



Pearls of Wisdom  
Collected from Near and Far

**On the First Task**

I think the first task for the aspiring novelist is to read tons of novels. Sorry to start with such a commonplace observation, but no training is more crucial. To write a novel, you must first understand at a physical level how one is put together . . . It is especially important to plow through as many novels as you can while you are still young. Everything you can get your hands on—great novels, not-so-great novels, crappy novels, it doesn't matter (at all!) as long as you keep reading. Absorb as many stories as you physically can. Introduce yourself to lots of great writing. To lots of mediocre writing too. This is your most important task.

~ Haruki Murakami

**On Starting with a Blank Page**

It's easy to feel like novels are for other people to write, people who are born with ideas already there. I don't have a name, I don't have a plot. I have the typewriter and I have white paper and I have me, and that should add up to a novel.

~ William Saroyan

**On What to Write About**

If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.

~ Toni Morrison



### **On Discovering Your Story**

I loved the freedom of writing fiction. Of letting my imagination go as far as it would take me. You can always pull back, take a more conservative course. But why not soar for a while just to see what happens?

~ Delia Owens

### **On Writing from Experience**

The advantage of writing from experience is that it often provides you with details that you would never think of yourself, no matter how rich your imagination. And specificity in description is something every writer should strive for.

~ Christopher Paolini

### **On Starting**

The scariest moment is always just before you start.

~ Stephen King

### **On Clearing Your Throat**

Beginning a novel is always hard. It feels like going nowhere. I always have to write at least 100 pages that go into the trashcan before it finally begins to work. It's discouraging, but necessary to write those pages. I try to consider them pages -100 to zero of the novel.

~ Barbara Kingsolver

### **On Starting with a Puzzle Piece**

Start small. If you try to think about all of it at once—the world you hope to capture on the page, everything you know, every idea you've ever had, each person you've met, and the panoply of feelings coursing through you like a river—you'll be overcome with paralysis.... Think of a jigsaw puzzle—one of those vexingly complicated puzzles that comes in a big box.... Build a corner. That is what people who are good at puzzles do. They ignore the heap of colors and shapes and simply



look for straight edges. They focus on piecing together one tiny corner. Every book, story, and essay begins with a single word. Then a sentence. Then a paragraph.

~ Dani Shapiro

### **On the Benefits of Doodling**

I started to doodle, and the doodlings turned into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs... and before I knew it, I was writing a story.

~ Suchen Christine Lim

### **On Stakes**

Find out what each character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what's at stake. Find a way to express this discovery in action [in scene], and then let your people set about finding or holding onto or defending whatever it is. Then you can take them from good to bad and back again, or from bad to good, or from lost to found. But something must be at stake or you will have no tension and your readers will not turn the pages.

~ Anne Lamott

### **On Building Plot**

'And then what happened?' Those words, I think, are the most important words there are for a storyteller. Anything you can do to keep people turning the pages is legitimate.

~ Neil Gaiman

### **On Trusting Your Reader**

Trust your reader, don't try to describe things. Give a hint and they will fulfill this hint with their own imagination.

~ Paulo Coelho



### **On Style**

When you tell a story in the kitchen to a friend, it's full of mistakes and repetitions. It's good to avoid that in literature, but still, a story should feel like a conversation. It's not a lecture.

~ Isabel Allende

My aim in constructing sentences is to make the sentence utterly easy to understand, writing what I call transparent prose. I've failed dreadfully if you have to read a sentence twice to figure out what I meant.

~ Ken Follett

### **On Viewing Your Story from Multiple Angles**

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story... When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

~ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Believe in the story and believe in yourself. Don't take every knockback as a condemnation of you, but don't dismiss every condemnation of you or your story ... And work bloody hard.

~ Bruce Pascoe

### **On Overcoming Writer's Block**

Sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going,... I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, "Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." So finally I would write one



true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say.

~ Ernest Hemingway

I think the most important thing for writers at any level is to let yourself write terribly. I think a lot of people stop themselves from writing their first draft because they put their editing hat on too soon.

The first draft is all about experiments and making mistakes and having huge plot holes. And that's okay. It's okay to be a bad writer in your first draft because a lot of the craft of writing is in the rewriting. If you have something there in front of you, it's easier to polish than if you don't have anything at all.

~ Whiti Hereaka

### **On Distractions**

Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.

~ Zadie Smith

### **On When to Stop**

The best way is always to stop when you are going good and when you know what will happen next. If you do that every day when you are writing a novel you will never be stuck. That is the most valuable thing I can tell you so try to remember it.

~ Ernest Hemingway

### **On Having Fun**

I think one of the main things to remember when you're writing is that writing should be pleasurable. It should be fun. It should be exploratory. You should be writing about things that surprise you.

~ Joyce Carol Oates