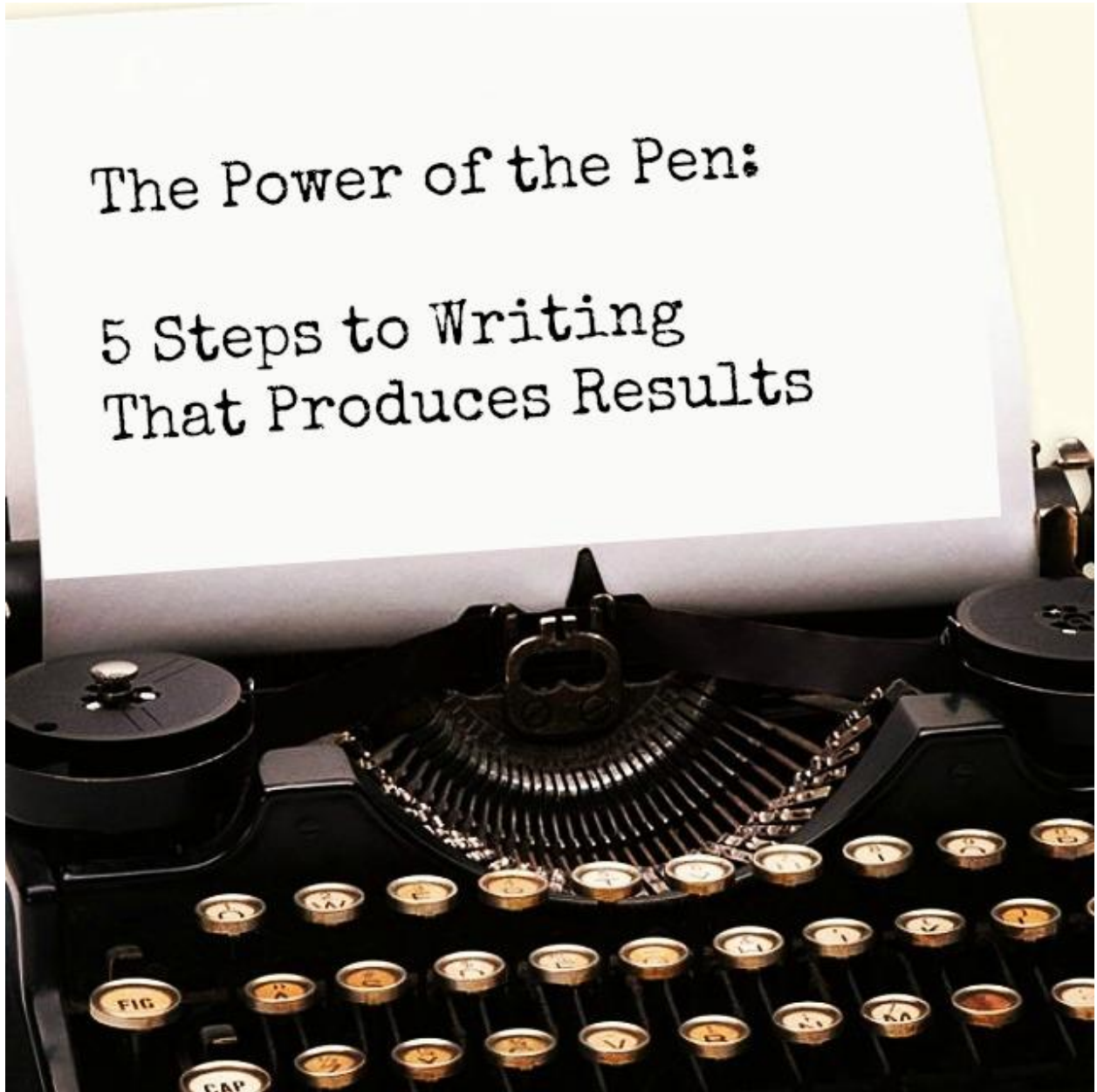


The Power of the Pen:
5 Steps to Writing
That Produces Results



by Jaime Shine

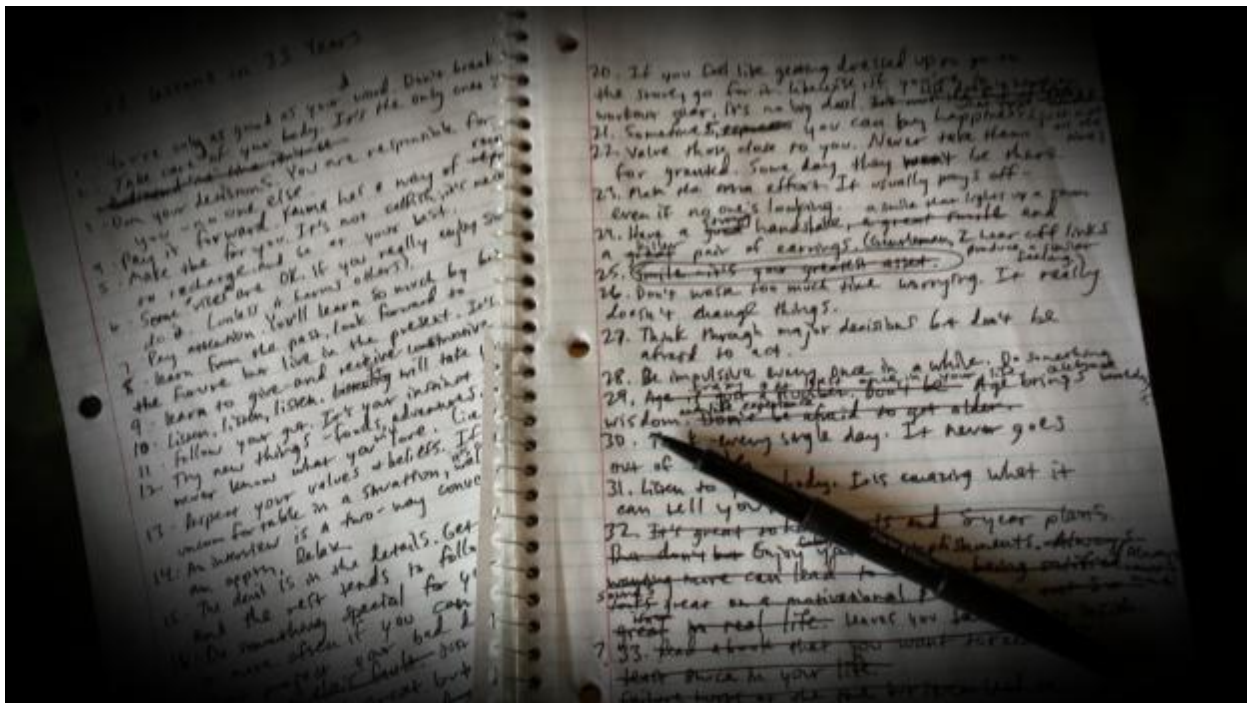
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The Power of the (Red) Pen

“To write is human, to edit is divine.” -Stephen King

When I was in school, there was nothing I hated more than the red pen. Teachers would use it to correct mistakes on your paper and make suggestions. As a perfectionist, I attributed any red marks to failure, which was not high on my to-do list. As much as I hated the red pen, I now understand its importance.



Maybe I still haven't gotten over the sting of the red pen. I use black, even for revisions.

The basic writing process has five steps: prewriting (thinking/outlining), writing, revising (rewriting), editing and publishing. Did you notice that 40% of the writing process is dedicated to revising and editing? That's why, in my humble opinion, it's the most important aspect of writing. All of the steps are necessary, but not doing a proper job of revising and editing your work will turn readers away. Have you ever read an

article that goes on forever—well past its point? Or a blog post saddled with poor grammar and spelling errors? It's enough to make me walk away.

What makes me want to read your work (and others too)?

- Revise, revise and revise some more. Eliminate unnecessary words.
- Strong punctuation and grammar: A lack of one or both makes reading difficult.
- White space (especially on screen). Use short paragraphs, quotes, images and lists for easier reading.
- Reduce your adverb dependency. These suckers lead to passive writing and empty word use.
- A clear point. What are you trying to say?

“The biggest illusion about communication is that it's taking place.”

-George Bernard Shaw

Yes, rules are made to be broken, but you have to know the rules first. The more that you know (and follow) the “rules” of writing, the easier your writing will be to read. So what are these rules? They differ depending on who you talk to or what you're writing, but Mr. King's *Top 20 Rules For Writers*[^] are a great place to start.

More people are expected to write today than ever before (social media, blogging, etc.), and some just aren't comfortable with it. I hope this guide on the writing process helps you become more confident in your writing ability.

Reader Feedback

What are your most important rules of writing?

Is there a rule that you routinely break?

When did you start writing?

Who is your favorite writer?

Prewriting: A Precursor to Rad Writing

As I was writing the previous chapter about the importance of revising and editing your work, it dawned on me that many people who are required to write today (blogs, social media, company newsletters, etc.) may not have much experience with the writing process. So I decided to write about it to explain each step's importance and throw in some insight along the way.

pre-writ-ing (noun): the creation and arrangement of ideas before writing; step one of the writing process



Free writing -- and espresso -- help me get the creative juices flowing.

Think before you write. Whether you jot down a brief outline in your notebook, draw comprehensive diagrams or kick around a few ideas in your head, you're performing the first step in the writing process. You may think prewriting is prehistoric, but let's compare. Any professional painter will tell you to spend *at least* as much time preparing to paint as painting itself. Otherwise, you won't see professional results.

The same holds true for writing. If you want to write something worth reading, take the time to prepare. Your prep work will reflect the scope of your project (novel vs. blog post) and your comfort level. Some people are comfortable mentally prepping before blogging while others will want a more detailed outline in print. Either way works, as long as it works for you.

The prewriting part of the process may not occur behind a desk or even soaking up the rays on a patio with your laptop. In fact, physical activity is a great way to spur ideas and think about what you want to write. Or maybe you prefer a luxurious bubble bath with a good book or chatting with a friend over coffee. It doesn't matter where the light bulb goes off, as long as it does.

“You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you've got something to say.” -F. Scott Fitzgerald

And prewriting is the time to figure out that something, not the writing phase.

Post Script to Prewriting

Do you currently prewrite?

How do you prewrite (mentally, outlining, diagramming, etc.)?

Do you engage in physical activity or go to a special place to prewrite?

Now It's Time to Write

If prewriting is the pregame strategy session, step two of the writing process—drafting or writing—is the mad rush onto the field. After all of the film watching and play designing and planning, it's time to let it all out.



Step two of the writing process is a rush of adrenaline!

draft-ing (verb): the second stage of the writing process during which a writer organizes information and ideas into sentences and paragraphs

You may be wondering why I'm using the term drafting instead of writing. I thought it would help avoid confusion because we're discussing the entire writing process. But rest assured, we're talking about the same thing. This is the phase where you try to type or write as fast as the words pour out of you, if you've done a good job of prewriting.

"Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down." -John Steinbeck

This is the fun part or at least the part where you start to see results. It's like rolling that first stripe of paint on the wall after hours of prep work or taking the plunge out of an airplane after going through all of the pre-jump requirements. (I prefer the latter but I'm sure painting is just as exciting to some people!) This is the time to introduce your characters or describe the situation or state your points clearly.

This is not the time to worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation or overall structure. I'm not saying that you should leave them out on purpose, but these items will be addressed during the next two steps (revising and editing). If you tend to correct grammatical errors or typos without thinking about it, don't worry. Some of us are just hardwired that way (including yours truly). It will slow you down if you attempt to *not* correct these errors at this time.

One of the reasons that I love writing is that you can do it almost anywhere. All you need is a computer, typewriter or pen and paper *AND* some privacy. How much privacy? That depends on you. Some people want a room with a door they can shut. Others don't mind light background noise: quiet conversations on a cafe patio, the soothing tones of the ocean or the peaceful sounds of nature.

“Like your bedroom, your writing room should be private, a place where you go to dream... The space can be humble, and it really needs only one thing: a door you are willing to shut.” -Stephen King

Privacy can be hard to find in today's corporate America environments. If you're sitting in a cubicle in the middle of an open concept floor plan, surrounded by talking co-workers, music piped through overhead speakers and other office noises, it can be tough to write — for anyone. Don't discredit your ability to write if you have issues in this type of environment.

Try to find anywhere quiet— an open conference room, a forgotten nook or a local park during your lunch break. It's frustrating, but you may have to take your writing assignments home in order to produce quality work.

And if you're into writing by hand (like a certain author of this guide)? Don't be embarrassed or feel old-fashioned. It turns out that it's good for your brain.*

Feedback on This Draft

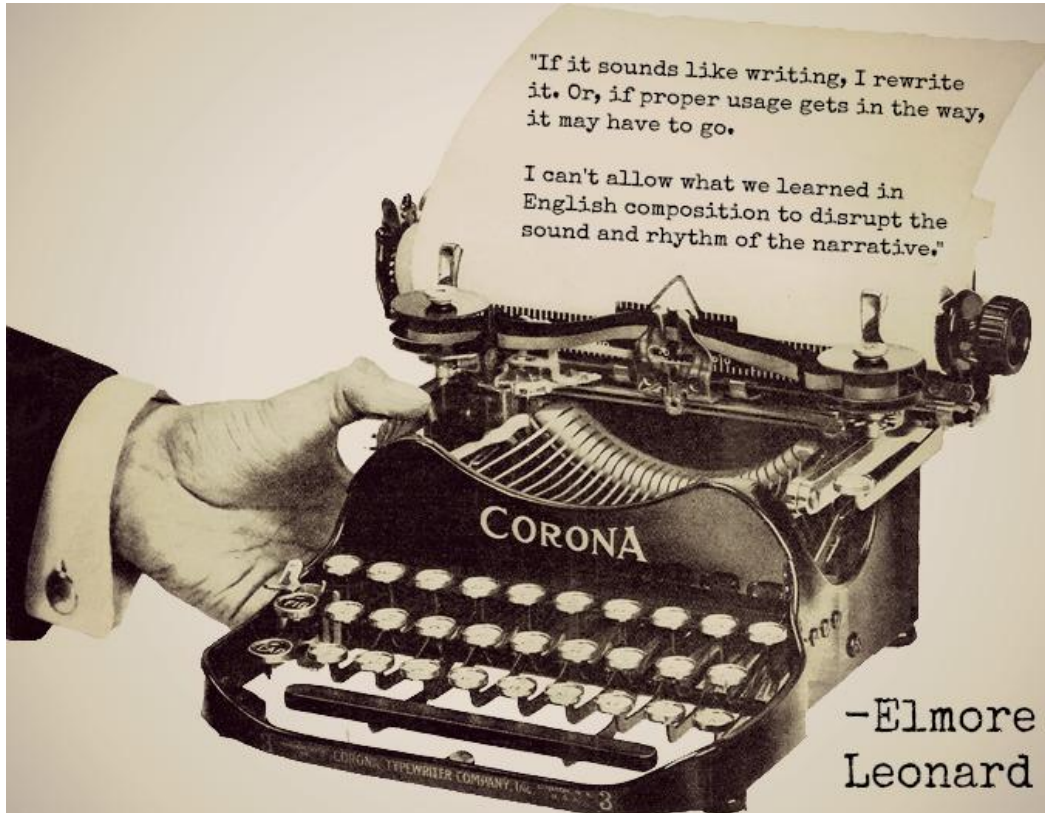
Where's your favorite place to write?

What's your favorite written piece—by you or someone else?

What type of writing do you create (i.e. copywriting, fiction, blog posts)?

Revising: No Rules, Just (Get It) Right

You've tackled prewriting (in the forest or the bathtub) and burst through the drafting phase like a team taking the field. Whew, we're done, right? No, now it's time to revise.



It's important to read your work. If it sounds awkward to you, it'll sound awkward to the reader.

Revising is all about making your work *sound* right. So read it—to yourself or out loud. (This is where it helps to have some privacy, or you may receive some concerned stares.) Is it easy to read? Are you intrigued? If not, your reader won't be either.

Now is the time to make your work **POP**. Spice up your opening line to grab the reader's attention. Upgrade your word choices and fill in missing details. Remove redundant or empty words and move sentences around if they make more sense elsewhere. You may end up with a drastically different piece or even a shifted message.

As novelist and screenwriter Elmore Leonard points out above, the best writers aren't bound by rules. However, they know the rules before they choose to break them, which is a far cry from not knowing the rules in the first place. If something you write is grammatically correct but sounds strange, find another way to say it. Sometimes I use fragments to make a point and fit the tempo of my work, but it's not on accident. Bottom line: don't quit revising until your work sounds right.

It can be tough to look at your work with a critical eye. Leave enough time between the drafting and revising phases to see your work in a new light. If you're on a tight deadline, at least shift focus for a brief period before coming back to your writing in progress. If possible, invite colleagues or peers to review your work. It's amazing what you can see from a fresh perspective.

Revising Review

Do you revise first, then edit? Or do you do them together?

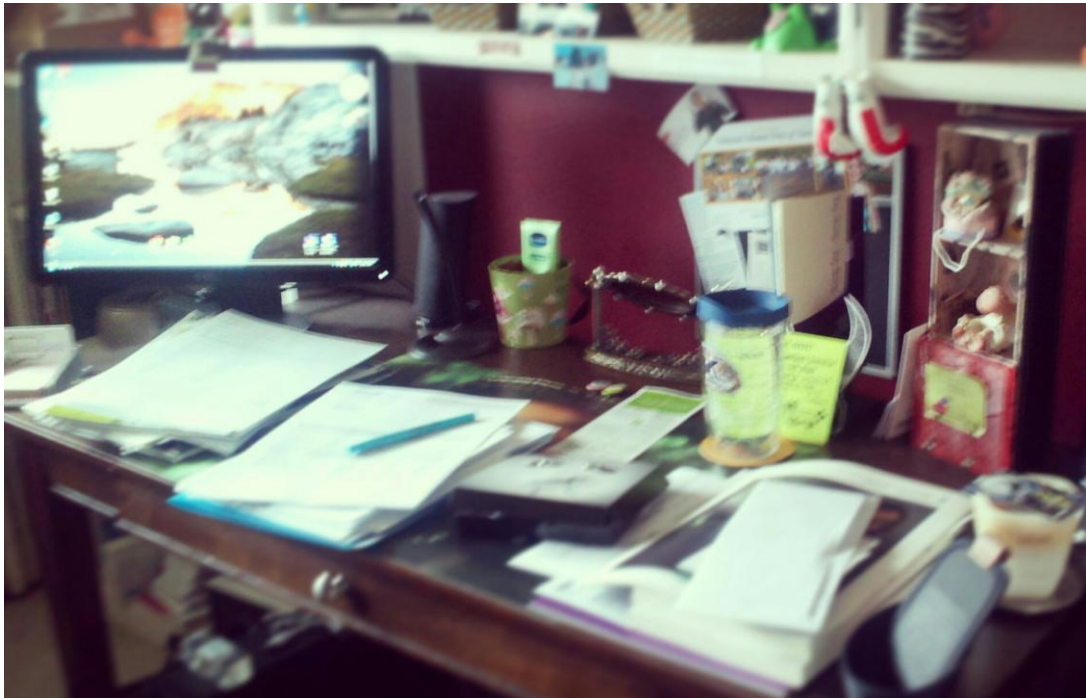
How long do you spend on the revising phase (compared to the other parts of the process)?

Do you prefer to revise alone or have others review your work?

Editing: Your Path to Divinity (and Divine Writing)

Prewriting ✓ Drafting ✓ Revising ✓

Don't put down the red pen yet. Now, it's time to edit.



Editing is messy work, but the results are worth it!

Wait, didn't we just do that? No, we revised our writing. Revising and editing go hand-in-hand, but they focus on different results. While revising makes your work *sound* good, editing makes your work *look* good. In the world of writing, both are necessary.

We've heard it all before: spelling, punctuation and grammar are important. Blah, blah, blah... But before you file away this grade school knowledge, consider this: grammar, spelling and punctuation can be the difference between your writing being read or not.

Why?

1. Proper punctuation and structure help tell your story. New sentences, paragraph breaks and choosing a hyphen over a comma (or vice versa) help the reader navigate your road map to your point. Imagine trying to read a blog post with no punctuation—one long block of text with no signs where to pause, stop or anticipate a new idea.
2. With every missing comma or spelling error, you're asking your audience *not* to take you seriously. People are interested in what you have to say because they think you know what you're talking about. But that's only half the battle; presenting your knowledge is just as important as having it.
3. Spelling, punctuation and grammar make you look polished, which is important if you're trying to present a professional image. Stand out from the crowd in a positive way by dotting your i's and crossing your t's (and knowing the difference between a hyphen and a dash).

So the next time you're in a rush and tempted to go straight from writing (step 2) to publishing (step 5), remember Stephen King's words of wisdom. "To write is human, to edit is divine."

Sound Off on Editing

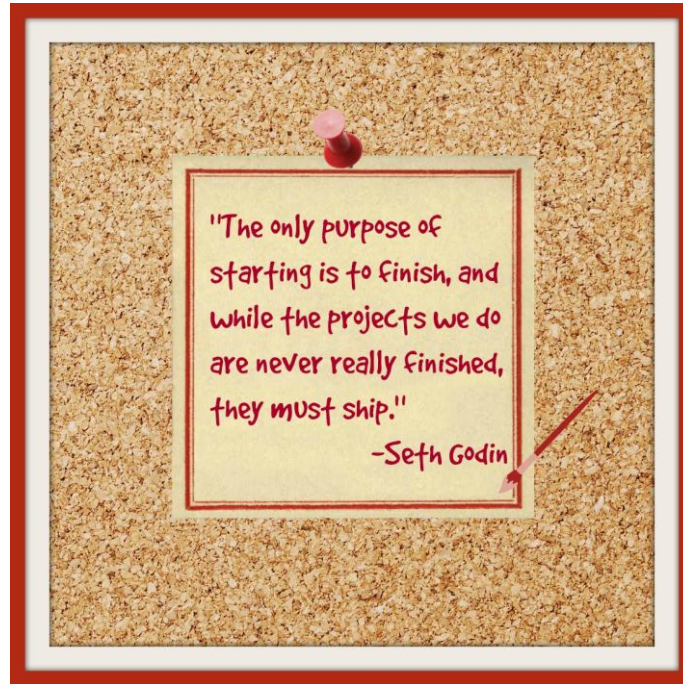
What mistake do you always catch while editing?

Do you prefer to edit on screen or on paper?

Do you prefer to revise and edit together or separately?

Publishing: The End or The Beginning?

It's over. We've reached the last step of the writing process: publishing. Simple, right? Just click *Publish* and you're done.



Not quite. After tackling prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, there's still work to do. Depending on your project, some of these questions may answer themselves, or you may have some more thinking to do.

What medium will you use to publish?

Do you need to add pictures, quotes or other visual elements to strengthen your written work?

If sourced, do you have permission to use those visual elements? (i.e. Don't steal people's pictures, even online!)

Have you thoroughly completed steps 1-4?

Are you ready for the world to see your work?

The last question can be an oxymoron. Some people are never ready for the world to see their work, but you do have to publish sometime. You can produce the best writing

in the world, but if no one reads it, what's the point? (This is presuming that you want people to read your work, of course.)

After completing the five steps of the writing process, you'll begin to understand. The writing process isn't linear and never truly ends. It's cyclical at best and sometimes resembles a drunken, disoriented party-goer. Don't be discouraged.

The trick is to follow the rules until you learn how to break them.

The real trick is learning which rules to follow and which rules to break. It's different for everyone. Once you figure that out, then you'll discover how powerful the written word can be.

Publish Your Comments

Are you a "publish or perish" disciple or would you rather take more time?

Do you have recommendations for a specific medium (i.e. blog services, book publishers, agents)?

What would you add to this series on the writing process?

What writing questions do you have?

Conclusion & References

If you're new to the writing world, don't be overwhelmed. The more you write, and follow the process outlined in this guide, the more comfortable you'll feel with your craft. Don't dismiss the writing process as third-grade material; it has worked for writers of all abilities for years. So the next time you sit down to write, follow these steps:

1. Prewriting
2. Drafting (or Writing)
3. Revising
4. Editing
5. Publishing

Remember, the writing process is cyclical, so you may revisit any step a number of times during the process. However, don't be paralyzed by fear. You have to publish at some point or no one will get to enjoy your work.

If you have any writing-related questions, feel free to ask me at jaimeshine.com or tweet me @jaimeshine. Of course, some people would rather focus on what they do best and leave writing to someone else. If that's you, please visit jaimeshine.com to learn more about my company's writing services or to discuss your project.

Happy writing!

~

References

^Stephen King's *Top 20 Rules for Writers*: <http://bit.ly/1XxkTgN>

*Writing by hand is good for the brain. <http://on.mash.to/1Hu1lbC>

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About the Author



I love to write. While most kids were playing with blocks or dolls, I was publishing magazines and newspapers: feature articles, ads, sports box scores, the whole nine yards. From promotions director to advertising roles to branding projects, I've always been interested in all forms of marketing. That interest blossomed into a career path and led me to open my own business in 2012, which has always been a dream of mine. And I'd love to work my magic for you.



Our passion: helping others communicate clearly to connect and engage.

Whether you're looking for writing of any kind, marketing help or a little social media savvy, we're here to help. Have a question? Ask away. Not sure if CCC is a fit? Try us. We'd love to help you succeed. Learn more about our services, check out the CCC blog or contact us to discuss your project at jaimeshine.com.

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