

## Hemingway on Writing

- **Introduction**
- The following notes are all quotes from Ernest Hemingway about topics related to writing and life as a writer
- They were compiled by the writer Larry W. Phillips from all manner of sources regarding Hemingway and published in Phillips's book, *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, published by Scribner in 1984
- Quotations are not included in the notes below but all bullets are direct quotes by Hemingway
- **What Writing Is and Does**
- I am trying to make, before I get through, a picture of the whole world – or as much of it as I have seen. Boiling it down always, rather than spreading it out thin
- All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened, and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you, and afterwards it will belong to you
- The secret is that it is poetry written into prose and it is the hardest of all things to do
- In truly good writing, no matter how many times you read it you do not know how it is done
  - That is because there is a mystery in all great writing and that mystery does not dissect out
  - Each time you reread you see or learn something new
- **The Qualities of a Writer**
- First, there must be talent, much talent, then there must be discipline
  - Then there must be the conception of what it can be and an absolute unchanging conscience to prevent faking
  - Then the writer must be intelligent and disinterested
  - The hardest thing, because time is short, is for him to survive and get his work done
- Real seriousness in regard to writing being one of the two absolute necessities – the other, unfortunately, is talent
- The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, shit detector
  - This is the writer's radar and all great writers have had it
- A writer must have a sense of justice and injustice
- A good writer should know as near everything as possible
  - Naturally he will not – but he only has to have the ability to learn in a quicker ratio to the passage of time than other men

- There are some things which cannot be learned quickly and time, which is all we have, must be paid heavily for their acquiring
- If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is
- Honesty and imagination are essential to the good writer
  - If he gets so he can imagine truly enough people will think that the things he relates all really happened and that he is just reporting
- **The Pain and Pleasure of Writing**
- You basically write for two people: yourself, to try to make it absolutely perfect, or if not that then wonderful; then you write for who you love whether she can read or not and whether she is alive or dead
- Writing is a hard business but nothing makes you feel better
- Do you suffer when you write? I don't at all. Suffer like a bastard when don't write, or just before, and fell empty and fucked out afterwards. But never feel as good as while writing
- Writing is something that you can never do as well as it can be done – it is a perpetual challenge and it is more difficult than anything else that I have ever done...so I do it. And it makes me happy when I do it well
- I have to write to be happy whether I get paid for it or not – but it is a hell of a disease to be born with
  - I like to do it. Which is even worse. That makes it from a disease into a vice. Then I want to do it better than anybody has ever done it which makes it into an obsession.
- You have the sheet of blank paper, the pencil, and the obligation to invent truer than things can be true
  - You have to take what is not palpable and make it completely palpable and also have it seem normal and so that it can become a part of the experience of the person who reads it
- Writing is worth doing as an end in itself
- There is no rule on how it is to write – sometimes it comes easily and perfectly; sometimes it is like drilling rock and then blasting it out with charges
- I love to write. But it has never gotten any easier to do and you can't expect it to if you keep trying for something better than you can do
- **What to Write About**
- Forget your personal tragedy – we are all bitched from the start and you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously
  - But when you get the damned hurt, use it – don't cheat with it
  - But don't think anything is of any importance because it happens to you or anyone belonging to you

- A writer makes stories up out of what he knows
- Whatever success I have had has been through writing what I know about
- The one thing I will not do is repeat myself on anything so the new ones are rarely as popular – people always want a story like the last one
- You cannot do something someone else has done even though you might have done it if they hadn't
- I try to show all the different sides of it, taking it slowly and honestly and examining it from many ways. So never think one story represents my viewpoint because it is much too complicated for that.
- Great subjects: war, love, money and poverty, avarice, murder
- The hardest thing in the world to do is to write straight honest prose on human beings. First you have to know the subject; then you have to know how to write. Both take a lifetime to learn.
- All stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you

- **Advice to Writers**

- 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 you know.
- If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written
- The greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produce the emotion that you experienced
  - Find what gave you the emotion; what the action was that gave you the excitement – then write it down making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling that you had
- Get inside someone else's head for a change
  - If I bawl you out try to figure out what I'm thinking about as well as how you feel about it
  - If Carlos curses Juan think what both their sides of it are – don't just think who is right
- You have to make decisions and enforce them
- As a writer you should not judge; you should understand
- When people talk listen completely – don't be thinking what you're going to say
  - Most people never listen; nor do they observe
  - If you get any feeling you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling

- There are a thousand ways to practice – when you're in town stand outside the theatre and see how the people differ in the way they get out of cars
  - And always think of other people
- Not listening dries a writer up
- It all comes from seeing and listening
- The great thing is to last and get your work done and see and hear and learn and understand; and write when there is something that you know; and not before; and not too damned much after
  - The thing to do is work and learn to make it
- I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across – not to just depict life, or criticize it – but to actually make it alive so that when you read something by me you actually experience the thing
  - You can't do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful
    - Because if it is all beautiful you can't believe in it
    - It is only by showing both sides – three dimensions and if possible four, that you can write the way I want to
- Try to make instead of describe
- If often took me a full morning of work to write a paragraph
- Avoid direct statement, though it is inevitable that it must be in there
- Prose should read easily and simply and seem short and yet have all the dimensions of the visible world and the world of a man's spirit
- Distrust adjectives
- What I've been doing is trying to do country so you don't remember the words after you read it but actually have the country
  - It is hard because to do it you have to see the country all complete all the time you write and not just have a romantic feeling about it
- Remember to get the weather in your god damned book – weather is very important
- Punctuation ought to be as conventional as possible – you ought to be able to show that you can do it a good deal better than anyone else with the regular tools before you have a license to bring in your own improvements
- If a writer needs a dictionary he should not write – he should have read the dictionary three times from beginning to end and then have loaned it to someone who needs it
- On the Kansas City Star you were forced to write a simple declarative sentence – this is useful to anyone
- After a book I am emotionally exhausted – if you are not you have not transferred the emotion completely to the reader
- **Working Habits**
- Do you know what is going to happen when you write a story? Almost never. I start to make it up and have happen what would have to happen as it goes along

- The best time to stop writing for the day is when you are going good and when you know what will happen next – this way you will never be stuck
  - Always stop while you are going good and don't think about it or worry about it until you start to write the next day (that way your subconscious will work on it all the time; but if you think about it consciously or worry about it you will kill it and your brain will be tired before you start)
  - Once you are into the novel it is as cowardly to worry about whether you can go on the next day as to worry about having to go into inevitable action – you *have* to go on; so there is no sense to worry
    - You have to learn that to write a novel
  - The hard part about a novel is to finish it
  - You learn not to worry by not thinking about it – as soon as you start to think about it stop it, think about something else
- When I was writing it was necessary for me to read after I had written – if you kept thinking about it, you would lose the thing that you were writing before you could go on the next day
  - It was necessary to read in order not to think or worry about your work until you could do it again
  - I had learned already never to empty the well of my writing, but always to stop when there was still something there in the deep part of the well, and let it refill at night from the springs that fed it
  - Read to keep your mind off writing
- After writing a story I was always empty and both sad and happy
- Don't take literature solemnly – it is just writing as well as you can and finishing what you start
- You have to go on when it is worst and most helpless – there is only one thing to do with a novel and that is go straight on through to the end of the damn thing
- The rewriting doesn't take more than six weeks or two months once it is done – but it is pretty important for me to let it cool off well before rewriting (put it away for a couple or three months and then rewrite it)
- The longer I have to stay away from it the better it will be as it gives me a whole new chance to see it cold and plug any gaps and amplify where there is any need
- The blue-backed notebooks, the two pencils and the pencil sharpener, the marble-topped tables, the smell of early morning, sweeping out and mopping, were all you needed
- Talking about the manuscript while working is bad luck
- It made me feel sick for people to talk about my writing to my face
- After you learn to write your whole object is to convey everything, every sensation, sight, feeling, place and emotion to the reader
- Summer's a discouraging time to work – you don't feel death coming on the way it does in the fall when the boys really put pen to paper

- You lose everything that is fresh and everything that is easy and it always seems as though you could *never* write – but you have more *métier* and you know more and when you get flashes of the old juice you get more results with them
- Wake up about seven-thirty, have breakfast and am working by nine and usually work straight through until two p.m. – after that it's like living in a vacuum until working time next day
- Having books published is very destructive to writing
- The more I'm let alone and not worried the better I can function
- Charles Scribner's ridiculing of my daily word count was because he did not understand me or writing especially well nor could know how happy one felt to have put down properly 422 words as you wanted them to be
  - And days of 1200 or 2700 were something that made you happier than you could believe
  - Since I found that 400 to 600 well done was a pace I could hold much better I was always happy with that number
  - But if I only had 320, I felt good
- Work every day till you're so pooped about all the exercise you can face is reading the papers – then eat, play tennis or swim or something in a work daze just to keep your bowels moving and the next day write again
- I happen to be in a very tough business where there are no alibis – it is good or it is bad and the thousand reasons that interfere with a book being as good as possible are no excuses if it is not
  - You have to make it good and a man is a fool if he adds or takes hindrance after hindrance to being a writer when that is what he cares about
    - Taking refuge in domestic successes, being good to your broke friends, etc., is merely a form of quitting
- You have to be ruthless about interruptions
- You may never like anything I like – and then suddenly you might like something very much. But you must believe that I am sincere in what I write.
- Writers should work alone – they should see each other only after their work is done, and not too often then
- Writing, at its best, is a lonely life
  - Organizations for writers palliate the writer's loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing
- For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity or the lack of it, each day
- **Characters**
- Most of the people in this story are alive and I was writing it very carefully to not have anybody identifiable
- The country is always true – what happens in the stories is fiction

- I wanted to write about the whole damned world if I could get to know it
- You invent from other people's experience and knowledge and what you know yourself
- If you take real people and write about them you cannot give them other parents than they have – you cannot make them do anything they would not do
- Invention is the finest thing but you cannot invent anything that would not actually happen
- That is what we are supposed to do when we are at our best – make it all up – but make it up so truly that later it will happen that way
- You ought to write, invent out of what you know and keep the people's antecedents straight
- I believe that when you are writing stories about actual people, not the best thing to do, you should make them those people in everything except telephone addresses
- Keep them people, people, people, and don't let them get to be symbols
- When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people, not characters
  - A character is a caricature
  - If a writer can make people live there may be no great characters in his book, but it is possible that his book will remain as a whole; as an entity; as a novel
  - If the people the writer is making, talk only of old masters; of music; of modern painting; of letters; or of science then they should talk of those subjects in the novel – if they do not talk of those subjects and the writer makes them talk of them he is a faker, and if he talks about them himself to show how much he knows then he is showing off
    - No matter how good a phrase or a simile he may have, if he puts it in where it is not absolutely necessary and irreplaceable he is spoiling his work for egotism
      - Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the baroque is over
  - For a writer to put his own intellectual musings, which he might sell for a low price as essays, into the mouths of artificially constructed characters which are more remunerative when issued as people in a novel is good economics, perhaps, but does not make literature
  - People in a novel, not skillfully constructed characters, must be projected from the writer's assimilated experience, from his knowledge, from his head, from his heart and from all there is of him
  - If he has luck as well as seriousness and gets them out entirely, they will have more than one dimension and they will last a long time
- Every writer is in much of his work
- I write some stories absolutely as they happen, others I invent completely – nobody can tell which ones I make up completely
  - The point is I want them all to sound as though they really happened

- **Knowing What to Leave Out**
- I've seen the marlin mate and know about that. So I leave that out. I've seen a school (or pod) of more than fifty sperm whales in that same stretch of water and once harpooned one nearly sixty feet in length and lost him. So I left that out. All the stories I know from the fishing village I leave out. But the knowledge is what makes the underwater part of the iceberg.
- When I stopped writing I did not want to leave the river where I could see the trout in the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge. The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it.
- My new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood
- If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them
  - The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water
  - A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing
- It wasn't by accident that the Gettysburg address was so short – the laws of prose writing are as immutable as those of flight, of mathematics, of physics
- My temptation is always to write too much – I keep it under control so as not to have to cut out crap and rewrite
  - Guys who think they are geniuses because they have never learned how to say no to a typewriter are a common phenomenon
    - All you have to do is get a phony style and you can write any amount of words
- The stories are written so tight and so hard that the alteration of a word can throw an entire story out of key
- Eschew the monumental; shun the epic – all the guys who can paint great big pictures can paint great small ones
- If a man writes clearly enough anyone can see if he fakes
  - If he mystifies to avoid a straight statement, which is very different from breaking so-called rules of syntax and grammar to make an effect which can be obtained in no other way, the writer takes a longer time to be known as a fake and other writers who are afflicted by the same necessity will praise him in their own defense
    - True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly



- I can write it like Tolstoy and make the book seem larger, wiser, and all the rest of it – but then I remember that was what I always skipped in Tolstoy
  - I don't like to write like God – it is only because you never do it, though, that the critics think you can't do it
- **Obscenity**
- Madame, all our words from loose using have lost their edge
- Try and write straight English; never use slang except in dialogue and then only when unavoidable (because all slang goes sour in a short time)
- I only use swear words that have lasted a thousand years for fear of getting stuff that will be simply timely and then go sour
- I've tried to reduce profanity in *The Sun Also Rises* but I reduced so much profanity when writing the book that I'm afraid not much could come out – perhaps we will have to consider it a profane book and hope that the next book will be less profane or perhaps more sacred
- On curse words: I'm not the little boy writing them on the wall to be smart – if I can make the effect without the word I will always do so but sometimes I can't
  - Also, it is good for the language to restore its life that they bleed out of it – that is very important
- I never use a word without first considering if it is replaceable
- One should never use words which shock altogether out of their own value or connotation
- The fundamental reason that I used certain words no longer a part of the usual written language is that they are very much a part of the vocabulary of the people I was writing about and there was no way I could avoid using them and still give anything like a complete feeling of what I was trying to convey to the reader
- If I wrote any approximation even of the speech of the bullring it would be unpublishable – I had to try to get the feeling by the use of two or three words, not using them directly, but indirectly
- My use of words which have been eliminated from writing but which persist in speech has nothing to do with the small boy chalking newly discovered words on fences
  - I use them for two reasons 1) as outlined above 2) when there is no other word which means exactly the same thing and gives the same effect when spoken
  - I always use them sparingly and never to give gratuitous shock – although sometimes to give calculated and what to me seems necessary shock
- **Titles**
- With enough time you can always get a good title – the hell of it is that you always have a lot that seem good and it takes time to tell which one is right
- [Hemingway suggests the Bible as a source for titles]

- Getting a title is a lot like drawing cards in a poker game – you keep on drawing and they're all worthless but if you can last at it long enough you always get a good hand finally
- **Other Writers**
- I think you should learn about writing from everybody who has ever written that has anything to teach you
- What books should a writer have to read? He should read everything so he knows what he has to beat.
  - There is no use writing anything that has been written before unless you can beat it
  - What a writer in our time has to do is write what hasn't been written before or beat dead men at what they have done
    - The only way he can tell how he is going is to compare with dead men
- All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* – all American writing comes from that. There was nothing before; there has been nothing as good since
- The good writers are Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain – that's not the order they're good in; there is no order for good writers
- E.E. Cummings's *Enormous Rooms* was the best book published last year that I read
- You shouldn't read the shit about living writers – you should always write your best against dead writers that we know what stature that they have and beat them one by one
  - Don't fight with the poor pathological characters of our time
- On Faulkner: how beautifully he can write and as simple and as complicated as autumn or as spring
- "Am a man without any ambition, except to be champion of the world, I wouldn't fight Dr. Tolstoy in a 20 round bout because I know he would knock my ears off...but I would take him on for six and he would never hit me and would knock the shit out of him and maybe knock him out. He is easy to hit. But boy can *he* hit. If I can live to 60 I can beat him. (Maybe.)"
- I started out trying to beat dead writers that I knew how good they were – I tried for Mr. Turgenev first and it wasn't too hard. Tried for Mr. Maupassant (won't concede him the *de*) and it took four of the best stories to beat him. He's beaten and if he was around he would know it. Then I tried for another guy and I think I fought a draw with him – Mr. Henry James I would just thumb him once the first time he grabbed and then hit him once where he had no balls and ask the referee to stop it.
  - There are some guys nobody could ever beat like Mr. Shakespeare (the champion) and Mr. Anonymous – but would be glad any time, if in training, to go twenty with Mr. Cervantes in his own home town and beat the shit out of him (although Mr. C is very smart and would be learning all the time and would probably beat you in a return match)

- In the big book I hope to take Mr. Melville and Mr. Dostoyevsky – but you can only run so many of those kind of races – they take it out of you
  - I know this sounds like bragging but Jesus Christ you have to have confidence to be a champion and that is the only thing I ever wished to be
- I've been wondering about Dostoyevsky – how can a man write so badly, so unbelievably badly, and make you feel so deeply
- Turgenev to me is the greatest writer there ever was – didn't write the greatest books but was the greatest writer
  - *War and Peace* is the best book I know but imagine what a book it would have been if Turgenev had written it
  - Chekov wrote about six good stories but he was an amateur writer
  - Tolstoy was a prophet
  - Maupassant was a professional writer; Balzac was a professional writer
  - Turgenev was an artist
- There were some stories that seemed to be only journalism
- I think Thomas Wolfe was only truly good about his home town and there he was wonderful and unsurpassable – the other stuff is usually over-inflated journalese
- Thornton Wilder is a very minor writer who knows his limitations and was over inflated in value by critics and as quickly deflated
- Dos Passos is often an excellent writer and has been improving in every way with each book he writes
- **Politics**
- There is no left and right in writing – there is only good and bad writing
- Write about what you know and write truly and tell them where they can place it...books should be about the people you know, that you love and hate, not about the people you study up about
- Know who you are as a writer
- Do not let them deceive you about what a book should be because of what is in the fashion now
- Nothing will help a writer unless he adds something new to human knowledge while he is writing
- **The Writing Life**
- The actual, concrete things that harm a writer are politics, women, drink, money, ambition, and the lack of politics, women, drink, money and ambition
- All writers are poor first and then rich
- The one who is doing his work and getting satisfaction from it is not the one the poverty bothers
- Hunger is good discipline and you learn from it

- My own experience with the literary life has not as yet included receiving royalties – but I hope by keeping down advances to some day have this take place
- I don't think there is any question about artistic integrities – it has always been more exciting to write than to be paid for it and if I can keep on writing we may eventually all make some money
- I've always thought that only one thing mattered, your own career, and like a general in battle I would sacrifice anything to my work and I would not let myself be fond of anything I could not lose
  - But now I have learned that you have no success while you are alive; the only success that counts while you live is making money and I refused that
  - I am going to take pleasure in the things I have while I have them
- About posterity: I only think about writing truly. Posterity can take care of herself.
- It is only by hazard that a writer makes money
  - Then our writers when they have made some money increase their standard of living and they are caught – they have to write to keep up their establishments, their wives, and so on, and they write slop. It is not slop on purpose but because it is hurried – because they write when there is nothing to say or no water in the well.
    - Then, once they have betrayed themselves they justify it and you get more slop
- I get letters from Vanity Fair, Cosmopolitan etc. asking me for stories, and serials, but I am publishing nothing for six months or a year...because I know that now is a very crucial time and that it is much more important for me to write in tranquility, trying to write as well as I can, with no eye to any market, nor any thought of what the stuff will bring, or even if it can ever be published – than to fall into the money making trap
- Do not compete financially with people who can do nothing good at all except make some money
- Only two things you can do for an artist – give him money and show his stuff. These are the only two impersonal needs.
- My health is the main capital I have and I want to administer it intelligently
- When you're writing on a book and can't sleep your brain races at night and you write all the stuff in your head and in the morning it is gone and you are pooped
  - It is better though to produce half as much, get plenty of exercise and not go crazy than to speed up so that your head is hardly normal
  - You always need exercise
- The minute I stop writing for a month or two months and am on a trip I feel absolutely animally happy. But when you are writing and get something the way you want it to be you get a great happiness too – but it is very different.
- It's hard enough to write – and writing prose is a full time job and all the best of it is done in your subconscious and when that is full of business, reviews, opinions etc. you don't get a damned thing

- In Piggot, Arkansas I figure that I will be far enough away from people so they won't come and bother and I can work. I will be working on another novel and some gents when they are working on a novel may be social assets but I am just about as pleasant to have around as a bore with sore toenails.
- I like writing letters because it's such a swell way to keep from working and yet you feel like you've done something
- Please forgive the long stupid letters...I write them instead of stories and they are a luxury that gives me pleasure and I hope they give you some too
- Please forgive such a rotten letter – all my juice goes in the damned book
  - Anytime I can write a good letter it's a sign I'm not working
- A man can't stay home all the time and when he goes out if anything happens it is in the papers. It is never in the papers that you wake at first light and start working...nor that all the ambition you have ever had is to be the best American prose writer and to work hard at it.
- I had just finished a book and when you have done that you do not really give a damn for a few weeks
- We should never be too pessimistic about what we know we have done well because we should have some reward and the only reward is that which is within ourselves
  - Publicity, admiration, adulation, or simply being fashionable are all worthless
- Books should be judged by those who read them – not explained by the writer
- For Christ's sake write and don't worry about what the boys will say nor whether it will be a masterpiece nor anything
- I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit – I try to put the shit in the wastebasket
- Most live writers do not exist – their fame is created by critics who always need a genius of the season, someone they understand completely and feel safe in praising, but when these fabricated geniuses are dead they will not exist
- If any sonofabitch could write he wouldn't have to teach writing in college
- I wouldn't put a symbol into anything on purpose – it's hard enough just to make a paragraph
- I have always hoped for sound, intelligent criticism all my life as writing is the loneliest of all trades
- It is very destructive to publish a book and then read the reviews
- You must be prepared to work always without applause – when you are excited about something is when the first draft is done
  - But no one can see the first draft until you have gone over it again and again until you have communicated the emotion, the sights and the sounds to the reader, and by the time you have completed this, the words, sometimes, will not make sense to you as you read them, so many times you have to re-read them
  - By the time the book comes out you will have started something else and it is all behind you and you do not want to hear about it

- But if the book is good, is about something that you know, and is truly written and reading it over you see that this is so you can let the critics yip and the noise will have that pleasant sound coyotes make on a very cold night when they are out in the snow and you are in your own cabin that you have built or paid for with your work