



The Top Five Pieces of Writing Advice

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I HAVE A HUNCH THAT if you ask a hundred writers for their favourite advice and quotations about writing, ninety-three will include Thomas Mann's observation that 'a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.' Not only is it witty and, of course, true, it also allows writers to claim difference from – but not superiority to – the rest of the human race who, mostly, manage to make a living without constantly griping about how hard it all is. Which doesn't change the fact that the writing life *can* be hard, and even the most stoic among us are sometimes given to whining about our day-job, to the extent that the collective noun for writers is now, officially, a 'whinge'.

But when the right words won't come in the right order – or perhaps won't come at all – I'm sure I'm not alone in reaching for one my 'chicken soup' books for advice — a self-help deep dive that usually begins with Lily Tomlin's profoundly cheery reflection: 'We're all in this together. Alone.'

So for any writer currently feeling alone and creatively adrift, let's count down my top five pieces of writing advice, not counting Lily Tomlin or Thomas Mann; they were too humble to give advice, preferring to make us smile while wishing we could come up with something so bloody clever.

At number five, occupying pride of place on my pin-board, is this: 'There is a moment when the criticism feels bigger than the fix required. Relax, the moment will pass.' I can't give credit to whoever said it because I don't know, but I thank them for helping to prevent me from going off the deep



end when reeling from yet another salvo of editorial notes on a TV script or the manuscript for a novel.

At number four, something I've mentioned elsewhere in these podcasts, but is particularly pertinent to the subject of advice: 'Solvitur ambulando' — St Augustine's reminder that it 'is solved by walking'. And even if 'it' isn't solved, at least you had a nice walk.

Number three: the commandment in *Bird by Bird*, Ann Lamott's inspirational and deeply humane book on writing and life; a reminder that perfectionism is the enemy of progress and that we really need to just hammer out what she terms 'the shitty first draft'. I've taken her advice on many occasions, bashing out an embarrassingly poor draft that has at least given me something to improve and eventually polish into something that might conceivably not make me weep hot tears of embarrassment and shame.

At number two: E. L. Doctorow's liberating idea that 'writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.' Whether you're a plotter or a 'pantser', this is sound advice, perhaps a companion to André Gide's poetic exhortation to take risks: 'One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.'

And finally, at number one — again, something I've mentioned elsewhere, but cannot be repeated too often, since it applies not only to writing but to every aspect of life. Number one has to be from the master, Samuel Beckett. All together now... 'Ever Tried. Ever Failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'