



## How I Write By John

I have written a lot over the years. I come from a family that has long loved the written word, and writing has always, in one way or another, been a prominent theme in my life. Now, none of that means I have a perfectly comfortable relationship with writing – far from it. But, words do often come easily to me, and I really do enjoy the alchemy of sentence formation. I know this is not everyone’s experience, but it forms the backdrop of my approach to the craft.

I don’t have a single way of writing. It varies according to the situation. But, in that all-important end moment, when I press a “send” button on an e-mail, or seal a letter in an envelope and drop it in a postbox, or submit an essay to a teacher, or a manuscript to a publisher, there is a common feeling. Nervous anticipation. Does it contain what I intended? How will it be received? What if I am misunderstood? Who will be scrutinizing my work? Will they be unkind? Did I say what I meant? Was I authentic? It’s a moment of vulnerability. I enjoy that moment. Some people do not.

I enjoy it because it’s a moment of creation, always powerful. For me, the creation is made real by the act of sharing, so the prospect of others reading my writing, even evaluating it, is exciting to me. I think that informs my writing process in some important way. It must. While I write, I am anticipating this audience, and I begin to imagine their responses, their reactions, their critiques. It acts as a kind of inner filter, the devil on my left shoulder telling me to re-word this, or retract that. Most writing instructors would never advise this. They would advise, instead, something less burdensome, to free myself from inner filters and simply...write. That’s good advice. But it’s not me. My writing process is vigilant. I stop often, I hit the backspace button constantly. I change on the fly. Because I think on the fly. As I wrestle with a sentence, I wrestle with a thought. It’s the making of a thought. I prefer to make it and get it right in the moment. And that requires editing as I go. It means stopping, and starting and a frequent interruption to flow, but I prefer it that way. If I just let it rip with no inner editor, I would be much too aware of my leaving behind the detritus of unfinished business. In my attempt to write one sentence, I would be too distracted by the loose ends of the previous ones. I like to clean up as I go.

Sometimes I jot notes, ideas, and prompts to myself as I start a writing project – the heading structures to my thinking, or the topics I want to cover. This often changes as I go, but it gives me a place to start, something other than a blank page. It’s amazing what a few words on a page can do to inspire further thought. So I often start with that. But I get pretty quickly into the meat of full sentences

and connections. And during that meatier phase, I read, and think, and think and read. Writing needs material and it can't all come from my own thoughts. I need the thoughts of others in that mix.

I write a lot of short sentences. I like the staccato beat of that. And, it mimics more accurately the rat-a-tat-tat of my thought process. This can make elegance a problem sometimes, so I spend a good deal of effort thinking about the pure logic of writing – the connective tissue of punctuation and grammar and prepositions. I'm not strong on the finer points, the mechanics and rules of grammar and punctuation. I go by instinct. And a well-constructed train of thought is governed by the properties of logic – the coherent flow of one idea into the next. This is what I aim for in writing – a kind of breadcrumb trail the reader can follow. This works well with analytical, academic writing, but it can impede a purely artistic process. I struggle with this. The structure of well-connected sentences I build in my writing is like a fortification, blinding the reader from the true messiness of my soul. Maybe it's why I avoid creative writing.

The precision of words is important to me, so I use the dictionary a lot. And a thesaurus. I used the thesaurus in this piece to discover the word “fortification”. It's not a cheat, but a way to hone in on precision. I could scroll through my limited vocabulary to this end, but a thesaurus is much more efficient. I proofread to varying degrees. I am not hung up by any sense of perfectionism and count myself lucky for that. So, my proofreading process is rudimentary. And, since I clean up as I go, it often doesn't require much. I move things around in the interests of logic. Just now, I moved this paragraph from the middle to the end. I like bold, copy/paste moves like that – they satisfy the builder in me. I find line-editing tedious so I throw caution to the winds and submit my writing for the readers quite comfortable knowing that there will be commas out of place here and there. I began this paragraph professing my love of precision and end it with my tolerance for messiness. Humans are full of paradoxes and our writing is idiosyncratic. If I wrote this “How I Write” piece tomorrow, it would, no doubt, be very different. But sometimes we just have to hit “send”.