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How to Improve Your Writing Without Writing a Word

By Walter Burek

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Many an ad, business letter and TV commercial comes into being slowly, even painfully. Maybe because some of us write as if we were still using an IBM Selectric, wite-out and a badly worn Webster's. For that matter, maybe some still are. And that's OK.

But in these digital days, software and the Internet can help a tech-savvy writer be a better writer and make getting the job done easier. While writing every day is still the best practice for improving your writing skills, there are programs and Web sites available today that can really help your writing along.

Here are 18 digital tools you can use to research, brainstorm, organize, compose, communicate and bring out the better writer in you.

Wordsmithing Grammar and Style

Cliché Finder. You've always been told to "avoid clichés like the plague." But sometimes there's no other way to write or talk your way out of a sticky situation. This site lets you search for just the right cliché, by entries that include a specific word. | www.westegg.com/cliche |

Common Errors in English. This is a useful list of words often misused. Plus an interesting list of usages people keep telling you are wrong but which are actually standard in English. Links to other grammar resources as well.

| www.wsu.edu/%7Ebrians/errors/errors.html |

Dictionary of Difficult Words. Do you aim to become a member of the literati, or do you wish to be a savant? Do you want to avoid being verbigerative and be succinct instead? Search this list of over 13,900 difficult words to increase your vocabulary or just find out what those words really mean. | www.tiscali.co.uk/reference/dictionaries/difficultwords |

fun-with-words.com. Everything you want to know about amusing quirks, peculiarities, and oddities of the English language. Stuff like palindromes, spoonerisms, oxymora, and more. |

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www.fun-with-words.com |

Word Play. A list of links to dictionaries, foreign language translations, word games and wacky sites like The Apostrophe Protection Society, Burma Shave Signs, The Country & Western Song Generator and The Klingon Language Institute. | www.wolinskyweb.com/word.htm |

The Word Spy. This site is devoted to recently coined words and phrases, old words that are being used in new ways, and existing words that have enjoyed a recent renaissance. | www.wordspy.com |

Word Menu. This software version of Random House's printed Word Menu blends all the best features of a dictionary, thesaurus and encyclopedia into one-easy-to-use reference. Words are organized by subject rather than alphabetically. Windows and Mac. Available from www.wordmenu.com.

WordDog Plain English Editor. Add this program to your Microsoft Word app and it will sniff out ambiguous words, verbose phrases, redundancies and overworked phrases. Windows only. Available from www.worddog.com.

Reference

All Experts. If you can't find the info you need in this enormous archive of free Q&A, send your question to an expert of your choice (also free.)
| www.allexperts.com |

Bartleby.com. The perfect site to search for a Shakespeare quote, fact-check a line from a great classic, or look something up in Gray's Anatomy. Unrestricted access to reference, verse, fiction and nonfiction books.
| www.bartleby.com |

How Stuff Works. Want to know how those traveling lawn sprinklers work? Or how to clone a sheep? Or fix a leaky toilet? This is the site with all the answers. Channels for computers, electronics, home, science and more.
| www.howstuffworks.com |

Library Spot. An easy-to-navigate uber-library that provides answers to question with links to innumerable reference sites, including many other libraries.
| www.libraryspot.com |

Refdesk. An outstanding site filled with fact-finding links and connections to hundreds search engines and research sites. | www.refdesk.com |

Visual Thesaurus. A work of art that is also an excellent thesaurus. Synonyms and definitions unfold on your screen in a beautiful ballet. A slow-loading site, but well worth the wait. | www.visualthesaurus.com |

Creativity

CreativityforLife.com. Explore the creative process in your work and in your personal life. Plus links to many other creativity sites.

| www.creativityforlife.com |

Creativity–Portal. An elegant site that promotes creativity in all areas of life but features a page specific to writing. | www.creativity–portal.com |

The Soul Food Cafe. A soothing site that promotes writing and creative pursuits as a daily practice. Full of tips, techniques, references and encouragement for writers of all kinds. | www.dailywriting.net |

Organization

Tinderbox. This software application stores notes, ideas and plans, mapping them in colors and shapes as they're created. It then scans the notes and links and organizes them by patterns and

relationships. It will even gather and update relative info and breaking news from the Internet. Mac only. Available from www.eastgate.com.

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Walter is an professional advertising copywriter who writes, edits and publishes "WORDS@WORK", a FREE bimonthly newsletter of advice and about writing that works. To view his award–winning portfolio and to subscribe, visit <http://www.walterburek.com> You may also subscribe via [mailto: WordsAtWork@comcast.net](mailto:WordsAtWork@comcast.net) .

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Walter Burek is an award–winning copywriter who has been a writer and Creative Director on some of advertising's most important accounts. Walter also writes, edits and publishes Words@Work, a free newsletter for marketing communications professionals.

Improve Your Writing

By Nicole Murphy

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None of us will be brilliant writers the moment we first pick up a pen or hit the keyboard. It's a fact. We're beginners and while some will be beginning with better skills and understandings than others,

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none of us will be the best writer we can be.

Improving your writing is one of the great parts of being a writer. There's no greater feeling than picking up a story you wrote a year ago or even six months ago, picking up all the mistakes you made and realising you don't do it any more. I bet you can go up to any well known writer and ask them what they think of the first thing they published and the response will be something along the lines of: "I'm glad it was published because it got me started but quite frankly, I read it now and I shudder."

It can seem overwhelming, when you consider how good you want to be and how far you need to go to achieve it. A famous quote is that you need to write a million words before you can be a good writer. The follow ideas will help you make steady progress in your writing and achieve that aim of being the best you can be.

1). Practise, practise, practise. Yes, you've heard it all before. Write every day. Or at least regularly. And it's true. Writing is a skill and like all skills, will only improve if you practise. If you're only going to write once a month or will write ferociously for several weeks and then not again for six months, you can't expect your writing muscles to develop. Even if it's only one hundred words a day (and that will only take ten minutes or so), write as often and as regularly as you can.

2). Pick one weakness and work on it. Don't try to improve every aspect of your writing all at once. The first thing I decided to work on was Point Of View (POV). I got books, asked questions in online forums and wrote a lot, focussing my attention simply on POV. I not only got a handle on POV but found the style of POV that best suited my writing.

Once you're feeling confident about that area, pick another one and focus on it. Sometimes, you might only need a week or two to get a handle on an idea. Sometimes, it might take you months before you feel really comfortable with the way your writing looks and sounds.

The great thing is, even though you are focussing on one subject, the amount of writing you do will see small improvements in other areas as well. So you almost kill two birds with one stone.

3). Experiment with your writing. Each month, set yourself a challenge to do something different. May it's to write a story in first person when you normally use third. Maybe it's to try writing your story as a transcription of a tape rather than as an observer of the story. Maybe it's to try and write one hundred words as one sentence.

You will end up with interesting ideas, new areas that you need to look at and perhaps will discover a skill that you didn't know you possessed.

4). Write short shorts. Nothing will test your writing more than trying to tell an entire story, with good characterisation and plot, in five hundred words. You learn the value of words, the importance of right word at the right time. Even if you think you can't possibly do it, try it. It gets you thinking about your writing in a way that writing a novel doesn't, and you can't help but see what your strengths and weaknesses are.

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5). Get involved in critiquing other people's work and having your own critiqued. It is amazing how you can pick up errors in other people's work that you cannot see in your own. You'll learn a great deal from the process. And for your own work, a good idea is to ask for questions about a particular thing. For example: I'm not sure how clear the description is in this piece. Can you clearly see what is going on? Get your critiquers to focus on the skill you are focussing on and then you can receive their comments without being concerned that they are attacking you or your baby.

Take you time to improve your writing. Allow yourself to make mistakes and learn from them. No one's going to come back at you in ten years and say "How can she be on the New York Times Bestsellers List? Look at the crap she wrote in 2003." Except maybe you.

Nicole R Murphy is a writer and copy editor. She can help you develop your writing skills by copyediting and critiquing your work. Try a free trial at www.yourbestwork.com



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