

# On Writing Well

New writing technique - Reverse Engineering

Writing style of Frances Mayes (author of all-time NY Times best seller *Under the Tuscan Sun*)

James Michener's use of anecdotes

How Robert Ludlum researched his mystery novels

Writing effective ad copy

Writing samples of Hal Giesecking, creative director of the Virginia Hospitality Suite

Author Tom Clancy gave a workshop at the Naval Station in Norfolk, Virginia, to help military people returning from Iraq record their experiences as forms of self-expression and self-healing. He concluded by saying, “You have to play to win. Get a computer and write the book. Writing is hard, miserable, lonely work. But if you do it, and you get lucky, you do OK.” He held up the keys to his Mercedes-Benz to prove the point.

**Let me share with you a small secret** of a technique used by some freelance writers, including myself. Reverse engineering. That term means just what it sounds like. For example, Ford Motor Company is bringing out a new hybrid engine car that runs on battery power and gasoline for maximum

mileage per gallon of gas. If the car is successful, you can be sure that other car manufacturers will buy one or more and use reverse engineering – take the engine apart piece by piece in the reverse order in which it was put there. This allows them to make a blueprint of the engine, step by step in its manufacture, and analyze the various materials used. That company may then try to bring out a similar engine that is different enough from the Ford model in material and design to avoid Ford's patents on the engine.

When I find a book or an article that I believe is particularly well-written, I will take it apart – sometimes literally, with a scissors. Or I will make notes in the margin about what I believe the author was doing. I use these to create an outline of techniques and transitions that I can use in my own writing. This reverse engineering will give me a working plan for my own writing.

The first few words of a novel or article are crisis-time for most writers. It's when that reader decides to keep reading or goes to watching *Everybody Loves Raymond* on TV. You must hook the reader in those first key words. Look at some of the books you've read recently. How did the author hook you into continuing?

What follows is an example of reverse engineering of the first paragraph of *The Murder Room* by P.D. James. On the left is the text. On the right are my notes about how I believe the author achieved the intended effect.

## “THE MURDER ROOM”

<b>TEXT Author’s opening paragraph</b>	<b>ANALYSIS: AUTHOR’S INTENT</b>
<p>On Friday 25 October, exactly one week before the first body was discovered at the Dupayne Museum, Adam Dalgliesh visited the museum for the first time.</p>	<p><i>Great opening line that stops readers.</i></p> <p><i>Attention getting – “first body.”</i></p> <p><i>This foreshadows more murders to come. This first line also introduces the main character, Adam Dalgliesh and the museum setting.</i></p> <p><i>Raises questions that keep the reader reading.</i></p>

## “KENTUCKY MOON”

If I were writing my own mystery novel, I could use P.D. James’ opening as a blueprint for my book – plastering my words on P.D.’s sturdy frame.

Example: First line of a fictional (literally) novel we’ll call *Kentucky Moon*.

<b>TEXT Author’s opening paragraph</b>	<b>ANALYSIS: AUTHOR’S INTENT</b>
Warren Kramer struggled in the cold Louisville night to turn his car key in the frozen lock, not knowing there was a frozen man on the seat inside with something in his pocket that could destroy Warren’s marriage – and even his life.	<i>Opening line introduces main character, place and season. Tips reader off that something is about to happen. Foreshadows “something in the pocket” that means serious trouble. Raises questions that keep the reader reading.</i>

Write your own opening paragraph for your own novel, using the beginning of P.D. James’ book as a model. [Email](#) it to us. We'll print the best "openings" on this page with full credit to its author.

Always remember, your job as a writer is to *keep the reader reading, word by word*. Does that sentence you just wrote (above) do that? Keeping readers interested, sentence by sentence, is a skill that can help you turn some of the most boring documents into readable text that really does communicate ideas.

Reverse engineering can be used to analyze all of the major writing elements of the P.D. James mystery novels. Yet the book that you wrote to an outline of these elements would be completely yours. You can copy any writer's formula, but not of course, the words. That is plagiarism, one of the great sins of writing. As a former editor, I was the victim of writers' plagiarism twice. Without knowing it, I purchased articles that had been published elsewhere. The magazine editors of those publications contacted me almost immediately, and I had to write a note of apology to them and to the readers. And I never worked with either writer again because of my complete loss of trust in them.

The U.S. copyright law protects the words of all writers. For information about how to register your work, go to [www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov).

The courts have generally held that you can quote from the works of other writers as long as you cite the source (writer's name and the publication or book in which it appeared). This is known as "fair comment." The legal rub is that there has never been a clear explanation of how many words you can use without exceeding this "fair comment" rule. You are generally safe if quoting up to 100-150 words.

You can use reverse engineering on any business letter, article, novel or non-fiction book. In fact it's a great way to learn the craft of writing and to develop your own writing style.

**One master of style is Frances Mayes.** She talked recently about the beginning of *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

“During my first summer in Tuscany I bought one of those blank books that everybody who goes to Italy buys – marble color with a blue vellum spine. And I had no idea I was about to write two memoirs. I had written five books of poetry before and had kept running notebooks. They weren’t ever journals.

“I kept finding things that inspired me. So I began to write them down in the blue book that looked as if it should have immortal thoughts in it. I made lists of wild flowers. I tried to describe bird calls, and made sketches of tiles I had seen in Pompeii. I even added local planting advice. ‘Plant sunflower seeds when the moon crosses Libra,’ though I had no idea when that might be.

“So this blue book became the outgrowth of the pleasures in the new life I found there. I took it with me and sat on rocks overlooking the valley. I sat in the café in the morning and had a cappuccino and watched wonder woman dubbed into Italian which is really wonderful. And I kept it by my bed and wrote during storms. It was just a natural kind of companion.

“I think a blank book is a wonderful companion. I have several different kinds of books. One is simply a word book. I collect words and keep them in this book. They are wonderful books to keep because when you are writing and kind of stuck you can open these books and find what has inspired you.

“So writing the first book, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, was easy. So was writing the second book, *Bella Tuscany*, which was really a continuation of the first book.

“That said, there is much more to writing a coherent book than writing down your impressions and attempting to describe the color of rain seeping into the side of a house. I had at some point to face the transformation of my exuberant notes into that dreaded word – a ‘narrative.’ I had never worked with narrative before; my poetry is lyric poetry so I didn’t quite know how to go about creating the structure of the book. I think that structure is the hard part. Once you have the structure, it’s easier. I have always loved the genre of the travel narrative – the quest. And the thing in the travel narrative I have always loved is the inner journey that parallels the outer journey.”

Tracy Kidder is another author whose way of working is worth studying. He does a great deal of research even as he immerses himself in watching and interviewing the workers who people his books. This research adds perspective and historical resonance to his text. In *House* here is how he described the ground breaking ceremony.

“Ground Breaking: On every continent and many islands, people used to undertake elaborate rituals when they undertook to build. Augury assisted choices and planning of sites. In northern Ireland, for example, lamps were placed on stones that marked two corners of an incipient house, and the site was deemed safe to build on if the lamps stayed lit for a few nights.”

**James Mitchener said,** “After I have taken a long journey, I spend almost every afternoon in the library.” That is how he added depth to what he had seen on his trips. *In Return to Paradise*, he casually dropped in some of the anecdotes

“To this remote haven (Tahiti) have wandered men of great genius, and it is their work which has broadcast the mysterious charm of Polynesia.

“The French sent Paul Gauguin and Pierre Loti, who is now commemorated by a florid statue at the pool he made famous in his lush story of Tahiti. The statue is something of a disappointment to the local French. A fiery young novelist arrived some years ago with the cry, “It’s a disgrace! In a French colony! No statue of the immortal Loti!” He took up a subscription, went back to Paris and had the statue made. When it was erected the local patriots received a shock. It didn’t look at all like Loti. It looked exactly like the young novelist.”

I asked Mr. Michener what advice he would give to someone who wants to write a personal travel journal or a travel article. He strongly recommended that the writer take a second or third look at a destination, perhaps only writing a few notes the first visit.

“That first impression is very powerful. But it is not logical reasoning. You have to return a second or third time if you’re going to write something meaningful about the area. Good writers describe the situation as it is and let the reader reach their own conclusions. I think that’s the great experience.”

**Robert Ludlum** is another writer who loved to travel.

When asked how he got so much detail in his thrillers, he proudly pulled out a large scrapbook, bulging with photographs, ticket stubs, ferry schedules and more.

“I take pictures wherever I go,” he said. “They’re not very good pictures, but they bring back things to mind. My younger son says I have the largest collection of bad photographs in the world.”

Ludlum often enlisted his entire family – his wife, sons and daughters-in-law – to gather miscellaneous items. On a trip to Greece, they saved restaurant menus, theater programs and tour brochures, all raw materials for the giant scrapbook that would fill his novels with credible detail.

“To me as a reader I get annoyed when a self-indulgent writer just shows off but doesn’t really tell a story. To me storytelling is first a craft. Then, if you’re lucky, it becomes an art form. But first, it’s got to be a craft. You’ve got to have a beginning, middle and end. And I have sort of applied the theatrical principles to writing, threw the story in the air and wondered what was going to happen.”

Has a club or your boss ever asked you to write a news release?

Richard Janssen, a former top reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and later a Senior Editor at *Business Week*, gave this advice.

“For newspapers your release text should be in the form of an inverted pyramid, with the most important information in the first sentence. The classic *lede* (what reporters call the first paragraph) will have the who, what, where, when and why all right there. You’ve all seen them. John R. Jones (**who**) was injured when his car ran off a rain-slicked pavement (**what and why**) on Route 299 (**where**) about 2:30 p.m. Thursday night (**when**).

“The reason for this: if the rest of the story were chopped off by an editor because of space or time reasons, the reader will still have the essentials. If there’s room, you can round the story off with facts. These stories are designed to be cut from the bottom up.”

Everyone can use a good editor. Sometimes unintentional humor can strike when you least expect it. Janssen cites this mixed metaphor that once appeared in a major newspaper:

“Should the company bite the bullet and cut loose from this white elephant that was an albatross around its neck.”

A local newspaper ran a memorable health column about cholesterol with this headline: **"Facts can damage the heart"**

Memories are great sources and inspiration for what you write. Great French author, Marcel Proust, wrote whole novels by recalling memories associated with a sip of tea or the peal of a church bell in a stone tower.

Here are two personal examples based on my trips to India and Africa, brought back to mind with the memories of a match and a pile of clothes.

I remember walking through the streets of New Delhi toward the Red Fort, the massive structure built by the Moguls in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. I had read of the small room inside the fort that was in total darkness. A man crouching at the entrance offered (for a coin) a long match. You entered the room holding the match in front of you. Suddenly its light was reflected in thousands of tiles that lined the room, and I was surrounded by thousands of glowing matches. The inscription on the wall was translated by the man at the door as, “If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.”

It was an incredible experience, but the feeling didn't last. As I was walking back to the hotel, I was joined by several young boys who asked for money. Soon the several grew to ten or more. Then more than thirty. I had been warned at the hotel not to give coins to anyone on the street, particularly

to those in a crowd. Once you ran out of coins, you could be mobbed and injured.

I remember a young African boy in Senegal who took my hand and led me into his home, a one-room hut. He showed me his few possessions. His “closet” was a communal pile of shirts, pants and sandals on a dirt floor. I’m not saying that personal possessions would have made him (or anybody) any happier. But I was saddened to know that the “system” had foretold his life, and that he would probably have years of hardship, disease and poverty.

You can also use personal memories to make advertising copy that you write come to life. In New York I worked as a copywriter and copy supervisor at Ogilvy & Mather, Inc. in the shadow of David Ogilvy, one of the great ad men of all time. Shortly after I began working for the agency, he returned the script of a TV commercial I had written. It was covered with green ink notes (his trademark, along with his initial’s “D.O.”) He hated the commercial and those green marks shouted at me – “words don’t match the pictures” – “no big idea here” – “cliché,” etc. I was so in awe of him and so impressed that he had taken so much time with what I had written that I kept the green monster at my desk for almost the eight years I stayed with the agency.

One of the accounts I served as a writer was the United States Travel Service, a (now defunct) government agency charged with attracting more foreign travelers to America.

My colleague, Murray Goodwin, came up with what I have always thought was a great theme (now widely imitated by other tourist destinations).

**“Only in America”**

I was privileged to write some of the early ads for this new ad series. Research had shown that the Germans and French were very interested in the American West, and many travelers loved cowboy and Indian stories. O&M's firm policy, mandated by "D.O.", was that you should use hard facts, not fluff, in writing an ad. He said, "Write as if you were answering a question asked by someone sitting next to you at a dinner party."

Here is part of the text I wrote for an advertisement that would run in Europe. It featured a large photograph of people in cowboy hats (obviously tourists) gathered around a roaring campfire as one cowboy poured cups of steaming coffee for the group and another played a guitar.

In my mind's eye I sat down at that campfire and wrote:

### **Only in America**

*Western dude ranches, Colorado's ghost towns, Utah's "city of castles." Come this year. Airfares have never been lower.\**

"Go West!" Millions have responded to that early American cry – at first by horseback and covered wagon, and now by modern jets. The Great American West begins at the Mississippi River and ends thousands of square miles later in the surf of the Pacific Ocean. It has spawned legends that have become part of American folklore. Cowboys, Indians, Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid. This year come see the wonders of the West – only in America.

Crow and Shoshone Indian hunted buffalo on Western plains where vacationers now breakfast on flapjacks, beer biscuits and scalding black coffee. After this chuck wagon feast, dude ranch guests can trailride to an Indian reservation. Or maybe watch a cowboy wrestle a quarter-ton steer to the

ground. You can stay at a ranch for about £2.80\* per day, including a comfortable room. Food is extra. If you want real luxuries (such as heated swimming pools, try one of our fancy dude ranches. From £8 to £22\* per day.

· Early 1980s' prices (in foreign currency). Those were the days!

Always remember that you as a writer are the final judge of your words. An important skill is knowing what advice to accept and which to reject.

Benjamin Franklin told this story to Thomas Jefferson:

When I was a journeyman printer, one of my companions, an apprentice hatter, having served out his time, was about to open shop for himself. His first concern was to have a handsome sign-board, with a proper inscription. He composed it in these words.

**John Thompson, Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money.**

A drawing of a hat was joined to these words. He thought he would submit it (the new sign) to his friends for their amendments.

The first he showed it to thought the word "Hatter" tautologous because it was followed by the words "makes hats," which show he was a hatter. It was struck out.

The next observed that the word "makes" might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. If good to their mind, they would buy, by whomsoever made. He struck it out. A third said he thought the words "for ready money" were useless as it was not the custom of

the place to sell on credit. Everyone who purchased expected to pay. (So) the inscription now stood, “John Thomson sells hats.”

“Sells hats,” says his next best friend! “Why nobody will expect you to give them away, what then is the use of that word?” It was stricken out, and “hats” followed it (as a hat was painted on the board). So the inscription was reduced ultimately to

**John Thompson**

**(and a picture of a hat)**

Ben’s story to Thomas Jefferson may have been very timely, ultimately arming Jefferson to ward off numerous critics and would-be editors of the document he was writing.

*The Declaration of Independence.*

## Reinventing yourself as a better writer

### Think about:

Do you write out of necessity (letters and business memos) or from a genuine desire to express another side of yourself? You don't have to be a Shakespeare or a William F. Buckley with a complete mastery of words and vocabulary. Some of the world's most powerful communications are simple words.

"I love you."

"I am sorry."

"On December 7, 1941 – a date that will live in infamy . . ."

Write what you *feel*.

### Take action:

Get out your address book and write a letter to a friend you have not communicated with recently. Tell your friend about what has been happening in your life. *Don't email it.* That is becoming the most spam-filled impersonal way to communicate with other human beings. Use the U.S. postal service. You've made two people's lives a little richer. Your friend's and your own.

### Words to consider:

"What is conceived clearly is expressed clearly, and the words to say it will arrive with ease."

Nicolas Boileau

"The ideal view for daily writing, hour on hour, is the blank brick wall of a cold storage warehouse. Failing this, a stretch of sky will do, cloudless if possible."

Edna Ferber