark
naked and crying.

Lidia Yuknavitch (1963–)

Every time I read that someone has spoken badly of me I begin to cry, I drag myself across the floor, I scratch myself, I stop writing indefinitely, I lose my appetite, I smoke less, I engage in sport, I go for walks on the edge of the sea, which by the way is less than thirty meters from my house, and I ask the seagulls, whose ancestors ate the fish who ate Ulysses: *Why me? Why?* I've done you no harm.

Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003)

**WHEN GOD HANDS
YOU A GIFT, HE
ALSO HANDS YOU
A WHIP; AND THE
WHIP IS INTENDED
SOLELY FOR **SELF-
FLAGELLATION.****

Truman Capote (1924–84)

The effort of writing seems more arduous all the time. Unlike technicians who are supposed to become more proficient with practice, I find I've grown considerably less articulate.

S. J. Perelman (1904–79)

ALL WRITERS
FEEL STRUCK
BY THE
LIMITATIONS
OF LANGUAGE.

Margaret Atwood (1939–)

*In the end a man
must sit down
and get the words
on paper, and
against great odds.
This takes **stamina**
and **resolution**.*

E. B. White (1899–1985)

**No writer
who achieves
spectacular
success does
so without
a modicum
of good luck.**

P. D. James (1920–2014)

*[The] impulse—to tell a tale rich in context, alive to situation, shot through with event and perspective—is as strong in human beings as **the need to eat food and breathe air**: it may be suppressed but it can never be destroyed.*

Vivian Gornick (1935–)

A WRITER IS A
WRITER BECAUSE
EVEN WHEN
THERE IS NO
HOPE, EVEN
WHEN NOTHING
YOU DO SHOWS
ANY SIGN OF
PROMISE, **YOU
KEEP WRITING
ANYWAY.**

Junot Díaz (1968–)

I'm always thinking about duties, rights, and gifts.... That's how social worlds and our intimate lives are structured, right? What is your duty? What accrues to you? What is your right? And what are your gifts? The wildcard is gifts because what rights accrue to you because of certain gifts?

Zadie Smith (1975–)

*There's no moral obligation to write in any particular way. But **there is a moral obligation**, I think, not to ally yourself with power against the powerless.*

Chinua Achebe (1930–2013)

I'm not a big believer in the novelist's obligation to reflect or catalyze society in some ways.... I don't write books that have messages. None of them have a moral to them. I'm more interested in exploring things that are hard to understand and maybe bringing the readers with me.

Tana French (1973-)

What a novel can do is show the distance between what's being said and what's being felt.... The drama is the distance between what's to be spoken of and what's not to be mentioned again.

Colm Tóibín (1955-)

If being a novelist has any moral, political side, it is **identifying with people who are not like you.** It's not that we make political statements or show our party cards; it's seeing the world through the eyes of someone who is different.

Orhan Pamuk (1952–)

**LITERATURE
IS POWERLESS IN
DIRECTLY CONFRONTING
THE EVIL, BUT IT
CAN BE SUBVERSIVE
AND EFFECTIVE IN
SHAPING READERS'
SENSIBILITIES
AND CHANGING
THEIR WAY OF SEEING
THINGS. IT IS
A SLOW PROCESS.**

Ha Jin (1956–)

*CREATE DANGEROUSLY,
FOR PEOPLE WHO
READ DANGEROUSLY.
THIS IS WHAT I'VE ALWAYS
THOUGHT IT MEANT
TO BE A WRITER. WRITING,
KNOWING IN PART
THAT NO MATTER HOW
TRIVIAL YOUR WORDS
MAY SEEM, SOMEDAY,
SOMEWHERE, SOMEONE
MAY RISK HIS OR
HER LIFE TO READ THEM.*

Edwidge Danticat (1969–)

Writers throughout the ages have one weapon, which is literature, but they also have their responsibilities as a citizen when literature does not seem to suffice.... They are not mutually exclusive. One continues to write anyway, but if you are called out to demonstrate, if people are being killed in the streets, **it's hardly the moment to go for your pen and paper.**

Wole Soyinka (1934-)

**READING
IS AN
ACTIVE,
IMAGINATIVE
ACT;
IT TAKES
WORK.**

Khaled Hosseini (1965–)

*The demand that
I make of my reader
is that **he should
devote his whole life
to reading my works.***

James Joyce (1882–1941)

Whether I'm writing scripts or prose, the goal is identical. **To give pleasure.** Now whether I succeed or not is up for debate, and, mostly, I fail. But I try. I like to make things. It's a way to stay busy during one's ephemeral and confusing life.

Jonathan Ames (1964–)

On my tombstone,
I want to have
the words
“She gave a lot
of people a
lot of pleasure.”

Jackie Collins (1937–2015)

*THE REAL TROUBLE
WITH THE WRITING
GAME IS THAT
NO GENERAL RULE
CAN BE WORKED
OUT FOR UNIFORM
GUIDANCE.*

Erle Stanley Gardner (1889–1970)

**You write what
you write, and then
either it holds up
or it doesn't hold up.
There are no rules.**

Jamaica Kincaid (1949–)

INDEX

- Achebe, Chinua **143**
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi **87**
Alexie, Sherman **19**
Allende, Isabel **103**
Ames, Jonathan **152**
Amis, Kingsley **15**
Amis, Martin **109**
Angell, Roger **127**
Atkinson, Kate **102**
Atwood, Margaret **137**
Austen, Jane **119**
Baldwin, James **44**
Bass, Rick **160**
Blume, Judy **74**
Bolaño, Roberto **134**
Borges, Jorge Luis **66**
Boyd, William **41**
Boylan, Jennifer Finney **29**
Bradbury, Ray **51**
Bukowski, Charles **122**
Butler, Octavia **17**
Capote, Truman **135**
Carey, Peter **68**
Cartland, Barbara **89**
Chandler, Raymond **35**
Cisneros, Sandra **57**
Cleary, Beverly **123**
Cline, Emma **98**
Coates, Ta-Nehisi **7**
Coben, Harlan **121**
Cole, Teju **62**
Collins, Jackie **153**
Danticat, Edwidge **148**
Desai, Kiran **59**
Díaz, Junot **141**
Dickens, Charles **75**
Didion, Joan **67**
Dillard, Annie **105**
Dyer, Geoff **106**
Egan, Jennifer **120**
Eggers, Dave **26**
Eliot, T. S. **110**
Emerson, Ralph Waldo **54**
Enright, Anne **85**
Erdrich, Louise **84**
Ferrante, Elena **55**
Fitzgerald, F. Scott **53**
Fleming, Ian **40**
Ford, Richard **117**
Forster, E. M. **91**
Frayn, Michael **107**
French, Tana **144**
Gaitskill, Mary **28**
García Márquez, Gabriel **43**
Gardam, Jane **25**
Gardner, Erle Stanley **154**
Gay, Roxane **82**
Gilchrist, Ellen **30**
Goodman, Richard **70**
Gornick, Vivian **140**
Greene, Graham **95**
Grossman, David **9**
Hammett, Dashiell **24**
Hemingway, Ernest **129**
Hinton, S. E. **18**
Hollinghurst, Alan **93**
hooks, bell **45**
Hornby, Nick **63**
Hosseini, Khaled **150**
Hurston, Zora Neale **31**
Ishiguro, Kazuo **94**
James, Henry **64**
James, Marlon **52**
James, P. D. **139**
Jin, Ha **147**
Johnson, Charles **126**

INDEX

- Joyce, James **151**
July, Miranda **86**
Kazin, Alfred **11**
Kenyon, Jane **114**
Kincaid, Jamaica **155**
King, Stephen **8**
Kirino, Natsuo **39**
Klinkenborg, Verlyn **12**
Koch, Herman **33**
Kraus, Chris **27**
Kureishi, Hanif **16**
Lahiri, Jhumpa **61**
Lamott, Anne **112**
le Carré, John **14**
Lee, Chang-Rae **46**
Lee, Min Jin **36**
Leonard, Elmore **97**
Mailer, Norman **104**
Mantel, Hilary **130**
Marías, Javier **20**
Maxwell, William **13**
McPhee, John **78**
Moore, Lorrie **60**
Morrison, Toni **21**
Munro, Alice **118**
Murakami, Haruki **42**
Nabokov, Vladimir **101**
Ng, Celeste **79**
Oates, Joyce Carol **132**
Pamuk, Orhan **146**
Parker, Dorothy **71**
Perelman, S. J. **136**
Picoult, Jodi **50**
Pratchett, Terry **77**
Rowling, J. K. **32**
Rushdie, Salman **125**
Russo, Richard **131**
Saunders, George **100**
Sedaris, David **108**
Seth, Vikram **22**
Shapiro, Dani **116**
Shteyngart, Gary **34**
Smith, Patti **58**
Smith, Zadie **142**
Soyinka, Wole **149**
Spark, Muriel **92**
Straub, Emma **37**
Straub, Peter **47**
Tan, Amy **73**
Theroux, Paul **23**
Thurber, James **124**
Tóibín, Colm **145**
Trevor, William **72**
Trollope, Anthony **113**
Twain, Mark **65**
VanderMeer, Jeff **49**
Vonnegut, Kurt **90**
Walker, Alice **56**
Ward, Jesmyn **99**
Waters, Sarah **81**
Waugh, Evelyn **111**
Weiner, Jennifer **115**
Welty, Eudora **48**
West, Lindy **83**
Wharton, Edith **80**
White, E. B. **138**
White, Edmund **128**
Whitehead, Colson **69**
Winterson, Jeanette **88**
Wodehouse, P. G. **76**
Woolf, Virginia **10**
Yanagihara, Hanya **96**
Yuknavitch, Lidia **133**
Zinsser, William **38**

Published by
Princeton Architectural Press
A McEvoy Group company
202 Warren Street
Hudson, NY 12534
Visit our website at www.papress.com

© 2018 Princeton Architectural Press
All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-61689-780-2 (epub, mobi)

Princeton Architectural Press is a leading publisher in architecture, design, photography, landscape, and visual culture. We create fine books and stationery of unsurpassed quality and production values. With more than one thousand titles published, we find design everywhere and in the most unlikely places.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from the publisher, except in the context of reviews.

Every reasonable attempt has been made to identify owners of copyright. Errors or omissions will be corrected in subsequent editions.

Editor: Sara Stemen
Designer: Brett Yasko
Series designer: Paul Wagner

Special thanks to:
Janet Behning, Abby Bussel,
Benjamin English, Jan Cigliano
Hartman, Susan Hershberg,
Kristen Hewitt, Lia Hunt,
Valerie Kamen, Jennifer Lippert,
Sara McKay, Parker Menzimer,
Eliana Miller, Nina Pick, Wes Seeley,
Rob Shaeffer, Marisa Tesoro,
and Joseph Weston of Princeton
Architectural Press
—Kevin C. Lippert, publisher

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available from the publisher
upon request.

Write
every day.
Don't
ever stop.

Rick Bass (1958–)

“A writer is a writer because even when there is no hope, even when nothing you do shows any sign of promise, you keep writing anyway.”

—Junot Díaz

The Writer Says summons us to an intimate gathering of novelists, memoirists, grammarians, journalists, and teachers—a glittering cocktail party where history’s most venerable scribes meet today’s freshest storytellers and essayists to compare insights on work habits, formative experiences, the pleasures and limitations of language, the business of authoring, and much more. On the guest list: Henry James and Mark Twain, squaring off about modifiers; Charles Bukowski and Beverly Cleary, at odds about revision; Zadie Smith and Chinua Achebe, discussing the moral dimension of writing; and Jonathan Ames and Jackie Collins, united in their desire to give readers pleasure. *The Writer Says* presents the processes, preferences, admonitions, and advice of our most beloved writers, in a collection sure to inspire readers to pen some perspicacious prose of their own.

Princeton Architectural Press
www.papress.com