

# DR. ROY PETER CLARK | THE POYNTER INSTITUTE

## QUICK 50 WRITING TOOLS

Use this quick list of Writing Tools as a handy reference. Share it and add to it. For fresh takes on these ideas and more, visit **Writing Tools: The Blog** at [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org). To purchase a copy of "Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer," visit your favorite book seller.

### I NUTS AND BOLTS

- BEGIN SENTENCES WITH SUBJECTS AND VERBS.** Make meaning early, then let weaker elements branch to the right.
- ORDER WORDS FOR EMPHASIS.** Place strong words at the beginning and at the end.
- ACTIVATE YOUR VERBS.** Strong verbs create action, save words, and reveal the players.
- BE PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE.** Use passive verbs to showcase the "victim" of action.
- WATCH THOSE ADVERBS.** Use them to change the meaning of the verb.
- TAKE IT EASY ON THE -INGS.** Prefer the simple present or past.
- FEAR NOT THE LONG SENTENCE.** Take the reader on a journey of language and meaning.
- ESTABLISH A PATTERN, THEN GIVE IT A TWIST.** Build parallel constructions, but cut across the grain.
- LET PUNCTUATION CONTROL PACE AND SPACE.** Learn the rules, but realize you have more options than you think.
- CUT BIG, THEN SMALL.** Prune the big limbs, then shake out the dead leaves.

### II SPECIAL EFFECTS

- PREFER THE SIMPLE OVER THE TECHNICAL.** Use shorter words, sentences and paragraphs at points of complexity.
- GIVE KEY WORDS THEIR SPACE.** Do not repeat a distinctive word unless you intend a specific effect.
- PLAY WITH WORDS, EVEN IN SERIOUS STORIES.** Choose words the average writer avoids but the average reader understands.
- GET THE NAME OF THE DOG.** Dig for the concrete and specific, details that appeal to the senses.
- PAY ATTENTION TO NAMES.** Interesting names attract the writer — and the reader.
- SEEK ORIGINAL IMAGES.** Reject clichés and first-level creativity.
- RIFF ON THE CREATIVE LANGUAGE OF OTHERS.** Make word lists, free-associate, be surprised by language.
- SET THE PACE WITH SENTENCE LENGTH.** Vary sentences to influence the reader's speed.
- VARY THE LENGTHS OF PARAGRAPHS.** Go short or long — or make a "turn" — to match your intent.
- CHOOSE THE NUMBER OF ELEMENTS WITH A PURPOSE IN MIND.** One, two, three, or four: Each sends a secret message to the reader.
- KNOW WHEN TO BACK OFF AND WHEN TO SHOW OFF.** When the topic is most serious, understate; when least serious, exaggerate.
- CLIMB UP AND DOWN THE LADDER OF ABSTRACTION.** Learn when to show, when to tell, and when to do both.
- TUNE YOUR VOICE.** Read drafts aloud.

### III BLUEPRINTS

- WORK FROM A PLAN.** Index the big parts of your work.
- LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REPORTS AND STORIES.** Use one to render information, the other to render experience.
- USE DIALOGUE AS A FORM OF ACTION.** Dialogue advances narrative; quotes delay it.
- REVEAL TRAITS OF CHARACTER.** Show characteristics through scenes, details and dialogue.
- PUT ODD AND INTERESTING THINGS NEXT TO EACH OTHER.** Help the reader learn from contrast.
- FORESHADOW DRAMATIC EVENTS OR POWERFUL CONCLUSIONS.** Plant important clues early.
- TO GENERATE SUSPENSE, USE INTERNAL CLIFFHANGERS.** To propel readers, make them wait.
- BUILD YOUR WORK AROUND A KEY QUESTION.** Good stories need an engine, a question the action answers for the reader.
- PLACE GOLD COINS ALONG THE PATH.** Reward the reader with high points, especially in the middle.
- REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT.** Purposeful repetition links the parts.
- WRITE FROM DIFFERENT CINEMATIC ANGLES.** Turn your notebook into a "camera."
- REPORT AND WRITE FOR SCENES.** Then align them in a meaningful sequence.
- MIX NARRATIVE MODES.** Combine story forms using the "broken line."
- IN SHORT PIECES OF WRITING, DON'T WASTE A SYLLABLE.** Shape shorter works with wit and polish.
- PREFER ARCHETYPES TO STEREOTYPES.** Use subtle symbols, not crashing cymbals.
- WRITE TOWARD AN ENDING.** Help readers close the circle of meaning.

### IV USEFUL HABITS

- DRAFT A MISSION STATEMENT FOR YOUR WORK.** To sharpen your learning, write about your writing.
- TURN PROCRASTINATION INTO REHEARSAL.** Plan and write it first in your head.
- DO YOUR HOMEWORK WELL IN ADVANCE.** Prepare for the expected — and unexpected.
- READ FOR BOTH FORM AND CONTENT.** Examine the machinery beneath the text.
- SAVE STRING.** For big projects, save scraps others would toss.
- BREAK LONG PROJECTS INTO PARTS.** Then assemble the pieces into something whole.
- TAKE INTEREST IN ALL CRAFTS THAT SUPPORT YOUR WORK.** To do your best, help others do their best.
- RECRUIT YOUR OWN SUPPORT GROUP.** Create a corps of helpers for feedback.
- LIMIT SELF-CRITICISM IN EARLY DRAFTS.** Turn it loose during revision.
- LEARN FROM YOUR CRITICS.** Tolerate even unreasonable criticism.
- OWN THE TOOLS OF YOUR CRAFT.** Build a writing workbench to store your tools.

Dr. Roy Peter Clark is vice president and senior scholar at The Poynter Institute. You can contact him at: [rclark@poynter.org](mailto:rclark@poynter.org).

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The Poynter Institute | A School for Journalists | 801 Third Street South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701  
Phone: (727) 821-9494 | Fax: (727) 821-0583 | [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)