

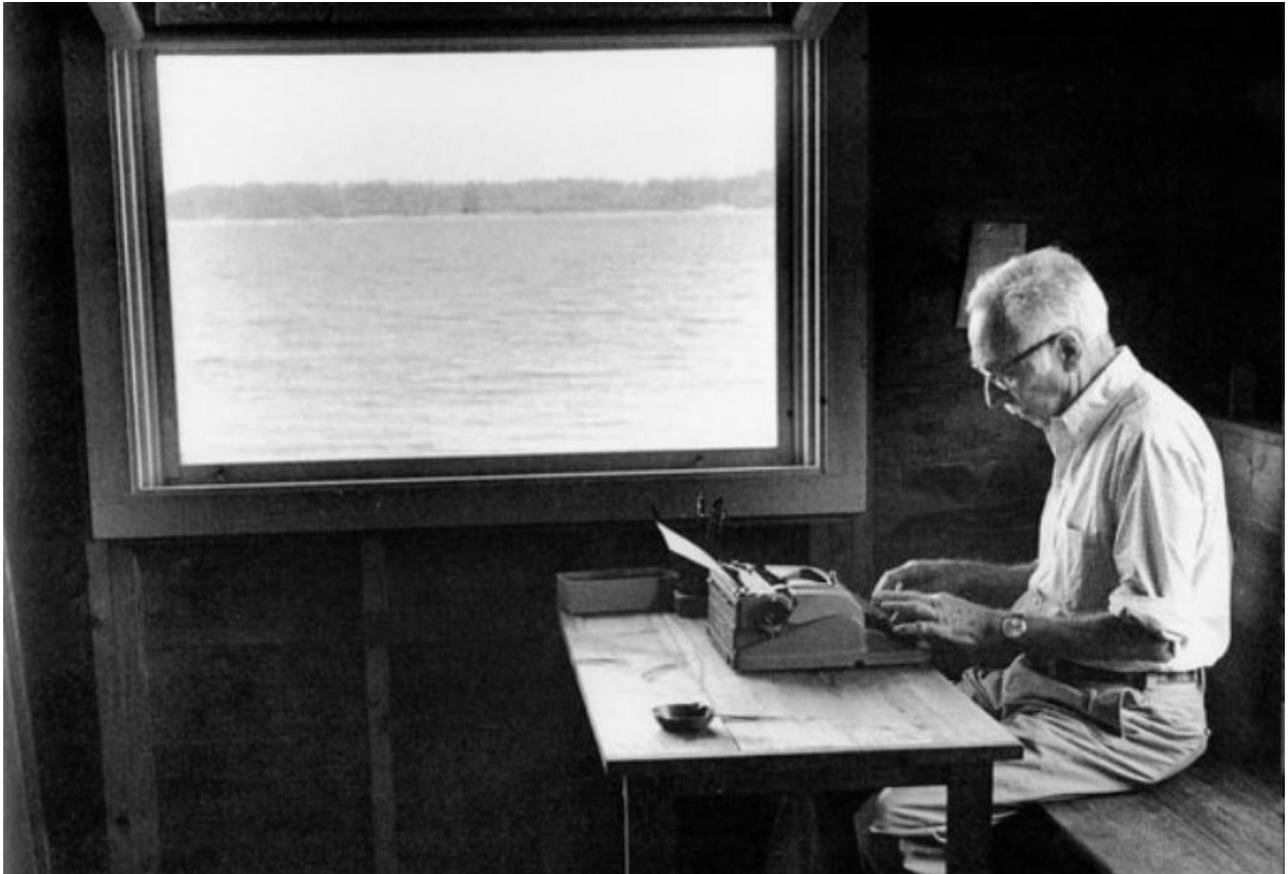
# 40 Best Essays of All Time (With Links)

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 rafalreyzer.com/40-best-essays-of-all-time

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**I wanted to improve my writing skills. I thought that reading forty best essays of all time would bring me closer to my goal. I didn't have much money (buying forty collections of essays was out of question) so I've found them online instead.**

I've hacked through piles of them and finally I've found the great ones. Now I want to share the whole list with you (with addition of my notes about writing). Each item on the list has a direct link to the essay, so please, click away and indulge yourself. Also, next to each essay there's an image of the book that contains the original work. Click on it and you'll be sent to its Amazon page. Moreover, if you want to grab other interesting essays, I highly recommend *The Best American Essays* books. They publish best essays from each year.

## About the essay list

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There's a similarity between reading essays and eating candy. Once you open the package, you have to eat the whole goddamn thing. It's addictive. I tried to find ones that were well-written and awe-inspiring at the same time. I wanted them to have the power to change my thinking and change my life. And they delivered.



It's interesting how we're influenced by a piece of writing for hours and days. When a year later someone asks you "what was this essay about?" you barely remember reading it. But a part of it is still with you. It changed you the very moment you read its last line. (It's a soothing way to think about it when you have no recollection of the contents, don't you think?).

The essays are not listed in any particular order. Just browse through them, read the summary, writing tips, and if you think it's good for you, go ahead and read it. There's also some bonus material at the end.

## 40 Best Essays Ever Written (With Links And Writing Tips)

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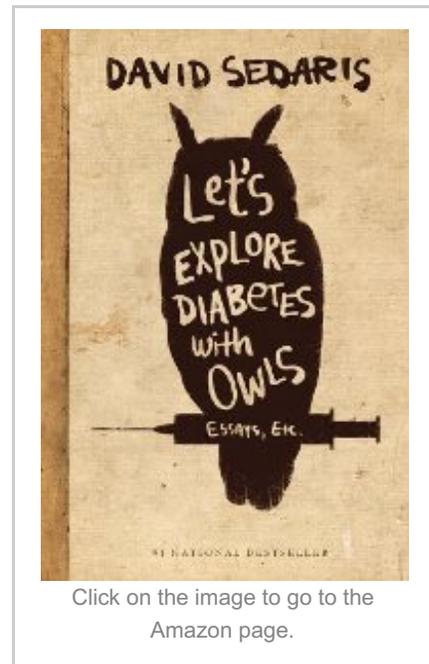


### 1. David Sedaris – Laugh, Kookaburra

A great family drama takes place against the backdrop of the Australian wilderness. And the Kookaburra laughs... This is one of the best essays of the lot. It's a great mixture of family reminiscences, travel writing and advice on what's most important in life. You'll also learn an awful lot about the curious culture of the Aussies.

### Writing tips from the essay:

- Use analogies (you can make it funny or dramatic to achieve a better effect): “Don’t be afraid,” the waiter said, and he talked to the kookaburra in a soothing, respectful voice, the way you might to a child with a switchblade in his hand”.
- You can touch a few cognate stories in one piece of writing. Reveal the layers gradually. Intertwine them and arrange for a grand finale where everything is finally clear.
- Be on the side of the reader. Become their friend and tell the story naturally, like around the dinner table.
- Use short, punchy sentences. Tell only as much as is required to make your point vivid.
- Conjure sentences that create actual feelings: “I had on a sweater and a jacket, but they weren’t quite enough, and I shivered as we walked toward the body, and saw that it was a . . . what, exactly?”
- You may ask a few tough questions in a row to provoke interest, and let the reader think.



## 2. Charles D'Ambrosio – Documents

You think your life punches you in the face all too often? After reading this essay you will change your mind. Reading about loss and hardships often makes us sad at first, but then, enables us to feel grateful for our lives. D'Ambrosio shares his personal documents (poems, letters) that had major impact on his life, and brilliantly shows how not to let go of the past.

### Writing tips from the essay:

- At times, the most powerful stories are about your family and the childhood moments that shaped your life.
- You don't need to build up tension and pussyfoot around the crux of the matter. Instead, surprise the reader by telling it like it is: “The poem was an allegory about his desire to leave our family”. Or: “My father had three sons. I'm the eldest; Danny, the youngest, killed himself sixteen years ago”.
- You can use real documents and quotes from your family and friends. It makes it so much more personal and relatable.
- Don't cringe before the long sentence if you know it's a strong one.
- At the end of the essay, you may come back to the first theme to close the circuit.

- Using a slightly poetic language is totally acceptable, as long as it improves the story.

### **3. E.B. White – Once more to the lake**

What does it mean to be a father? Can you see your younger self reflected in your child? This beautiful essay tells the story of the author, his son, and their traditional stay at a placid lake hidden within the forests of Maine. This place of nature is filled with sunshine and childhood memories. It also provides for one of the greatest meditations on nature and the passing of time.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Use sophisticated language, but not at the expense of readability.
- Use vivid language to trigger the mirror neurons in the reader's brain: "I took along my son, who had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows".
- It's important to mention universal feelings that are rarely talked about (it helps to create a bond between two minds): "You remember one thing, and that suddenly reminds you of another thing. I guess I remembered clearest of all the early mornings, when the lake was cool and motionless".
- Animate the inanimate: "this constant and trustworthy body of water".
- Mentioning tales of yore is a good way to add some mystery and timelessness to your piece.
- Using double, or even triple "and" in one sentence is fine. It can make the sentence sing.

### **4. Zadie Smith – Fail Better**

Aspiring writers feel a tremendous pressure to perform. The daily produce of words quite often turns out to be nothing more than gibberish. What then? Also, should the writer please the reader or should she be fully independent? What does it mean to be a writer, anyway? This essay is an attempt to answer these questions, but its contents are not only meant for scribblers. Within it, you'll find some great notes about literary criticism, how we treat art, and the responsibility of the reader.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- A perfect novel? There's no such thing.
- The novel always reflects the inner world of the writer. That's why we're fascinated with writers.
- Writing is not simply about craftsmanship, but rather about taking your reader to the unknown lands. In the words of Christopher Hitchens: "Your ideal authors ought to pull you from the foundering of your previous existence, not smilingly guide you into a friendly and peaceable harbor."
- Style comes from your unique personality and the perception of the world. It takes time to develop it.

- Never try to tell it all. “All” can never be put into language. Take a part of it and tell it the best you possibly can.
- Avoid cliché. Try to infuse new life into your writing.
- Writing is about your way of being. It’s your game. Paradoxically, if you try to please everyone, your writing will become less appealing, you’ll lose the interest of the readers. This rule doesn’t apply in the business world where you actually have to write for a specific person (a target audience).
- As a reader, you have responsibilities too. According to the critics, every thirty years, there’s just a handful of great novels. Maybe it’s true. But there’s also an element of personal connection between the reader and the writer. That’s why for one person a novel is a marvel, while for the other, nothing special at all. That’s why you have to search and find the author who will touch you.

### **5. Virginia Woolf – Death of the Moth**

In the midst of an ordinary day, sitting in a room of her own, Virginia Woolf tells about the epic struggle for survival, and the evanescence of life. This short essay is a truly powerful one. At the beginning, the atmosphere is happy. The life is in full force. And then, suddenly, it starts to fade away. There’s this sense of melancholy that would mark the last years of Woolf’s life.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- The melody of language... Good sentence is like music: “Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite that pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow- underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us”.
- You can show the grandest in the mundane (for example the moth at your window and the drama of life and death).
- Using simple comparisons makes the style more lucid: “Being intent on other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine, that has stopped momentarily, to start again without considering the reason of its failure”.

### **6. Meghan Daum – My Misspent Youth**

Many of us, at some point or another, dream about living in New York. Meghan Daum’s take on the subject is slightly different from what you might expect. There’s no glamour, no Broadway shows, and no fancy restaurants. Instead, there’s the sullen reality of living in one of the most expensive cities in the world. You’ll get all the juicy details about credit cards, overdue payments and scrambling for survival. In a way, it’s a word of warning. But it’s also a great story about shattered fantasies of living in a big city. Word on the street is: “You ain’t promised mañana in the rotten manzana”.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- You can paint a picture of your former self. What did that person believed in? In what

kind of world did he or she lived in?

- “The day that turned your life around” is a good theme you may use in a story. Memories of a special day are filled with emotions. Strong emotions often breed strong writing.
- Use cultural references and relevant slang to create a context for your story.
- You can tell all the details of the story, even if in some people’s eyes you’ll look like the dumbest motherfucker that ever lived. It adds to the originality.
- Say it in a new way: “In this mind-set, the dollars spent, like the mechanics of a machine no one bothers to understand, become an abstraction, an intangible avenue toward self-expression, a mere vehicle of style”.
- You can mixt your personal story with the zeitgeist or the ethos of the time.

## **7. Roger Ebert – Go Gentle Into That Good Night**

Probably the greatest film critic of all time, Roger Ebert, tells us not to rage against the dying of the light. This essay is full of courage, erudition, and humanism. From it, we learn about what it means to be in the process dying (Hitch’s *Mortality* is another great work on that theme). But there’s so much more. It’s the great celebration of life too. It’s about not giving up, and sticking to your principles until the very end. It brings to mind the famous scene from *Dead Poets Society* where John Keating (Robin Williams) tells his students: “Carpe, carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary”.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Start with a powerful sentence: “I know it is coming, and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear.”
- Use quotes to prove your point - “‘Ask someone how they feel about death’, he said, ‘and they’ll tell you everyone’s gonna die’. Ask them, ‘In the next 30 seconds?’ No, no, no, that’s not gonna happen”.
- Admit the basic truths about reality in childlike way (especially after pondering quantum physics) – “I believe my wristwatch exists, and even when I am unconscious, it is ticking all the same. You have to start somewhere”.
- Let other thinkers prove your point. Use quotes and ideas from your favorite authors and friends.

## **8. George Orwell – Shooting an Elephant**

Even after one reading, you’ll remember this one for years. The story, set in British Burma, is about shooting an elephant (it’s definitely not for the squeamish). It’s also the most powerful denunciation of colonialism ever put to writing. Orwell, apparently a free representative of the British rule, feels to be nothing more than a puppet succumbing to the whim of the mob.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- The first sentence is the most important one: “In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people — the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me”.

- You can use just the first paragraph to set the stage for the whole piece of prose.
- Use beautiful language that stirs the imagination: “I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains.” Or: “I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have.”
- If you’ve ever been to war, you will have a story to tell: “(Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.)”
- Use simple words, and admit the sad truth only you can perceive: “They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching”.
- Share words of wisdom to add texture to the writing: “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.”

## **9. George Orwell – A Hanging**

It’s just another day in Burma – time to hang a man. Without much ado, Orwell recounts the grim reality of taking another person’s life. A man is taken from his cage and in a few minutes, he’s going to be hanged. The most horrible thing is the normality of it. It’s a powerful story about the human nature. Also, there’s an extraordinary incident with the dog, but I won’t get ahead of myself.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Create brilliant, yet short descriptions of characters: “He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes. He had a thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man on the films”.
- Understand and share the felt presence of a unique experience: “It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man”.
- Make your readers hear the sound that will stay with them forever: “And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out on his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of “Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!”
- Make the ending original by refusing the tendency to seek closure or summing it up.

## **10. Christopher Hitchens – Assassins of The Mind**

In one of the greatest essays written in defense of free speech, Christopher Hitchens shares many examples on how modern media kneel to the explicit threats of violence posed by Islamic extremists. He recounts the story of his friend, Salman Rushdie, author of Satanic Verses who, for many years had to watch over his shoulder because of fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeini. With his usual wit, Hitchens shares various examples of people who died because of their opinions and of editors who refuse to publish anything related to Islam because of fear (and it was written long before the Charlie Hebdo massacre). After reading the essay, you will realize that freedom of expression is one of the most precious things we have, and that we have to fight for it.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Assume that the readers will know the cultural references. When they do, their self-

esteem goes up – they are a part of an insider group.

- When proving your point, give a variety of real life examples from eclectic sources. Leave no room for ambiguity or vagueness. Research and overall knowledge are essential here.
- Use italics to put emphasis on a specific word or phrase (here I use the underlining):  
“We live now in a climate where every publisher and editor and politician has to weigh in advance the possibility of violent Muslim reprisal. In consequence, there are a number of things that have not happened.”
- Think about how to make it sound more original: “So there is now a hidden partner in our cultural and academic and publishing and broadcasting world: a shadowy figure that has, uninvited, drawn up a chair to the table.”

## **11. Christopher Hitchens – The New Commandments**

It's high time to shatter the tablets, and amend the biblical rules of conduct. Watch, as Christopher Hitchens slays one commandment after the other on moral, as well as historical grounds. For example, did you know that there are actually many versions of the divine law dictated by God to Moses which you can find in the Bible? Aren't we thus empowered to write our own version of a proper moral code? If you approach it with open mind, this essay may change the way you think about the Bible and religion in general.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Take the iconoclastic approach. Have a party on the hallowed soil.
- Use humor to undermine orthodox ideas (it seems to be the best way to deal with an established authority).
- Use sarcasm and irony when appropriate (or not): “Nobody is opposed to a day of rest. The international Communist movement got its start by proclaiming a strike for an eight hour day on May 1, 1886, against Christian employers who used child labor seven days a week”.
- Defeat God on legal grounds: “Wise lawmakers know that it is a mistake to promulgate legislation that is impossible to obey”.
- Be ruthless in the logic of your argument. Provide evidence.

## **12. Phillip Lopate – Against Joie de Vivre**

While reading the essay, this quote from Slavoj Žižek kept coming back to me: “I think that the only life of deep satisfaction is a life of eternal struggle, especially struggle with oneself. If you want to remain happy, just remain stupid. Authentic masters are never happy; happiness is a category of slaves”. Personally, I can bear the onus of happiness or joie de vivre for some time. But there's also this force that enables me to get free, and wallow in the sweet feelings of melancholy and nostalgia. By reading this work of Lopate, you'll enter into a world of an intelligent man who finds most social rituals a drag. It's worth exploring.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Go against the grain. Be flamboyant and controversial (if you can handle it).
- Treat the paragraph like a group of thoughts on one theme. Next paragraph, next theme.
- Use references to other artists to set the context and enrich the prose: “These sunny little canvases with their talented innocence, third generation spirit of Montmartre, bore testimony to a love of life so unbending as to leave an impression of rigid narrow-mindedness as extreme as any Savonarola. Their rejection of sorrow was total”.
- Capture the emotions of life that are universal, yet remain unspoken.
- Don’t be afraid to share your intimate experiences.

### **13. Philip Larkin – The Pleasure Principle**

This piece comes from the Required Writing collection of essays. Larkin argues that reading in verse should be a source of intimate pleasure – not a medley of unintelligible thoughts that only the author can (or can’t?) decipher. It’s a sobering take on modern poetry and a great call to action for all those involved in it. Well worth a read.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Write about complicated ideas (such as poetry) in a simple way. You can really change how people look at things if you express yourself plainly enough.
- Go boldly. The reader wants a bold writer: “We seem to be producing a new kind of bad poetry, not the old kind that tries to move the reader and fails, but one that does not even try”.
- Play with words and the sentence length. Create music: “It is time some of you playboys realized, says the judge, that reading a poem is hard work. Fourteen days in stir. Next case”.
- Persuade the reader to take action. Here, a simple and direct language is the most effective.

### **14. Sigmund Freud – Thoughts for the Times on War and Death**

This essay clearly shows Freud’s disillusionment with the whole project of Western civilization. How the peaceful, European countries could engage in a war that would eventually cost more than 17 million lives? What stirs people to kill each other? Is it their nature, or are they puppets of imperial forces with agendas of their own? From the perspective of time, this work by Freud doesn’t seem to be fully accurate, but still, it’s well worth your time.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Commence with long words derived from Latin. Get grandiloquent, make your argument incontrovertible and leave your audience discombobulated.
- Use unending sentences, so that the reader feels confused, yet impressed.
- Say it well: “In this way he enjoyed the blue sea and the grey; the beauty of snow covered mountains and of green meadow lands; the magic of northern forests and the splendour of southern vegetation; the mood evoked by landscapes that recall great historical events, and the silence of untouched nature”.

- Human nature is the subject that never gets dry.

## **15. Zadie Smith – Some Notes on Attunement**

“You are privy to a great becoming, but you recognize nothing” – Francis Dolarhyde. This one is about the elusiveness of change occurring within you. For Zadie, it was hard to attune to the vibes of Joni Mitchell – especially her Blue album. But eventually, she grew up to appreciate her genius, and all the other things changed as well. This essay is all about the relationship between human, and art. We shouldn’t like the art because we’re supposed to. We should like it because it has an instantaneous, emotional effect on us. Although, according to Stansfield (Gary Oldman) in Léon, liking Beethoven is rather mandatory.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Build an expectation of what’s to come: “The first time I heard her I didn’t hear her at all”.
- Don’t be afraid of repetition if it feels good.
- Psychedelic drugs let you appreciate things you never before appreciated.
- Intertwine a personal journey with philosophical musings.
- Show rather than tell: “My friends had pity in their eyes. The same look the faithful tend to give you as you hand them back their “literature” and close the door in their faces”.
- Let the poets speak for you: “That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures”.
- By voicing your anxieties, you can heal the anxieties of the reader. In that way, you say: “I’m just like you. I’m your friend in this struggle”.
- Admit your flaws to make your persona more relatable.

## **16. Annie Dillard – Total Eclipse**

My imagination was always stirred by the scene of the solar eclipse in Pharaoh, by Boleslaw Prus. I wondered about the shock of the disoriented crowd when they saw how their ruler was apparently able to switch off the light. Getting immersed in this essay by Annie Dillard has a similar effect. It produces amazement and some kind of primeval fear. It’s not only the environment that changes; it’s your mind and the perception of the world. After the eclipse, nothing is going to be the same again.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Yet again, the power of the first sentence that draws you in: “It had been like dying, that sliding down the mountain pass”.
- Don’t miss the extraordinary scene. Then describe it: “Up in the sky, like a crater from some distant cataclysm, was a hollow ring”.
- Use colloquial language. Write like you talk. Short sentences often win.
- Contrast the numinous with the mundane to enthrall the reader.

## **17. Édouard Levé – When I Look at a Strawberry, I Think of a Tongue**

This suicidally beautiful essay will teach you a lot about the appreciation of life. It's a collection of personal, apparently unrelated thoughts that show us the rich interior of the author. You look at the real-time thoughts of another person, and then start to recognize the same patterns within yourself... It sounds like a confession of a person who's about to take their life, and it's striking in its originality.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Use the stream of consciousness technique and put random thoughts on paper. Then, polish them: "I have attempted suicide once, I've been tempted four times to attempt it".
- Place the treasure deep within the story: "When I look at a strawberry, I think of a tongue, when I lick one, of a kiss".
- Don't worry about what people might think. The more you expose, the more powerful the writing. Readers also take part in the great drama. They experience universal emotions that mostly stay inside. You can translate them into writing.

### **18. Gloria E. Anzaldúa – How to Tame a Wild Tongue**

Anzaldúa, who was born in south Texas, had to struggle to find her true identity. She was American, but her culture was grounded in Mexico. In this way, she and her people were not fully respected in either of the countries. This essay is an account of her journey of becoming the ambassador of the Chicano (Mexican-American) culture. It's full of anecdotes, interesting references and different shades of Spanish. It's a window into a new cultural dimension that you've never experienced before.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- If your mother tongue is not English, but you write in English, *wykorzystaj czasami swój oryginalny język*.
- You come from a rich cultural heritage. You can share it with people who never heard about it, and are not even looking for it, but it is of immense value to them when they discover it.
- Never forget about your identity. It is precious. It is a part of who you are. Even if you migrate, try to preserve it. Use it to your best advantage and become a voice of other people in the same situation.
- Tell them what's really on your mind: "So if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language".

### **19. Kurt Vonnegut – Dispatch From A Man Without a Country**

In terms of style, this essay is flawless. It's simple, conversational, humorous, and yet, full of wisdom. And when Vonnegut becomes a teacher, and draws an axis of "beginning – end", and, "good fortune – bad fortune" to explain literature, it becomes outright hilarious. It's hard to find an author with such a down-to-earth approach. He doesn't need to get intellectual to prove a point. And the point could be summed up by the quote from Great Expectations – "On the Rampage, Pip, and off the Rampage, Pip – such is Life!"

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Start with a curious question: “Do you know what a twerp is?”
- Surprise your readers with uncanny analogies: “I am from a family of artists. Here I am, making a living in the arts. It has not been a rebellion. It’s as though I had taken over the family Esso station.”
- Use your natural language without too many special effects. In time, the style will crystalize.
- An amusing lesson in writing from Mr. Vonnegut: “Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you’ve been to college”.
- You can put actual images or vignettes between the paragraphs to illustrate something.

### **20. Mary Ruefle – On Fear**

Most psychologists and gurus agree that fear is the greatest enemy of success or any creative activity. It’s programmed into our minds to keep us away from imaginary harm. Mary Ruefle takes on this basic human emotion with flair. She explores fear from so many different angles (especially in the world of poetry-writing) that at the end of the essay you will be able to look at it, dissect it, untangle it, and hopefully be able to say “fuck you” the next time your brain is trying to stop you.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Research your subject thoroughly. Ask people, have interviews, get expert opinions, and gather as much information as possible. Then scavenge through the fields of data, and pull out the golden bits that will let your prose shine.
- Use powerful quotes to add color to your story: “The poet who embarks on the creation of the poem (as I know by experience), begins with the aimless sensation of a hunter about to embark on a night hunt through the remotest of forests. Unaccountable dread stirs in his heart”. – Lorca.
- Writing advice from the essay: “One of the fears a young writer has is not being able to write as well as he or she wants to, the fear of not being able to sound like X or Y, a favorite author. But out of fear, hopefully, is born a young writer’s voice”.

### **21. Susan Sontag – Against Interpretation**

In this highly intellectual essay, Sontag fights for art and its interpretation. It’s a great lesson especially for critics and interpreters who endlessly chew on works that simply defy interpretation. Why don’t we just leave the art alone? I always hated when at school they asked me: “what the author had in mind when he did X or Y?” Iēsous Pantocrator! Hell if I know! I will judge it through my subjective experience!

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Leave the art alone: “Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely

reactionary, stifling. Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities”.

- When you have something really important to say, style matters less.
- There’s no use for creating a second meaning or inviting interpretation of our art. Just leave it be and let it speak for itself.

## **22. Nora Ephron – A Few Words About Breasts**

This is a heartwarming, coming of age story about a young girl who waits for her breasts to finally grow. It’s simply a humorous and pleasurable read. As it happens, the size of breasts is a big deal for women. If you’re a man, you may peek into the mind of a woman and learn many interesting things. If you’re a woman, maybe you’ll be able to relate and at last, be at peace with your bosom.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Touch an interesting subject and establish a strong connection with the readers (in that case, women with small breasts). Let your personality shine through the written piece. If you are lighthearted and joyous, show it.
- Use hyphens to create an impression of a real talk: “My house was full of apples and peaches and milk and homemade chocolate-chip cookies – which were nice, and good for you, but-not-right-before-dinner-or-you’ll-spoil-your-appetite.”
- Use present tense when you tell a story to add more life to it.
- Share the pronounced, memorable traits of characters: “A previous girlfriend named Solange, who was famous throughout Beverly Hills High School for having no pigment in her right eyebrow, had knitted them for him (angora dice)”.

## **23. Carl Sagan – Does Truth Matter – Science, Pseudoscience, and Civilization**

Carl Sagan was one of the greatest proponents of skepticism, and an author of numerous books, including one of my all-time favorites – *The Demon-Haunted World*. He was also a renowned physicist and the host of the fantastic Cosmos: A Personal Voyage series, which inspired a whole generation to uncover the mysteries of the cosmos. He was also a dedicated weed smoker – clearly ahead of his time. The essay that you’re about to read is a crystallization of his views about true science, and why you should check the evidence before believing in UFO’s or similar sort of crap.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Tell people the brutal truth they need to hear. Be the one who spells it out for them.
- Give a multitude of examples to prove your point. Giving hard facts helps to establish trust with the readers and show the veracity of your arguments.
- Recommend a good book that will change your reader’s minds – *How We Know What Isn’t So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life*

## **24. Paul Graham – How To Do What You Love**

How To Do What You Love should be read by every college student and young adult. Internet is flooded with a large number of articles and videos that are supposed to tell you what to do with our lives. Most of them are worthless, but this one is different. It's sincere, and there's no hidden agenda behind it. There's so much we take for granted – what we study, where we work, what we do in our free time... Surely we have another two hundred years to figure it out, right? Life's too short to be so naïve. Please, read the essay and let it help you gain fulfillment from your work.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- Ask simple, yet thought provoking questions (especially at the beginning of the paragraph) to engage the reader: “How much are you supposed to like what you do?”
- Let the readers question their basic assumptions: “Prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work not on what you like, but what you'd like to like”.
- If you're writing for a younger audience, you can act as a mentor. It's actually beneficial for younger people to read a few words of advice from a person with experience.

**25. John Jeremiah Sullivan – Mister Lytle**

A young, aspiring writer is about to become a nurse of a fading writer – Mister Lytle (Andrew Nelson Lytle), and there will be trouble. This essay by Sullivan is probably my favorite one from the whole list. The amount of beautiful sentences it contains is just overwhelming. But that's just a part of its charm. It also takes you to the Old South which has an incredible atmosphere. It's grim and tawny but you want to stay there for a while.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- Short, distinct sentences are often the most powerful ones: “He had a deathbed, in other words. He didn't go suddenly”.
- Stay consistent with the mood of the story. When reading Mister Lytle you are immersed in that southern, forsaken, gloomy world, and it's a pleasure.
- Spectacular language that captures it all: “His French was superb, but his accent in English was best—that extinct mid-Southern, land-grant pioneer speech, with its tinges of the abandoned Celtic urban Northeast (“boynded” for burned) and its raw gentility”.
- This essay is just too good. You have to read it.

**26. Joan Didion – On Self Respect**

Normally, with that title you would expect some straightforward advice about how to improve your character and get on with your goddamn life – but not from Joan Didion. From the very beginning, you can feel the depth of her thinking, and the unmistakable style of a true woman who's been hurt. You can learn more from this essay than from whole books about self-

improvement. It reminds me of the scene from True Detective, where Frank Semyon tells Ray Velcoro to “own it” after he realized that he killed the wrong man all these years ago. I guess we all have to “own it”, recognize our mistakes and move forward sometimes.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- Share your moral advice: “Character — the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life — is the source from which self-respect springs”.
- It’s worth exploring the subject further from a different angle. It doesn’t matter how many people already wrote on self-respect or self-reliance – you can still write passionately about it.
- Whatever happens, you must take responsibility for it. Brave the storms of discontent.

**27. Susan Sontag – Notes on Camp**

I’ve never read anything so thorough, and lucid about an artistic current. After reading this essay, you will know what camp is. But not only that – you will learn about so many artists you’ve never heard about. You will follow their traces and go to places where you’ve never been before. You will vastly increase your appreciation for art. It’s interesting, how something written in form of a list could be so amazing. All the listicles we usually see on the web simply cannot compare with it.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- Talking about artistic sensibilities is a tough job. When you read the essay, you will see how much research, thought and raw intellect came into it. But that’s one of the reasons why people still read it today, even though it was written in 1964.
- You can choose an unorthodox way of expression in the medium for which you produce. For example, Notes on Camp are a listicle – one of the most popular content formats on the web. But in the olden days, it was quite uncommon to see it in a print form.
- Just think about what is camp: “And third among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling”.

**28. Ralph Waldo Emerson – Self-Reliance**

That’s the oldest one from the lot. Written in 1841, it still inspires generations of people. It will let you understand what it means to be self-made. It contains some of the most memorable quotes of all time. I don’t know why, but this one especially touched me: “Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design; and posterity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients”. Now isn’t it purely individualistic, American thought? Emerson told me (and he will tell you) to do something amazing with my life. The language it contains is a bit archaic but that just adds to the weight of the argument. You can consider it to be a meeting with a great philosopher who really shaped the ethos of modern United States.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- You can start out with a powerful poem that will set the stage for your work.
- Be free in your creative flow. Do not wait for the approval of others: “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness”.
- Use rhetorical questions to strengthen your argument: “I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word?”

### **29. David Foster Wallace – Consider The Lobster**

When you want simple field notes about a food festival, you needn't send there the formidable David Foster Wallace. He sees right through the hypocrisy and cruelty behind killing hundreds of thousands of innocent lobsters – by boiling them alive. This essay uncovers some of the worst traits of modern American peoples. There are no apologies or hedging one's bets. There's just plain truth that stabs you in the eye like a lobster claw. After reading this essay, you may reconsider the whole animal-eating business.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- When it's important, say it plainly and stagger the reader: “[Lobsters] survive right up until they're boiled. Most of us have been in supermarkets or restaurants that feature tanks of live lobster, from which you can pick out your supper while it watches you point”.
- In your writing, put exact quotes of the people you've been interviewing (including slang and grammatical errors). It makes it more vivid, and interesting.
- You can use humor in serious situations to make your story grotesque.
- Use captions to expound on interesting points of your essay.

### **30. David Foster Wallace – The Nature of the Fun**

The famous novelist and author of the most powerful commencement speech ever done is going to tell you about the joys and sorrows of writing a work of fiction. It's like taking care of a mutant child that constantly oozes smelly liquids. But you love that child and you want others to love it too. It's a very humorous account of what does it mean to be an author. If you ever plan to write a novel, you should definitely read that one. And the story about the Chinese farmer is just priceless.

### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Base your point on a chimerical analogy. In this case, writer's unfinished work is a “hideously damaged infant”.
- Even in expository writing, you may share an interesting story to keep things lively.
- Share your true emotions (even when you think they won't be of interest to anyone). Often, that's exactly what will interest the reader.
- Read the whole essay for marvelous advice on writing fiction.

### **31. Margaret Atwood – Attitude**

This is not an essay per se, but I included it in the list for the sake of variety. It was delivered as a commencement speech at The University of Toronto, and it's about keeping the right attitude. Soon after leaving the university, most graduates have to forget about safety, parties and travel, and start a new life – one filled with a painful routine that will last until they drop. Atwood says that you don't have to accept that. You can choose how you react to everything that happens to you (and you don't have to stay in that dead-end job till the rest of your days).

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- At times, we are all too eager to persuade, but the strongest persuasion is not forceful. It's subtle. It speaks to the heart. It affects you gradually.
- You may be tempted to tell about a subject by firstly stating what it is not, rather than what it is. Try to avoid that.
- Simple advice for writers (and life in general): "When faced with the inevitable, you always have a choice. You may not be able to alter reality, but you can alter your attitude towards it".

### **32. Jo Ann Beard – The Fourth State of Matter**

Read that one as soon as possible. It's one of the most masterful, and impactful essays you'll ever read. In a way, it's like a good horror – a slow build up, and then your jaw drops to the ground. To summarize the story would be to spoil it, so I recommend that you just dig in and devour this essay during one sitting. It's a perfect example of "show, don't tell" writing, where actions of characters are enough to create the right effect. No need for flowery adjectives here.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- The best story you will tell is going to come from your personal experience.
- Use unsolved mysteries that will nag the reader. For example, at the beginning of the essay we learn about the "vanished husband" but there's no explanation. We have to keep reading to get the answer.
- Explain it in simple terms: "You've got your solid, your liquid, your gas, and then your plasma". Why complicate?

### **33. Terence McKenna – Tryptamine Hallucinogens and Consciousness**

To me, Terence McKenna was one of the most interesting thinkers of the twentieth century. He's numerous lectures (now available on YouTube) attracted millions of people who suspect that consciousness holds secrets yet to be unveiled. McKenna consumed psychedelic drugs for most of his life and it shows (in a positive way). Many people consider him a looney, and a hippie, but he was so much more than that. He had the courage to go into the abyss of his own psyche, and come back to tell the tale. He also wrote many books (most famous being Food

Of The Gods), built a huge botanical garden in Hawaii, lived with shamans, and was a connoisseur of all things enigmatic and obscure. Take a look at this essay, and learn more about the explorations of the subconscious mind.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- Become the original thinker, but remember that it may require extraordinary measures: “I call myself an explorer rather than a scientist, because the area that I’m looking at contains insufficient data to support even the dream of being a science”.
- Learn new words every day to make your thoughts lucid.
- Come up with the most outlandish ideas to push the envelope of what’s possible. Don’t take things for granted or become intellectually lazy. Question everything.

**34. Eudora Welty – The Little Store**

By reading this little known essay, you will be transported into the world of the old American South. It’s a remembrance of trips to the little store in a little town. It’s warm, straightforward, and when you read it, you feel like a child once more. There are all these beautiful memories that live inside of us. They lay somewhere deep in our minds, hidden from sight. The work by Eudora Welty is an attempt to uncover some of them and let you get reacquainted with some of the smells and tastes of the past.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- When you’re from South, flaunt it. It’s still the good old English but sometimes it sounds so foreign. I can hear the Southern accent too: “There were almost tangible smells – licorice recently sucked in a child’s cheek, dill-pickle brine that had leaked through a paper sack in a fresh trail across the wooden floor, ammonia-loaded ice that had been hoisted from wet croker sacks and slammed into the icebox with its sweet butter at the door, and perhaps the smell of still-untrapped mice”.
- Yet again, never forget your roots.
- Childhood stories can be the most powerful ones. You can write about how they shaped you.

**35. John McPhee – The Search for Marvin Gardens**

The Search for Marvin Gardens contains many layers of meaning. It’s a story about a Monopoly championship, but also, it’s the author’s search for the lost streets visible on the board of the famous board game. It also presents a historical perspective on the rise and fall of civilizations, and on Atlantic City which once was a lively place, and then, slowly declined, the streets filled with dirt and broken windows.

**Writing tips from the essay:**

- There’s nothing like irony: “A sign- ‘Slow, Children at Play’- has been bent backward by an automobile”.
- Telling the story in apparently unrelated fragments is sometimes better than telling the

whole thing in a logical order.

- Creativity is everything. The best writing may come just from connecting two ideas and mixing them to achieve a great effect. Shush! The muse is whispering.

### **36. Maxine Hong Kingston – No Name Woman**

A dead body at the bottom of the well makes for a beautiful literary device. The first line of Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red* delivers it perfectly: "I am nothing but a corpse now, a body at the bottom of a well". In fact, there's something creepy about the idea of the well. Just think about the "It puts the lotion in the basket" scene from *The Silence of The Lambs*. In the first paragraph of Kingston's essay we learn about a suicide committed by uncommon means of jumping into the well. But this time it's a real story. Who was this woman? Why did she do it? Read the essay.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Mysterious death always gets the attention. The macabre details are like daiquiris on a hot day – you savor them – you don't let them spill.
- One sentence can speak volumes: "But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space".
- It's interesting to write about cultural differences – especially if you have the relevant experience. Something that is totally normal for us is unthinkable for others. Show this different world.
- The subject of sex is never boring.

### **37. Joan Didion – On Keeping A Notebook**

*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is one of the most famous collections of essays of all time. In it, you will find a curious piece called *On Keeping A Notebook*. It's not only a meditation about keeping a journal. It's also Didion's reconciliation with her past self. After reading it, you will seriously reconsider your life's choices and look at your life from a wider perspective.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- When you write things down in your journal, be more specific – unless you want to write a deep essay about it years later.
- Use the beauty of the language to relate to the past: "I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be; one of them, a seventeen-year-old, presents little threat, although it would be of some interest to me to know again what it feels like to sit on a river levee drinking vodka-and-orange-juice and listening to Les Paul and Mary Ford and their echoes sing 'How High the Moon' on the car radio".
- Drop some brand names if you want to feel posh.

### **38. Joan Didion – Goodbye To All That**

This one touched me because I also lived in the New York City for a while. I don't know why, but stories about life in NYC are so often full of charm and this eerie-melancholy-jazz feeling. They are powerful. They go like this: "There was a hard blizzard in the NYC. As the sound of sirens faded, Tony descended into the dark world of hustlers and pimps." That's pulp literature but in context of NYC it always sounds cool. Anyway, this essay is amazing in too many ways. You just have to read it.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Talk about the New York City. They will read it.
- Talk about the human experience: "It did occur to me to call the desk and ask that the air conditioner be turned off, I never called, because I did not know how much to tip whoever might come—was anyone ever so young?"
- Look back at your life and reexamine it. Draw lessons from it.

#### **39. George Orwell – Reflections on Gandhi**

George Orwell could see things as they were. No exaggeration, no romanticism – just facts. He recognized totalitarianism and communism for what they were and shared his worries through books like *1984* and *Animal Farm*. He took the same sober approach when dealing with saints and sages. Today, we regard Gandhi as one of the greatest political leaders of twentieth century – and rightfully so. But did you know that when asked about the Jews during the World War II, Gandhi said that they should commit collective suicide, and that it: "would have aroused the world and the people of Germany to Hitler's violence." He also recommended utter pacifism in 1942, during the Japanese invasion even though he knew it would cost millions of lives. But overall he was a good guy. Read the essay and broaden your perspective on Bapu of the Indian Nation.

#### **Writing tips from the essay:**

- Share a philosophical thought that stops the reader for a moment: "No doubt alcohol, tobacco and so forth are things that a saint must avoid, but sainthood is also a thing that human beings must avoid".
- Be straightforward in your writing – no mannerisms, no attempts to create 'style' and no invocations of the numinous – unless you feel the mystical vibe.

#### **40. George Orwell – Politics and the English Language**

Let Mr. Orwell give you some writing tips. Written in 1946, this essay is still one of the most helpful documents on writing in English. Orwell was probably the first person who exposed the deliberate vagueness of political language. He was very serious about it and I admire his efforts to slay all unclear sentences (including ones written by distinguished professors). But it's good to make it humorous too from time to time. My favorite examples of that would be the immortal Soft Language sketch by George Carlin or Romans Go Home scene from Monty Python's Life of Brian. Overall, it's a great essay filled with examples from all sorts of written materials. It's a must read for any writer.

### Writing tips from the essay:

- Listen to the master: “This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose”. Do something about it.
- This essay is all about writing better, so go to the source if you want the goodies.

## Other Essays You May Find Interesting

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The list that I've prepared is by no means complete. The literary world is full of exciting essays and you'll never know which one is going to change your life. I've found reading essays very rewarding because sometimes, a single one means more than reading a whole book. It's almost like wandering around and peeking into the minds of the greatest writers and thinkers that ever lived. To make this list more comprehensive, below I included twelve more essays you may find interesting.

### **Oliver Sacks – On Libraries**

One of the greatest contributors to the knowledge about the human mind, Oliver Sacks meditates on the value of libraries and his love of books.

### **Noam Chomsky – The Responsibility of Intellectuals**

Chomsky did probably more than anyone else to define the role of intelligentsia in the modern world. There is a war of ideas over there – good and bad – intellectuals are going to be those who ought to be fighting for the former.

### **Sam Harris – The Riddle of The Gun**

Sam Harris, now famous philosopher and neuroscientist, takes on the problem of gun control in United States. His thoughts are clear and free of prejudice. After reading this, you'll appreciate the value of logical discourse over heated, irrational debate that more often than not has real implications on policy.

### **Tim Ferriss – Some Practical Thoughts on Suicide**

This piece was written in the form of a blog post, but it's definitely worth your time. Author of the NYT best seller *The 4-Hour Workweek* shares an emotional story about how he almost killed himself, and what can you do to save yourself or your friends from suicide.

### **Edward Said – Reflections on Exile**

The life of Edward Said was a truly fascinating one. Born in Jerusalem, he lived between Palestine and Egypt, and finally settled down in United States where he completed his most famous work – *Orientalism*. In this essay, he shares his thoughts about what it means to be in exile.

### **Richard Feynman – It's as Simple as One, Two, Three...**

Richard Feynman is clearly one of the most interesting minds of the twentieth century. He was a brilliant physicist, but also an undeniably great communicator of science, an artist and a traveler. By reading this essay, you can observe his thought process when he tries to figure out what affects our perception of time. It's a truly fascinating read.

### **Rabindranath Tagore – The Religion of The Forest**

I like to think about Tagore as of my spiritual Friend. His poems are just marvelous. In many ways, they are similar to some of the Persian verses that praise the love, nature and the unity of all things. By reading this short essay you will learn a lot about Indian philosophy and it's relation to its Western counterpart.

### **Richard Dawkins – Letter To His 10 Year Old Daughter**

Every father should be able to articulate his philosophy of life to his children. With this letter, the famed atheist and defender of reason, Richard Dawkins, does exactly that. It's beautifully written and stresses the importance of looking at evidence when we're trying to make sense of the world.

### **Albert Camus – The Minotaur (or, The Stop In Oran)**

Each person requires a period of solitude – a period when one's able to gather thoughts and make sense of life. There are many places where you may attempt to find quietude. Albert Camus tells about his favorite one.

### **Koty Neelis – 21 Incredible Life Lessons From Anthony Bourdain**

I included it as the last one because it's not really an essay, but I just had to put it somewhere. In this listicle, you'll find 21 most original thoughts of the high-profile cook, writer, and TV host, Anthony Bourdain. Some of them are shocking, others are funny but they're all worth checking out.

### **Lucius Annaeus Seneca – On the Shortness of Life**

It's similar the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam because it praises life. Seneca shares some of his stoic philosophy, and tells you not to waste your time on stupidities. Drink! – for once dead you shall never return.

### **Bertrand Russel – In Praise of Idleness**

This old essay is a must-read for the modern humans. We are so preoccupied with our work, our phones, and all the media input, that we tend to drown in our business. Bertrand Russel tells you to chill out a bit – maybe it will do you some good.

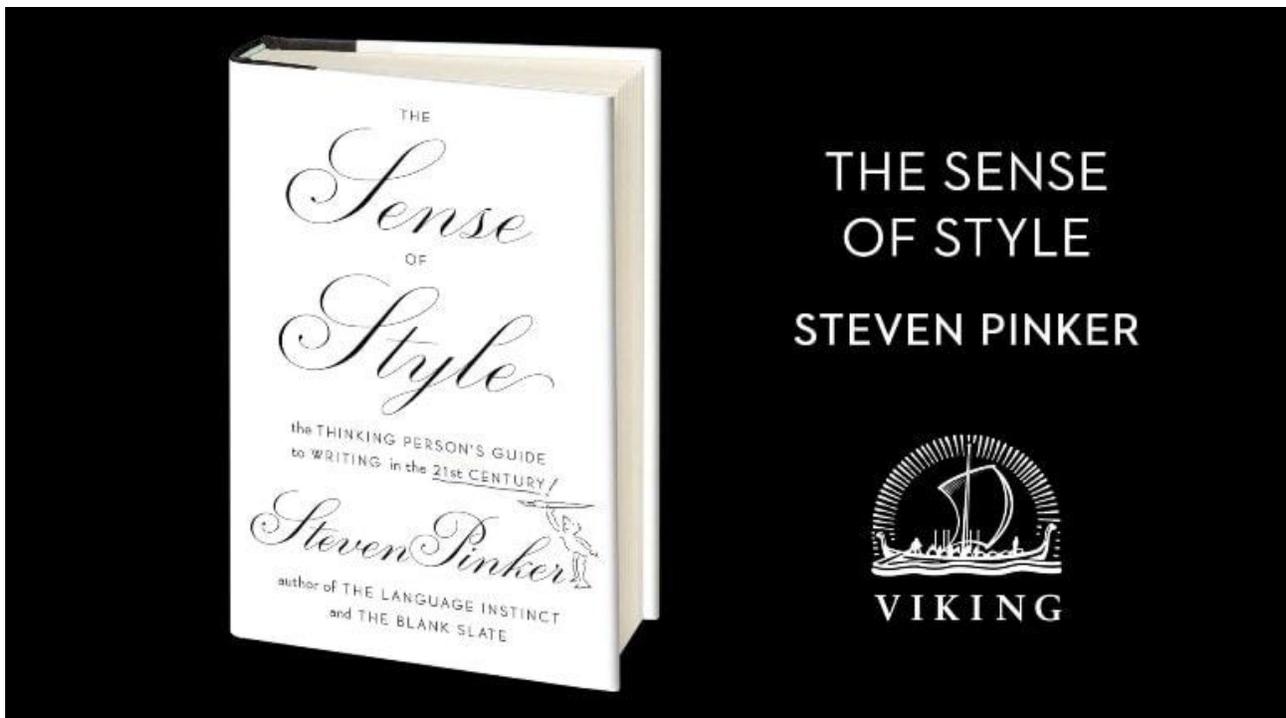
## **Bonus – More writing tips from two great books**

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The mission to improve my writing skills took me further than just going through the essays. I've come across some great books on writing too. I highly recommend you read them in their entirety. They're written really beautifully and contain lots of useful knowledge. Below you'll find random (but useful) notes that I took from *The Sense of Style* and *On Writing*.

### **The Sense of Style – By Steven Pinker**

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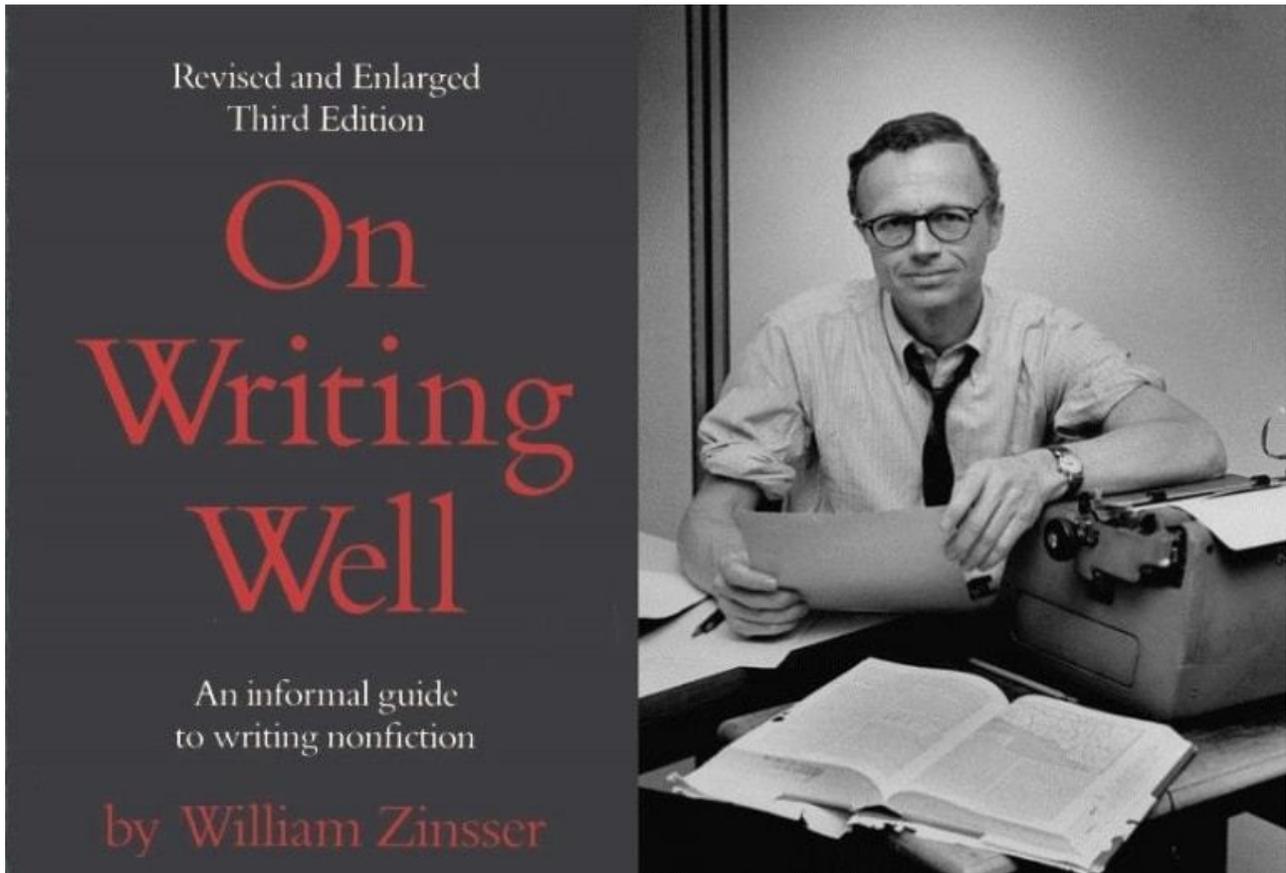


- Style manuals are full of inconsistencies. Following their advice might not be the best idea. They might make your prose boring.
- Grammarians from all eras condemn students for not knowing grammar. But it just evolves. It cannot be rigid.
- “Nothing worth learning can be taught” – Oscar Wilde. It's hard to learn writing from a manual – you have to read, write and analyze.
- Good writing makes you imagine things and feel them for yourself – use word-pictures.
- Don't fear using voluptuous words.
- Phonesthetics – or, how the words sound.

- Use parallel language (consistency of tense).
- Good writing finishes strong.
- Write for someone. Don't write to no one. Try to show people your view of the world.
- Don't tell everything you are going to say in summary (sign posting) – be logical, but be conversational.
- Don't be pompous.
- Don't use quotation marks where they don't "belong". Be confident about your style.
- Don't hedge your claims (research first, and then tell it like it is).
- Avoid clichés and metaconcepts (concepts about concepts). Be more straightforward!
- Not prevention – but prevents or prevented – don't use dead nouns.
- Be more vivid in your language – don't use passive where it's not needed. Direct the reader's gaze to something in the world.
- The curse of knowledge – the reader doesn't know what you know – beware of that.
- Explain technical terms.
- Use examples when you explain a difficult term.
- If you ever say "I think I understand this" it probably means you don't.
- It's better underestimate the lingo of your readers than to overestimate it.
- Functional fixedness – if we know some object (or idea) well, we tend to see it in terms of usage, not just as an object.
- Use concrete language instead of abstraction.
- Show your work to people before you publish (get feedback!).
- Wait for few days and then revise revise revise. Think about clarity and the sound of sentences. Then show it to someone. Then revise one more time. Then publish (if it's to be serious work).
- Look at it from a perspective of other people.
- Omit needless words.
- Put the heaviest words at the end of the sentence.
- It's good to use the passive but only when appropriate.
- Check all text for cohesion. Make sure that the sentences flow gently.
- In expository work, go from general to more specific. But in journalism start from the big news and then give more details.
- Use the paragraph break to give the reader a moment to take a breath.
- Use the verb instead of a noun (make it more active) – not "cancellation", but "canceled". But after you introduced the action, you can refer to it with a noun.
- Avoid too many negations.
- If you write about why something is so, don't spend too much time writing about why it is not.

## On Writing Well – By William Zinsser

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- Writing is a craft. You need to sit down every day and practice your craft.
- You should re-write and polish your prose a lot.
- Throw out all the clutter. Don't keep it because you like it. Aim for readability.
- Look at the best examples of the English literature. There's hardly any needless garbage there.
- Use shorter expressions. Don't add extra words that don't bring any value to your work.
- Don't use pompous language. Use simple language and say plainly what's going on ("due to the fact that" equals "because").
- The media and politics are full of cluttered prose (because it helps them to cover up for the mistakes).
- You can't really add style to your work (and especially, don't add fancy words to create an illusion of style). That will look fake. You need to develop style over time.
- Write in the "I" mode. Write to a friend or just for yourself. Show your personality. There is a person behind the writing.
- Choose your words carefully. Use the dictionary to learn different shades of meaning.
- Remember about the phonology. Make music with words.
- The lead is essential. You have to pull the reader in. Otherwise, your article is dead.
- You don't have to make the final judgement on any topic. Just pick the right angle.
- Do your research. Not just obvious research but a deep one.
- When it's time to stop, stop. And finish strong. Think about the last sentence. Surprise them.
- Use quotations. Ask people. Get them talking.
- If you write about travels, it must be significant to the reader. Don't bother with the

obvious. Choose your words with special care. Avoid travel clichés at all cost. Don't tell that the sand was white and there were rocks in the beach. Look for the right detail.

- If you want to learn about how to write about art, travel, science etc. – read the best examples available. Learn from the masters.
- Concentrate on one big idea (“let's not go peeing down both legs”).
- “The reader has to feel that the writer is feeling good.”
- One very helpful question: “What is the piece really about?” (Not just “what the piece is about?”)

## Now immerse yourself in the world of essays

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By reading the essays from the list above you'll become a better writer, a better reader, but also a better person. Essay is a special form of writing. Very often it is deeply personal and you won't be able to find beautiful thoughts it contains in any other literary form. I hope you enjoy the read and that it will inspire you to do your own writing.



**As I said before, this list is only an attempt to share some of the best essays available online. Do you know any other pieces that could be included in that list? Please share your thoughts in the comment section below.**