

Cultural Daily

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On Writing Poorly

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, July 21st, 2011

Today is Ernest Hemingway's birthday, and lots of people are writing about him. Many quote his four rules for writing well: "Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative." You'll find that people who write about Hemingway's rules try to show how clever they are, by following his rules when they write their little essays. Their first paragraphs are exceedingly short.

Hemingway's rules are fine rules, if you are Hemingway and feel like they help you. Or maybe if you're a reporter, which, as Hemingway declared, is where he got his rules, from the Style Book when he worked at the Kansas City *Star*.

Point being: Hemingway's rules weren't in his own voice. He got them elsewhere.

In today's America, there are many authorities who say they'll teach you to write well. "Follow my rules," they tell you, "and here's an example." "Find your own voice," they say. Which is about as helpful as telling a comic to "be funnier" or an actor to "make it more real."

If you have to *find* your voice, you are engaging in the wrong process. What you really have to do is *lose* all the voices that are not yours – the teachers and parents, editors and reviewers. What's left, after you lose everything else, *is* your voice.

It's harder to get rid of other people's voices than you might think.

Someone said, "I've been rich and poor and I've been poor, and believe me, rich is better." Actually, a lot of people said it. The line has been attributed to George S. Kaufman's wife Beatrice, Sophie Tucker, Gertrude Stein, W.C. Fields, Mae West, Joe E. Lewis, Fanny Brice, Frank Sinatra, and Irving Wallace. They were all quoting someone else, speaking in someone else's voice.

Plato said (actually, he reported that Socrates said) we're born knowing everything, but life in this world causes us to forget. The path to knowledge, for Plato, is remembrance.

Writing's the same: you have to remember your voice.

How many times do we say words that are not ours? Let me disclose: Leslie Brisman, one of my

English professors, asked the class this question. On reflection, I wonder if he was repeating something said by his colleague, Harold Bloom. If so, he never gave Bloom attribution, just as Bloom rarely attributed the things he said, just as I have often asked Brisman's question as if it were my own.

It's hard to lose the other voices.

To do so, you have to let everything fall away. You have to stop worrying about writing well. You have to accept that it is fine to write poor.

Without the luxury of other people's language, the stilt of propriety, the ego involved when you try to impress people, you strip yourself down to very little. It is like taking off your clothes, and here is the point. We'd all be pretty uncomfortable running down the street naked. But if someone *else* were running naked down the street, we'd all look. What we want to read, what we *really* want to read, is that naked stuff that's *hard* to write... hard because it is so poor and without art, not hard because it is so artful or luxurious. What we want to read, need to read, is poor writing.

Some kinds of written work are especially resistant to poor writing. Screenwriting is one of them. Goodness knows, there are tons of bad scripts – about 99% of them, in my experience. One of the reasons they're bad is that they're written so *well*. They are "well-crafted." They are the product of thousands of screenwriting schools, development executives, producers, online tutorials, and all the rest, all giving advice. What gets made out of all that? Let me ask the question another way. Even if the scripts get made into movies, what really gets *made*? Movies where the dialogue is dialogue from other movies, movies where the form is the form from other movies, movies where the style is the style from other movies. Movies that are bad because they are not poor.

All those advice-givers, with, perhaps, a rare exception or two, are just more voices you are going to have to get rid of one day, if you are a writer, and if you want to be yourself and write poor. Still, I understand those advice-givers. I have been one of them. Screenplays seek the god of commerce through the prayer of art, and that is no easy religion.

I think poetry is the best kind of writing, if poor is what you're after. We all know you can't make a living writing poetry, so poets have no gods of commerce to answer to; it's fitting for poets to take the vow of poor writing. Poets can strip everything down, and the pretense of another person's voice, or the forced art of an over-designed phrase, is as apparent as a crack in a wine glass.

Sadly, most writers are already poor, financially. But I hope their writing becomes poor as well. Writing's a profession that rarely pays, in cash or even fame, except for a few – the few whose voices become the voices we have to forget.

Image from [PostSecret](#).

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