

I WRITE

**Stewart Hendrickson
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I write because it's fun, it's therapeutic, I learn new things, it helps me to understand... and because I can. Anyone can. If you can tell a story, you can write. Writing is better than speaking because you can always edit your words. Once you speak, it's said. You can't take it back. When you write, you can rephrase, decide what not to say, or add something more. First, you write, then you edit, edit, and edit until you get it right.

This little essay is not about how to write – I'm not qualified for that. It's more about what I've learned along the way, some simple things I do, and to encourage you to write.

How did my writing progress? My worst course in college was English 101 – Freshman English. I wrote a research paper, theme papers, reviews... and they all came back with the same low grade. I cringe now to think that the professor had to read all that mediocre drivel. I didn't get much feedback, so I didn't learn much. Throughout college, I had to write more, and my writing probably improved. In a senior course in physical chemistry, the professor required written answers to many exam questions, and the final exam had only one question: write a short essay on what you learned. That was good, and I tried to do something similar in my college chemistry teaching.

In graduate school, there is one writing experience that stands out in my mind. I had to give a seminar and write a short abstract of what I was going to present. I handed my abstract to the professor and we went over the writing. He managed to cut the number of words in half, and still say what I wanted to say. I was dumbfounded and began to learn the economy of words – how to write concisely, something necessary in scientific writing. If you can replace several words with just one or two, that's better and makes for easier reading.

After my year of postdoctoral work, I had to write a research paper to publish in a major journal. I wrote the first draft and then went over it with my professor. He was an excellent writer – a perfectionist, in a good way. After about twelve drafts – we were changing just a few words back and forth – I finally asked him if it was ready to submit. He answered in one word – YES. It sailed by the reviewers without any changes. I learned more about writing in that one experience than in all my undergraduate years in college.

As I started to write my research papers, I attended a short course on scientific writing. The best advice I remember was, **AVOID THE PASSIVE TENSE! AT ALL COST!** Example: ~~this experiment was carried out to show that...~~ this experiment showed that... Not only does the latter use fewer words, but it has more impact (action); the former is just plain boring. Two points learned: active voice and economy of words.

As I wrote more scientific papers – fifty-four in my science career of thirty-eight years – I picked up many more writing skills, and I’m still learning. There are more things I could say but I don’t want to sound too didactic. Get a good book on writing or a good writer to help you.

An important part of being a good writer is being a good reader. I am a voracious reader of both fiction and non-fiction. If I don’t have two new books on my bedside next to the one I am currently reading, I feel a bit of panic – will I soon run out of books to read? You should learn to discern between good and bad writing – there is a lot of the latter around. I continually learn new things from good writers.

In 1994-95 I was on leave from St. Olaf College as a visiting program director at the National Science Foundation in Arlington, VA. Reading grant proposals in the Molecular Biophysics Program, from scientists in a variety of different disciplines – chemistry, biology, physics, etc. – I felt that undergraduate science education needed to be more interdisciplinary. I started to write, as I often do when something bothers me. This resulted in a three-thousand-word essay, [*Undergraduate Science Education: A New Direction*](#), which was published in an undergraduate science quarterly, and an invitation to be a keynote speaker at a regional undergraduate chemistry meeting at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. It was also published in the quarterly magazine of my alma mater, Pomona College. Writing can be not only fun and educational but also rewarding through publication.

More recently, I was asked by an ethnomusicology professor at the University of Arizona to write a chapter in an encyclopedia of ethnomusicology. My first response was: why me, a biochemist? But she insisted. Earlier I wrote a piece on scales and modes in Western folk music, posted on the internet – I had studied some music theory in college. She wanted me to expand on that into Persian, Arab, and Indian music. I spent some time in the ethnomusicology library at UW and learned a lot in the process. This was published in the [*Sage Encyclopedia of Music and Culture*](#) (2019). It was a fun educational project, which I added to my [scientific publication list](#) as number 55, a fitting capstone!

I also wrote a monthly column, *Musical Traditions*, in the [*Victory Music Magazine*](#), from 2002 to 2009, and I contribute short articles to the [NW HOOT](#), an internet site for the [Pacific Northwest Folklore Society](#). This was fun, but also demanding, as I had to prepare a new piece every month or so. It is amazing how a deadline will motivate one to write.

There is one thing that I would like to recommend to you – particularly if you have children – regardless of how good a writer you are. Write about your life. This need not be an “autobiography,” but rather remembrances – little anecdotes and snapshots, and mileposts along your lifetime. Do this for your children, grandchildren, and those to follow, so they may know something about you. Do it

now, before you forget your younger years and those you met along the way. My father used to tell me stories about growing up in Wisconsin, but he never wrote them down – I deeply regret that. There are many things I would like to ask him, but it's too late now.

About six years ago I wrote my *Remembrances*, with text, pictures, and some documents. I wrote from my birth in 1937 up until when we moved from Minnesota to Seattle in 1996. I need to update that now, to the present time, while my memory is still somewhat good. This should be on my, and your, to-do list before it's too late.

I often ask people to write a short article, and they answer, "but I can't write." Yes, you can! You just have to start. I hope this will encourage you to do so.

Here are a couple of books by writers on writing.

[*This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*](#), by Ann Patchett (2013). Non-fiction essays she wrote in her beginning years as a writer. Of life, the art and craft of writing, a philosophy of life, and more. An enjoyable collection of Ann Patchett short stories.

[*Bird By Bird, some instructions on writing and life*](#), by Anne Lamott (1994). Writing advice, beginning with simple advice from her father, also a writer. A guide through the writer's world.

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