



## The Two 'P's: Poetry and Print

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ONE OF THE EARLIEST pieces of advice I received consisted of three simple words, repeated three times: print and read.

I'd hoped for some magic formulae, tricks to crack the code, precious secrets of the trade. But what I heard instead felt rather boring, underwhelming, not exactly clues with which to unlock the 'creative genius' trapped inside. However, those three words spoken by a writer friend have proven to be advice that's served me well over the years.

Often, things on screen look better than they are. The blue-grey light of the screen, its neatness and crisp borders and margins, its shine and compactness — all combine to imbue what you have written with a degree of polish, a certain finality. It appears as if it's finished, done. But a quick print and change of scene often reveal it's far from done. What appeared like a masterfully done scene at night may, in fact, turn out to be a hurried piece of writing. As you go over ink on paper, lazy syntax, rolling sentences, clumsy choice of words — they all scream louder when looked at in print.

I therefore often print what I have written the previous hour, day, or week, transport it from the brightness of the screen to the felt world of paper. I also take the printed thing elsewhere, away from where it was composed. And if I can, I wait for some time before reading it. All these small tricks put distance between the person who wrote it and the one reading it. A necessary degree of separation. To pay attention to language in the



manner of a poet is everything. The contract between words and your eyes is somehow made more intimate as you hear the rhythms of the sentences rolling in front of you. It's perhaps a good idea to resist the temptation of taking the pen to alter, replace, or cross out that word, phrase or sentence you find poor, not doing its job, because a first reading is probably best done without the business of scrawls and crosses. Let it come at you, see what the whole thing is about, get a feel of the body first. You can always wield the scalpel afterwards, at the second or third reading.

### *Poetry*

The purest form, they say, is poetry. While some novelists might argue theirs is the greatest form ever invented, it's poetry where you witness language at its finest. After all, we do reserve special praise for books that affect us with their poetic language and beauty. In our noisy world of instant news and views, with the senses sometimes under assault from an increasingly visual culture, it's poetry I turn to to cleanse my mind, to re-establish the connection with the magic of words. Many years ago, I read some Faiz and Lorca before embarking on a novel, and I remember feeling fresh, somehow full of wonder, as if I was writing a story for the first time. Poetry does that. It's especially true if life's other duties sometimes keep you away from writing. Reading a collection of poems might then be akin to a blood transfusion.

Print and read.