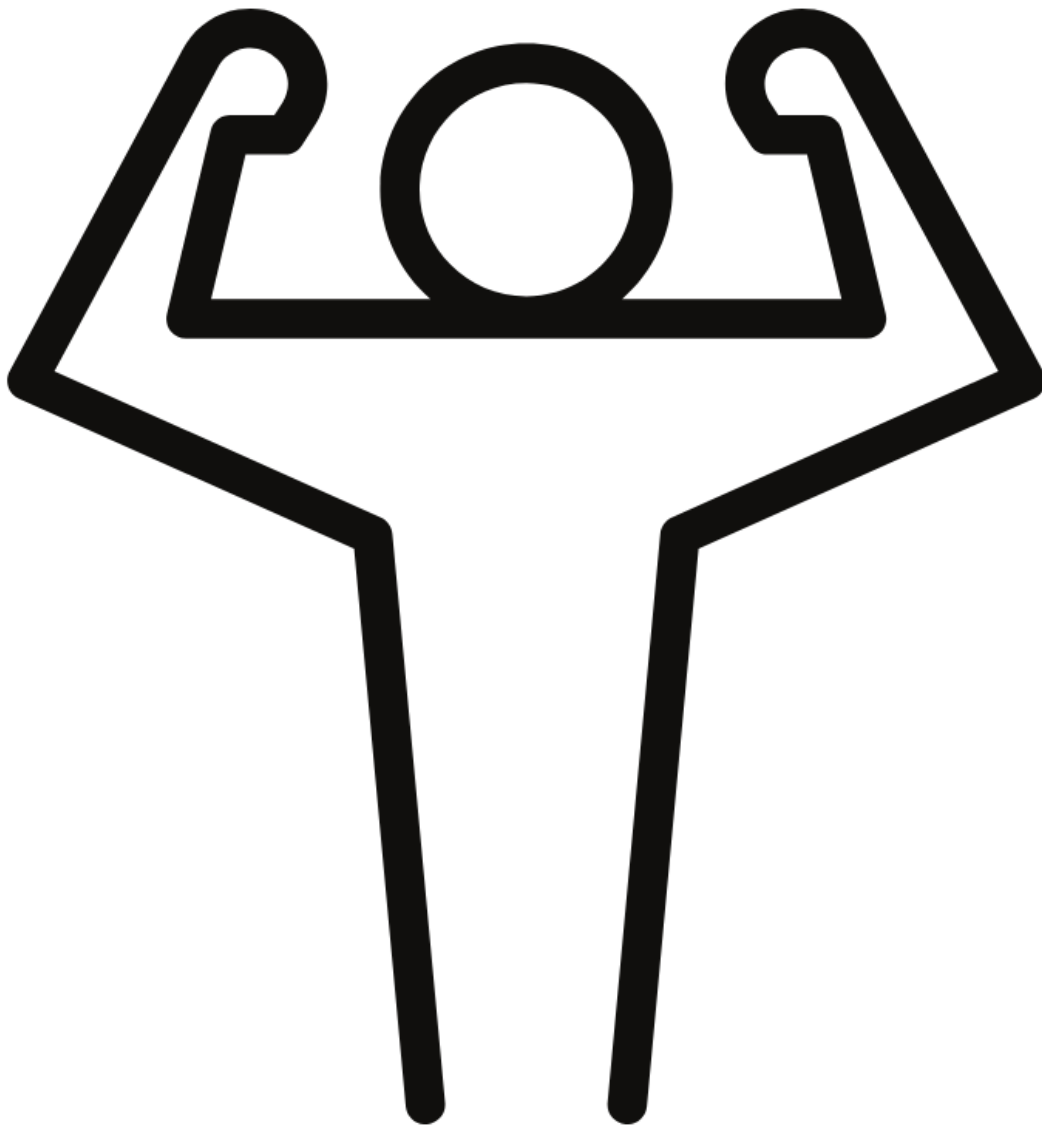




JANICE THOMPSON, AUTHOR

Strengthen Your Writing

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Hi everyone. This is Janice Thompson, full-time freelance author and speaker.

Welcome to this lesson on strengthening your non-fiction writing.

Whether you write articles or books, you need to make sure your writing is the strongest it can be. What would be the point of coming up with a great idea, an incredible hook, terrific symbols, and an awesome layout if you couldn't actually write?

So many writers I know have faced this dilemma: they're the kings and queens of ideas, but they don't really know the craft. There are no shortcuts. You've got to learn how to weave and bind words together in such a way that your reader respects what you have to say. And you've got to turn in a clean manuscript so that your future editor takes you seriously.

So, how do you go from novice to strong writer? Well, how did you learn to ride a bike? How did you learn to drive? How did you learn to do anything you've learned? Just one word: practice.

Practice Makes Perfect

You've heard the phrase since you were a kid, no doubt: practice makes perfect. When I was little I took piano lessons from the lady next door, Mrs. Morgan. I can still remember the seriousness of her approach. Everything, she informed me, depended on my willingness to learn my scales, my fingering, the basic tenets of music. And once I learned a new skill, I had to practice, practice, practice to implement it. What good would it do me to memorize the notes if I didn't know what to do with them?

The same principle rings true here. You must practice your writing skills. Work at it

until you're exhausted. In the beginning, you should be writing at least one hour per day. This will prepare you for the deadlines ahead!

I'm going to give you a list of thirty-three things every non-fiction writer must do in order to succeed. If you miss even one of these things, you will struggle to get your foot in the door. If you do them all on a regular basis, you will be stunned at the development in your writing skills.

33 TIPS FOR STRENGTHENING YOUR WRITING

1. Read! I'm always stunned when I talk to would-be writers who aren't voracious readers. If you're writing non-fiction, you'd better be reading it, and not just for enjoyment. I buy more books from amazon than a person should be allowed by law. Why? Because I'm on a learning curve. I regularly purchase books on the writing craft. Yes, I've published seventy books. Yes, I've been at this awhile. But, I still have a lot to learn, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. So I read. I read what the masters have written. I read what's current and hip. I read instructional materials for writers and speakers. I spend every available moment I can taking in information, comparing it to my own, and then growing myself into the writer I need to be.
2. If you have a great topic but don't think you can do it justice, consider hiring a ghostwriter or finding a reputable co-author. (See our bonus feature for more on this.)
3. Take online courses or sign up for a creative writing class at your local junior college. Attend conferences where you can take classes that will give you relevant information for the type of writing you do. Consider yourself a perpetual learner.
4. Keep it real/relevant: Don't talk down to your reader, but don't highbrow him,

either.

5. Research, research, research. If you're a non-fiction writer, you'd better not commit one word to the page without researching first. Nothing will get you in trouble quicker than a poorly researched piece.
6. Write in the creative flow. Don't edit as you go. There will be a time to come back and edit. This isn't it.
7. Remember to braid and thread your topics, as we discussed in the last lesson. Add those hooks and symbols, then place the text in an order that makes sense to the topic.
8. Re-write, re-write, re-write: Very rarely will an author get it right the first time. Or the second. Or the third. This business is all about the rewrite.
9. Work with critique partners. They are your partners in crime and passion.
10. Once you've finished writing the book, read it aloud. Microsoft Word has a built in feature that will read the text aloud for you, at least my Mac version has this feature. There's something about listening to the cadence of words as a book is being read aloud that clues you in as to what's working and what's not. Reading aloud will help you catch those typos and grammatical problems, too. We don't always see them when we read silently, but we hear them when we read aloud.
11. Check the verb choices. Get rid of was, were, is, etc.
12. Check for sensory elements. Make sure you've tapped into the five senses. If the reader can see it, taste it, smell it, hear it, and touch it (symbolically speaking), you've done your job.
13. Check for run-on sentences. Don't try to cram too much into each sentence. Shorter sentences are the trend in non-fiction. Save your verbosity for that literary novel.
14. Kill off adverbs (-ly words)

15. Check the structure/length of paragraphs: The pacing of the story depends, at least in part, on the length of your paragraphs. In a literary piece, longer paragraphs might work. But in a fast-paced non-fiction piece, shorter, choppy paragraphs work best.
16. Check names for consistency: If she's Sue on page two, she'd better be Sue on page 222.
17. Word count: Have you done a final word count? What is it? Does this meet the editor's specifications?
18. Double-check the "hook" (opening line/paragraph) for effectiveness. Now that the "whole" story is written, is the hook as effective as it needs to be? Does it need to be beefed up?
19. Check the timeline. Is everything in proper order?
20. Eliminate prepositional phrases. Are they overused?
21. Cut the flab. Are there sections that don't show conflict, advance the information properly or prove your point? Perhaps you should cut them.
22. Check for beginning, middle and end. Do your transitions work?
23. Does the story arc/come full-circle? Many people like to bring their non-fiction books full-circle, returning (in some way) to where they began.
24. Check for symbolism. Have metaphors and other symbols been used effectively?
25. Kill off clichés: They bug editors like the plague.
26. Get rid of repetitious words. Do you notice a "pet" word? If so, eliminate to avoid repetition.
27. Check for ebb and flow. Does the writing have a natural "flow" to it? Ups and downs?

28. Check the plotline. Yes, there's a plotline, even in non-fiction! Is the information you presented well plotted with effective climax and tension at about the two-thirds point?
29. Get someone else to read your manuscript. Perhaps you have a writing buddy who would be willing to help.
30. Show, Don't Tell! Long stretches of telling are an indicator of sloppy, passive writing.
31. Spell Check. I'm always shocked when people send manuscripts my way with glaring errors. We don't always catch our typos, but most can be weeded out by running spell check.
32. Grammar Check. Use it, but understand that it's not always accurate or in line with what the editors will want. Refer to the Chicago Manual of Style (which you can find online). I also recommend Kathy Ide's book, "P.U.G.S. – Punctuation, Usage, Grammar & Spelling."
33. Reach a stopping point. Editing could go on forever. There could always be a word in need of tweaking or a phrase in need of striking. But at some point, you must say, "Okay. This is it. The book is done." After all, when the book sells, several editors will go through it again.

RECOMMENDED READING:

On Writing Well By William Zinser

The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr., & E. B. White

The Elements of Grammar by Margaret Shertzer



Better Vocabulary in 30 Minutes a Day by Edie Schwager

EXERCISE: Make several passes through your first three chapters, looking for all of the things mentioned in this lesson. After you've conquered your first three chapters, move on to the next three, and then the next three...until you're done.

That's it for this lesson, friends. If your writing isn't in top-top shape, nothing else matters. So, get busy! You've got a lot of work to do.

By JThompson

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Non-Fiction Lessons

Edit

← Ghostwriters and Co-Authoring

What's In...and What's Out →

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