10 Ways to Become a Better Writer
by Don Milam

When George Plimpton asked Ernest Hemingway what the best training for an aspiring writer would be in a 1954 interview, Hemingway replied, “Let’s say that he should go out and hang himself because he finds that writing well is impossibly difficult. Then he should be cut down without mercy and forced by his own self to write as well as he can for the rest of his life. At least he will have the story of the hanging to commence with.”

Hopefully, you won’t have to be hanged to become a better writer. However, it will take a lot of hard work and discipline. Over the years I have collected thoughts and ideas on how to make myself a more successful writer. These writing tips, if applied, will help move you forward on your own voyage to becoming a more complete writer.

1. Unplug Yourself!
To unplug yourself you must find a place where there are no distractions. It will become your secret place for your work.

2. Generate Material!
You have your theme selected and you have some thoughts on what to write. How can you enlarge the material you presently have? I have developed a few processes over the years that have helped me.

- Questioning
- Clustering
- Freewriting
- Research

3. Build Your Vocabulary!
Words are the tools we use to communicate the inspired thoughts that fill our rich souls. Most people are limited in their writing because of the poverty of their vocabulary.

4. Organize Notes and Thoughts!
At this point you have spawned a pool of ideas for your writing. Now, it is time to take all your notes and organize them into categories.
5. Create an Outline!
The outline will organize your material in a logical sequence and allows you, the writer, to place topics and subtopics into their proper place. The outline is never fixed. It is always fluid and can change as you write.

6. Sit Down and Write!
You cannot hope to become a better writer if you do not write. Obvious? Yes! But more people get stuck in the beginning than in the middle of a project. If you are going to excel at writing, you must write. In his poem, The Hollow Men, T.S. Eliot wrote, “Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, fall the shadow.” As a writer, you begin in the shadow land, the place where there is nothing but your thoughts.

7. The Importance of the First Paragraph
The first sentences that you write will be some of the most important and critical pieces of the whole manuscript. Great beginnings connect with something deep inside us and make us want to read on. The initial words you write to open up your book will determine if you will entice the reader to move forward.

8. The Importance of Rereading, Rewriting, and Revising
“Never think of revising as fixing something that is wrong. That starts you off in a negative frame of mind. Rather think of it as an opportunity to improve something you already love.” (Marion Dane Bauer)

Once you have reached the end of your writing, now is the time for the tedious work of revision and editing. Anyone can cut poor writing, but only a serious writer can cut excellent writing that is neither apt nor necessary.

9. Get Feedback
Not much to say on this subject except to mention that it is always helpful to have others read and comment on what you have written. Only choose people who will be honest.

10. Mastering Effective Endings
The ending is just as important as the beginning. Many writers simply lead the reader hanging with no final conclusion or direction.