

BOOK

How To Write Short: Word Craft for Fast Times

AUTHOR

Roy Peter Clark

PUBLISHER

Little, Brown and Company

PUBLICATION DATE

August 2013

SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

In *How to Write Short*, Roy Peter Clark turns his attention to the art of painting a thousand pictures with just a few words. Short forms of writing have always existed—from ship logs and telegrams to prayers and haikus. But in this ever-changing Internet age, short-form writing has become an essential skill.

Clark covers how to write effective and powerful titles, headlines, essays, sales pitches, Tweets, letters, and even self-descriptions for online dating services. With examples from the long tradition of short-form writing in Western culture, *How to Write Short* guides writers to crafting brilliant prose, even in 140 characters.

"The Hippocratic Oath; The Twenty-Third Psalm; The Lord's Prayer; Shakespeare's Sonnet 18; The Preamble to the Constitution; The Gettysburg Address; The last paragraph of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. If you add up the words in these documents, the sum will be fewer than a thousand, 996 by my count. Show me any number of pictures as powerful as those seven documents."

"While technologies, genres, and platforms evolve, the purposes of short writing remain intact.

To enshrine: gravestones, monuments, tattoos

To amuse: jokes, insults, one-liners, snarky comments

To explain: museum texts, recipes, instructions

To narrate: microfiction, live blogs, diaries

To alert and inform: text messages, tweets, telegrams, status updates, news bulletins, signage

To remember: notes, summaries, lists, ceremonial texts (such as wedding vows)

To inspire: proverbs, quotations, prayers, aphorisms

To sell: graffiti, adverts, résumés, bumper stickers, T-shirts, dating sites

To converse: Q & A, social networks, feedback loops, blogs, speech balloons."

"When it comes to the how of short writing, you will find three paths: learning short writing through reading; practicing the best short writing moves; and cutting longer texts down to size. If you want to write short, you must read short, and you must do it without bias."

Jose Saramago who, though wrote long, kept a blog near the end of his life to write short. See also Dale Carnegie.

"The British author David Lodge says it best: a novelist or any writer, "cannot afford to cut himself off from low, vulgar, debased language." Nothing expressed in language is irrelevant for the learning writer, not the chants of soccer hooligans or the list of ingredients on the box of cake mix."

"One of the most creative fortune cookies: IGNORE PREVIOUS COOKIE."

David Von Drehle's approach in journalistic writing:

Why does the story matter? What's the point Why is the story being told? What does the story say about life, the world, the times we live in? What my story *really* about?

WHY DOES A STORY LACK FOCUS? The topic is too wide. The author takes a detour. The writer lacks a sense of audience. Clutter hides a clear focus.

When writing online short articles: "Add links as you must, but don't clutter the text with so many opportunities to escape that the straight one-two-three meaning is lost."

THE SOURCE OF BLURB: "The name comes to us from a fictitious character, Miss Belinda Blurb, whose exaggerated praise was used to sell books and magazines. Spy magazine made fun of the practice as 'logrolling in our time.'"

THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF GREAT SHORT WRITING: focus, wit, polish

Behind Tom Petty's Free Fallin' "Just below the surface here is the joke that California is so cluttered with people and traffic that the freeway is not free at all but a clotted artery of the body politic, a society all revved up but going nowhere. That last line reverberates with some kind of dark humor and self-effacement, as Petty leads a great band known as the Heartbreakers."

"I've long taught that three was the magic number in writing, the digit that symbolized wholeness, fullness, the total package. But in an accelerating world, it appears that the power of two is catching up."

In summarizing the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

"When people want to break away from one government and form their own, it makes sense to list their reasons for doing so."

Reinhold Niebuhr, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

"Niebuhr wrote another stanza, but few can remember it because these first four lines say so much—in fact, they say it all, an illusion created by the magic of three . . . if two examples divide the world, then the addition of a third element encompasses the world, creates at least the appearance of the whole, an effect made manifest in common discourse: beginning, middle, end."

"The hard stock of English words comes from our Anglo-Saxon heritage. In addition to function words such as prepositions and conjunctions, the Old English word hoard contained many stark words of one syllable, including the notorious four-letter variety . . . That hard language was softened in 1066 after the invasion of England by William the Conqueror. The Norman (think French) invasion of England brought with him a language that sounded more sophisticated and urbane. Words derived from Latin and Greek, with migration routes through Italy and France, were suited to the workings of government and higher levels of abstraction."

Camille Paglia: "What fascinated me about English was what I later recognized as its hybrid etymology: blunt Anglo-Saxon concreteness, sleek Norman French urbanity, and polysyllabic Greco-Roman abstraction. The clash of these elements, as competitive as Italian dialects, is invigorating, richly entertaining and often funny, as it is to Shakespeare, who gets tremendous effects out of their interplay. The dazzling multiplicity of sounds and word choices in English makes it brilliantly suited to be a language of poetry. It's why the pragmatic Anglo-American tradition (unlike effete French rationalism) doesn't need poststructuralism: in English, usage depends upon context; the words jostle and provoke one another and mischievously shift their meanings over time."

EB White: "'Omit needless words!' cries the author on page 17, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having shortchanged himself, a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced the clock. Will Strunk got out of this predicament by a simple trick: he uttered every sentence three times. When he delivered

his oration on brevity to the class, he leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels in his hands, and, in a husky, conspiratorial voice, said, "Rule Thirteen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!"

When editing, things to cut: Adverbs, Adjectives, Strings of Prepositional Phrases, Intensifiers, Qualifiers, Jargon, Latinate flab

"Hostile editorialists criticized Lincoln's address as short, shallow, and unworthy of the civic liturgy. But for most who heard or read it, the speech became famous because of its brevity. Let's do the math. Everett [President of Harvard who preceded Lincoln] spoke for two hours; Lincoln for two minutes. The now-forgotten oration was sixty times longer than the Gettysburg Address."

"In his book *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, historian Garry Willis asserts that the famous speech helped create a new form of political discourse, 'a revolution in style.' Sonorous and bombastic language gave way to the plain and simple – with this caveat. 'It would be wrong to think that Lincoln moved toward the plain style of the Gettysburg just by writing shorter, simpler sentences. Actually, that Address ends with a very long sentence – eighty-two words, almost a third of the whole talk's length.'"

Epitaphs: you only get one shot at a tombstone

Story about seeing a girl with a large neck tattoo with RODERICK on it
There were some interesting red lines on it, but he later discovered that it was the word "VOID" over it
"There are times when you can't omit needless words, even in the smallest of texts. And you can't delete them. Or conceal them. Or laser them off. Sometimes all you can do is stamp them 'Void.'"

Gene Weingarten: "I learned to write humor almost entirely from Dave Barry, whom I hired and then edited for years. Once, I impulsively asked Dave if there was any rhyme or reason to what he did, any writing rules he followed. The questions surprised both of us; he and I were never much for rules or strictures or limits or templates. Eventually, he decided use, there was actually on modest principle that he'd adopted almost unconsciously: 'I try to put the funniest word at the end of the sentence.'"

The etymology of the word *slogan*, "a phrase expressing the aims or nature of an enterprise, organization, or candidate," is revealing. Its etymon is Gaelic and translates to 'battle cry,' especially as employed by the berserkers in Scottish clans. The slogan, then, is not a rational conclusion of a subtle argument. The slogan is an in your face call to arms.

The Pitch: Where the writer attempts to stand apart from the masses in a sentence or two at the top

The Lure: Where the writer compile evidence (anecdotes, preferences, or humor) that he is worthy

The Catch: Where the writer ends with an irresistible call to action

"From the beginning, storytellers have embedded the work of other storytellers within their work. The story inside the story."

One Man, One Year by Ammon Shea

"I collect words. One could also say that I collect word books, since by last count I have about a thousand volumes of dictionaries, thesauri, and assorted glossaries, but I don't see that as a collection. These books are merely the tools with which I gather my collection."

"I wanted to name my first book . . . The Name of the Dog because getting the name of a dog and putting that name in a story lends the tale a kid of particularity that readers love."