Ten things I learned about writing from Stephen King

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[Stephen King](https://www.theguardian.com/books/stephenking) is an All-Time Great, arguably one of the most popular novelists the world has ever seen. And there’s a good chance that he’s inspired more people to start writing than any other living writer. So, as the Guardian and King’s UK publisher Hodder launch a short story competition – to be judged by the master himself – here are the ten most important lessons to learn from his work.

**1. Write whatever the hell you like**

King might be best known – or, rather, best regarded – as a writer of horror novels, but really, his back catalogue is crammed with every genre you can think of. There are thrillers (Misery, Gerald’s Game), literary novels (Bag Of Bones, Different Seasons), crime procedurals (Mr Mercedes), apocalypse narratives (The Stand), fantasy (Eyes Of The Dragon, The Dark Tower series) … He’s even written what I think of as being one of the greatest Young Adult novels of all time: The Long Walk. Perhaps the only genre or audience he hasn’t really touched so far is comedy, but most of his work features moments that show his deft touch with humour. It’s clear that King does what he wants, when he wants, and his constant readers – the term he calls his, well, constant readers – will follow him wherever he goes.

**2. The scariest thing isn’t necessarily what’s underneath the bed**

Horror is a curious thing. What scares one person won’t necessarily scare another. And while there might be moments in his horror novels that tread towards the more conventional ideas of what some find terrifying, for the most part, the truly scary aspects are those that deal with humanity itself. Ghosts drive people to madness, telekinetic girls destroy whole towns with their powers, clowns … well, clowns are just bloody terrifying full stop. But the true crux of King’s ability to scare is finding the thing that his readers are actually worried about, and bringing that to the fore. If you’re writing horror, don’t just think about what goes bump in the night; think about what that bump might drive people to do afterwards.

**3. Don’t be scared of transparency**

One of my favourite things about King’s short story collections are the little notes about each tale that he puts into the text. The history of them, the context for the idea, how the writing process actually worked. They’re not only invaluable material for aspiring writers – because exactly how many drafts does it take to reach a decent story? King knows! – but they’re also brilliant nuggets of insight into King himself. Some people might think that it’s better off knowing nothing about authors when they read their work, but for King, his heart is on his sleeve. In his latest collection, The Bazaar of Broken Dreams, King gets more in-depth than ever, talking about what inspired the stories in such an honest way that it couldn’t have come from another writer’s pen. Which brings us to …

**4. Write what you know. Sort of. Sometimes**

Write what you know is the most common writing tip you’ll find anywhere. It’s nonsense, really, because if we all did that we’d end up with terribly boring novels about writers staring out of windows waiting for inspiration to hit. (If you like those, incidentally, head straight for the literary fiction section of your nearest bookshop.) But King understands that experience is something which can be channelled into your work, and should be at every opportunity. Aspects of his life – addiction, teaching, his near-fatal car accident, rock and roll, ageing – have cropped up in his work over and over, in ways that aren’t always obvious, but often help to drive the story. That’s something every writer can use, because it’s through these truths that real emotions can be writ large on the page.

**5. Aim big. Or small**

King’s written some mammoth books, and they’re often about mammoth things. The Stand takes readers into an apocalypse, with every stage of it laid out on the page until the final fantastical showdown. It deals with a horror that hits a group of characters twice in their lives, showing us how years and years of experience can change people. And The Dark Tower is a seven (or eight, or more, if you count the short stories set in its world) part series that takes in so many different genres of writing it’s dizzying. When he needs to, King aims really big, and sometimes that’s what you have to do to tell a story. At the other end of the spectrum, some of King’s most enduring stories – Rita Hayworth & Shawshank Redemption, The Mist – have come from his shorter works. He traps small groups of characters in single locations and lets the story play out how it will. The length of the story you’re telling should dictate the size of the book. Doesn’t matter if it’s forty thousand words or two hundred, King doesn’t waste a word.

**6. Write all the time. And write a lot**

King’s published – wait for it – 55 novels, 11 collections of stories, 5 non-fiction works, 7 novellas and 9 assorted other pieces (including illustrated works and comic books). That’s over a period of 41 years. That’s an average of two books a year. Which is, I must admit, a pretty giddying amount. That’s years of reading (or rereading, if you’re as foolishly in awe of him as I am). But he’s barely stopped for breath. This year has seen three books published by him, which makes me feel a little ashamed. Still, at my current rate of writing, I might catch up with him sometime next century. And while not every book has found the same critical and commercial success, they’ve all got their fans.

**7. Voice is just as important as content**

King’s a writer who understands that a story needs to begin before it’s actually told. It begins in the voice of the novel: is it first person, or third? Is it past or present tense? Is it told through multiple narrators, or just the one? He’s a master at understanding exactly why each story is told the way it’s told. Sure, he might dress it up as something simple – the story finding the voice it needs, or vice versa – but through his books you can see that he’s tried pretty much everything, and can see why each voice worked with the story he was telling.

**8. And Form is just as important as voice**

King isn’t really thought of as an experimental novelist, which is grossly unfair. Some of King’s more daring novels have taken on really interesting forms. Be it The Green Mile’s fragmented, serialised narrative; or the dual publication of The Regulators and Desperation – novels which featured the same characters in very different situations, with unsettling parallels between the stories that unfolded for them; or even Carrie’s mixed-media narrative, with sections of the story told as interview or newspaper extract. All of these novels have played with the way they’re presented on the page to find the perfect medium for telling those stories. Really, the lesson here from King is to not be afraid to play.

**9. You don’t have to be yourself**

Some of King’s greatest works in the early years of his career weren’t published by King himself. They were in the name of Richard Bachman, his slightly grislier pseudonym. The Long Walk, Thinner, The Running Man – these are books that dealt with a nastier side of things than King did in his properly attributed work. Because, maybe it’s good to have a voice that allows us to let the real darkness out, with no judgments. (And then maybe, as King eventually did in The Dark Half, it’s good to kill that voice on the page … )

**10. Read On Writing. Now**

This is the most important tip in the list. In 2000, King published On Writing, a book that sits in the halfway space between autobiography and writing manual. It’s full of details about his process, about how he wrote his books, channelled his demons and overcame his challenges. It’s one of the few books about writing that are actually worth their salt, mainly because it understands that it’s about a personal experience, and readers might find that useful. There’s no universal truths when it comes to writing. One person’s process would be a nightmare for somebody else. Some people spend years labouring on nearly perfect first drafts; some people get a first draft written in six weeks, and then spend the next year destroying it and rebuilding it. On Writing tells you how King does it, to help you to find your own. Even if you’re not a fan of his books, it’s invaluable to the in-development writer. Heck, it’s invaluable to all writers.