

Commentary on the slides below:

Slide 1. My Author Brand

2. This talk should not be the end of your journey to improve your craft, but is hopefully enough to fire your imagination and keep growing. It's based on my year as a judge for the Edgars, where I had about 160 books assigned to me. I couldn't possibly read them all, so what follows are the top reasons I put a book down after 25 pages. Following these rules won't win you an Edgar, but it might keep the reader going past chapter one.

3. This talk was developed as part of the pedagogy training I received during my Master's in Creative Writing at Napier University in Edinburgh. I had to develop a class in creative writing, so I blended my tips on writing with how the brain acquires new skills. I can provide information, hopefully in a way that makes you think and analyze it. That process changes it from information into knowledge, but it can only become a skill if you consistently apply it. I recommend you write whatever rule you feel you need to work on and post it beside you as you write. After 2-3 weeks, it should be hardwired into your writing process, and you can post a new rule/technique. I mention diving, as I had to study the physiology of diving before I was allowed to strap on a tank and go underwater. I understood the theory, but only through practice did I learn how it applied to me. (Hint, I rarely went below sixty feet, as the time down starts to get a lot shorter, and the light's not that good, anyway.)

4. Processing information and turning it into usable knowledge requires the brain to be properly rested, so you can focus on the subject, then get good sleep that night so your brain can work on it further. Poor sleep prevents efficient growth of new synapses in the brain, which is how the brain acquires new knowledge. Part of that process requires you to NOT think about the new information so that the other parts of the brain can make associations which will aid recall later on. Charles Dickens was a prodigious walker when working on a story. I swim. Talking about it with classmates also helps as you gain insight into their perspective and broaden your understanding of the topic. Women have a biological advantage over men in this regard. The corpus callosum is a bundle of nerves that allows the two hemispheres of the brain to communicate, and it's 18% thicker in women.

5. One of the ways you can make yourself a more active listener is to assign yourself tasks for the presentation. Professors at Stanford have their students write the numbers 3, 2, and 1 before they begin a lecture. At the end, the student should be able to list three things they learned, two things they found interesting, and one question they still have. Try it next time you're in class, and you'll be surprised by how much more you retain.

6. BEST CURRVE. My mnemonic for self-editing. Since I was in Scotland, I felt the double R appropriate.

They stand for: Boring, Efficient Word Use, Senses, Telling, Confusing, Unbelievable, Repetition, Reveal, and Ending. Let's dive down now, shall we? I promise not to go too deep.

7. Boring. There is no change at the end of the scene. This often happens when the writer commits the deadly sin of "info dump." Yes, I need to understand your wizard can't levitate on Thursdays, but you need to incorporate that into the story in another way. Don't create a whole scene without any tension just to tell me the rules of the road. Also a problem with the use of passive voice. The castle was taken by the Moors vs. the Moors took the castle. Passive voice is the language of lawyers and bureaucrats, people who make it a profession to avoid responsibility. You're the God/Goddess of your world. Own it. Use active voice and assign blame as appropriate. ;)

8. Efficient Word Use. See the example on the slide. Hemingway learned to be so terse because he began as a war correspondent, sending his reports via telegram. He had to pay for every word. Make every word pull its weight. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was a French pilot and author of the beloved fable, *The Little Prince*. I had the recent pleasure of reading his memoir, *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. It's possibly the most lyrical prose I've ever

read, and I can only imagine how beautiful it must be in French. In it, he says that "Perfection is not achieved when nothing more can be added, but when nothing more can be removed." Also, adverbs. Stephen King says the road to Hell is paved with adverbs. Whenever you use a "ly" word, look at that as an opportunity for improvement (see examples.) Very: Mark Twain once said to always use "damn" instead of "very," to make sure the editor took it out.

9. Senses. Writers tend to rely too much on sight. Yes, it's our major way of sampling our environment, but how dreary our world would be without the others. And how dreary the world we create without them. Note in my example how I use three senses in one sentence. Smell, in particular, is a powerful sense we tend to neglect. The other four are processed in the cerebral cortex, where the brain assigns values to them. Smell goes via the olfactory nerve to the Amygdala, the reptilian brain, and the seat of powerful emotions and memories. Why do they tell you to bake bread just before a potential homebuyer visits you? The smell will evoke memories of their childhood homes and make your house feel welcoming.

10. Telling. You've heard this many times before. Our brain is highly evolved to read social cues. Incorporate those cues into your character descriptions and trust your reader to interpret them. By involving them in analyzing the scene, they become an active participant.

11. Confusing. Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is a short, cheap book on how to write clearly. It should be on every writer's desk and re-read once a year. It advises the writer to think of themselves as a guide, leading the reader through a swamp full of treacherous bogs and quicksand. Leave them a clearly marked trail. If they have to re-read something 2-3 times, they might feel the work isn't worth it and put your book down, never to be lifted again.

12. Unbelievable: Don't give your characters skills or information inappropriate to their time, size, age, or training/experience. It brings your reader out of the story and reminds them they're reading fiction. Suspension of disbelief is a contract between the writer and the reader. Don't abuse it.

13. Repetition. See the examples. I have three words I tend to overuse: "Just," "that," and "now." I do a word search after a final polish to make sure they don't bunch together.

14. Reveal. This goes back to information dumping. The picture of Darth Vader recalls perhaps one of the most powerful reveals in movie history. Done right, a reveal changes everything that happens going forward, but also makes the reader go back and see what came before in a new light. During my stint as a judge, I had one book I nearly threw across the room. A bomb is discovered in a large office building. The bomb squad appears. The timer is counting down. Cue a female bomb technician. OK, I'm in the scene. What happens next? Cue a one-and-a-half-page backstory on the bomb tech, how she was an army veteran with PTSD from her experience in Afghanistan. By the time we're back to her examining the bomb, I don't care what happens. The writer had lost me entirely. Good stuff to know, but it should have been integrated into her preparation to respond, or it should have been addressed afterward, so I appreciated how stressful her life was and how this bomb was a continuation of her daily struggle.

15. Vary. By this, I mean to vary the length of your sentences; otherwise, it becomes a chant. I think the most powerful sentence in the Bible is also the shortest. "Jesus wept." Having a series of longer sentences followed by a short one can make the short one more effective.

16. Ending: (Notice how I cleverly left this for the end? Pause for applause.)

In general, the last word in the sentence should be the most powerful. See the example, how "blade" at the end powerfully alters the entire sentence before. (Like a mini-reveal.) In the same way, the last sentence in a paragraph should be the most powerful, and the last paragraph in a chapter. That's how you keep the reader turning pages and ordering your next book.

17. Questions: Now it's time to use the three tools I gave you at the start and see how much you retained.

18. Writing Exercises. These are meant to sharpen your powers of description, and the first one is to improve your use of other senses. The first one will also deepen your understanding of the world you place your characters in.

19. Drum Story. I'm part Cherokee and once attended a drumming workshop. After failing three tries to mimic the elder who taught the class, he asked me what kind of dancing I do. "I don't dance," I said. He gently took the drum away and said, "The drum is not for the drummer. It's for the dancer. If you don't dance, you don't know what the dancer needs." In the same way, if you want to be a writer, you must be a reader. You must never forget the feeling of losing yourself in a world created by a master storyteller. That will remind you of what you're trying to achieve and why you do it.

20. Enterprise. Thus hangs by my desk. It reminds me to boldly go whenever I write, because I don't have time to be timid, and no one reads timid writers.

21. Shameless plug. Look for my newest novel, *Maiden Voyage*, released on November 18. An art heist aboard the *Titanic* by three female thieves. What could go wrong?