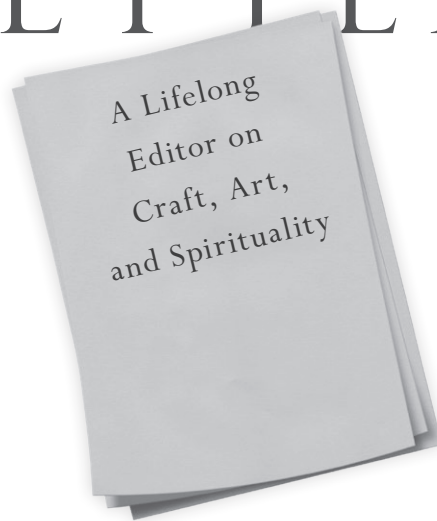


INSTRUCTOR RESOURCE

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WRITE BETTER



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QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS AND OTHERS

CHAPTER 1. FINDING AN OPENING

1. Find an article, blog, or chapter with a weak or average opening. Read through it and try to find something in the middle of the piece that could be stronger. Then rewrite the opening using that instead. (*Hint:* Don't look in established magazines, popular websites, or bestselling books. These often have good openings. Instead, look in more obscure places.)
2. The chapter mentions thesis openings, particular-to-general openings, humorous openings, dramatic openings, intriguing openings, understated openings, anti-openings, and long, poetic openings. But that's not an exhaustive list. Browse through popular magazines, books, and websites to find one or more examples of types of openings not mentioned in chapter one.
3. Pull out something you've written previously. Could it be improved by throwing away the first few paragraphs? Where would be a better place to start? Rewrite as needed.
4. Find a few favorite opening lines of books or articles and explain why they work.
5. Write three openings for your next piece and test them with readers to see which they think is best.

CHAPTER 2. KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

1. Pick three articles, each from a different online or print magazine. Read each one. In a sentence for each, describe the audience as specifically as you can.
2. Look again at the three articles you selected. In each one, how did the author clearly keep his or her focus on a well-defined audience, or what made it difficult to clearly identify who the author was writing for?

3. Summarize what chapter two says about the ways writers should and should not be concerned about their audience.
4. Name three things you are interested in, really enjoy, or are passionate about. Be as specific as possible—for example, not “music” but a particular song, not “history” but a particular person or year, not “food” but a particular dish, not “the environment” but a particular lake, not “sports” but a particular baseball game.

Think of an individual you would like to talk to about this topic, someone to whom you’d like to explain what it is and why you are so interested. It can be a different person for each one.

CHAPTER 3. GIVING STRUCTURE

1. Look at the list of three subjects you are interested in from exercise 4 for chapter two. Pick one.
2. Find out more about the topic you selected by:
 - Writing your first thoughts about the topic. (Don’t worry about these being polished or organized. They can be random and incomplete.)
 - Reading articles online or in print about the topic, noting in a file the most interesting anecdotes, facts, influences, implications, and opinions (putting direct quotations in quotation marks and keeping clear notes on bibliographic information—author, article title, date, URL, etc.—for the notes you take).
 - Looking at the general background of the topic, how it fits in its larger context culturally, socially, geographically, and historically, or how it is different from or similar to others in its category.
 - Talking to people who have firsthand experience or expertise with the topic and taking notes on what they say.
 - Noting your own responses and reactions to what you are finding.
 - Listing questions that come up that you’d like to have answered and where you think you could look to find those answers.
3. Once you’ve gathered your material in point 2 above, try organizing the material into two or three different outlines. Which do you think might be best and why?
4. Look at the list of possible structures listed in chapter three. Explain what kind of structure *Write Better* uses.

CHAPTER 4. THE CHARACTER OF PERSUASION

1. Why does persuasion have such a bad name?
2. Select three specific examples of persuasion—an advertisement, a newspaper editorial, a sermon, a political speech, etc. Evaluate each by answering the following questions:
 - What is the goal of each piece?
 - What weaknesses do you see in the argument that were not addressed?
 - How does or doesn't what is advocated enhance the common good?
 - How might the proposal injure certain groups of people or individuals, or how might they object?
3. Watch the movie *The Big Kahuna*. Pick two of the questions below and write 250-word answers for each.
 - Why was (or wasn't) Bob being manipulative with Mr. Fuller when he talked about Jesus?
 - Are all attempts at persuasion mere salesmanship? Why? If so, is that a bad thing?
 - If in conversation you intentionally bring up a topic you care about, are you automatically being unnatural and insincere? Why or why not?
 - Is it wrong to steer conversations? Explain.
 - Was Phil right that trying to persuade people of something makes you or them less human? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 5. THE CRAFT OF PERSUASION

1. Pick out three more examples of persuasion (in addition to the ones selected for the exercises for chapter four) such as advertisements, newspaper editorials, sermons, political speeches, etc. On a scale of one to ten, rate each one on the following criteria and offer a one-sentence comment on why you gave each rating. (Note that for simplicity and repetition, the best scores will be 5 or 6 rather than 10.)

Simplicity

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
VERY COMPLICATED			JUST RIGHT SIMPLICITY				OVERSIMPLIFIED		

Comment:

CHAPTER 7. CRACKING OUR WRITER'S BLOCK

1. For a week, using a small notebook or a notetaking app on your phone, write down every idea that comes to mind, good or bad. These ideas could happen while you are walking to class, watching a video, playing a game, eating a meal, talking with friends, working on the job, or brushing your teeth. Write down each one, no matter how trivial it may seem, whether or not it is something you might write about later.
2. Pick out a book by Shakespeare or Steinbeck, Austen or Achebe, or any other favorite. Find a passage and copy several paragraphs by hand (handwriting is better, but typing would be okay).
3. Here are the *Balderdash* words mentioned in chapter seven that you can try out on your own. Don't take more than one minute to come up with a phony definition for each:
 - padashan
 - icekhana
 - swallet
4. Get a copy of the box game *Balderdash*, and play it with some friends.

**CHAPTER 8. THE NUTS, BOLTS, HAMMERS,
AND SAWS OF GOOD REWRITING**

1. Revise or rewrite each of the following sample paragraphs.¹ As you do, keep in mind the six guidelines from Orwell and the additional five tips mentioned in chapter eight.
 - There is a simple truth that is so easily lost in the press of work on the job that one rarely hears business leaders or managers even ask the question about what value relationships might have in the context of discerning major decisions.
 - Perhaps you have several interactions with individuals that seem as good as gold when you are one to one with each other. But then you show up in a different setting together—a classroom, a committee meeting, a family gathering—and things are somehow different. An individual who expressed real wisdom privately is suddenly reticent to share openly. Someone who is normally gentle as a dove exhibits a hard, defensive edge. Relationships which, in other settings, are characterized by trust become tense or give way to maneuvering and posturing that speaks of a subtle distrust.

- Napoleon and Wellington were like two peas in a pod. There is a reason everyone links them together because they had a famous battle with each other at Waterloo in 1815. Other interesting things seem to connect them to each other too. Both of them were born in the same year, that being 1769. Both of them had prominent, important fathers who died when Napoleon and Wellington were in their early adolescence. Both of them had the same number of brothers and sisters—each had four brothers and three sisters. Both of them spoke French as their second language. Both of them taught themselves military tactics and strategies, having no prior formal military training before becoming officers. Both of them were at the head of their nations. Napoleon was emperor of France before Waterloo, and Wellington was prime minister of Britain afterward from 1828–30. They even shared two of the same mistresses. Wellington picked them up after Napoleon’s defeat. One of Wellington’s brothers even married the sister-in-law of the ex-wife of one of Napoleon’s brothers.

CHAPTER 9. WE REMEMBER ENDINGS FIRST

1. Go to the library and pull out collections of best essays such as the annual volumes of *The Best American Essays*, *The Best American Sports Writing*, and *The Best American Travel Writing*. Flip through them and find one or two essays that have particularly strong endings. Copy the endings and then explain why they are so good.
2. Find an essay or assignment you wrote recently, perhaps for another class or for a blog. Reread it to see if you can find a better ending somewhere in the middle of the piece. Then rewrite it with your new ending.

CHAPTER 10. TITLES THAT WORK

1. Why are titles important?
2. What does the author say are the key components of a strong book or article title?
3. Look at a bestseller list for nonfiction or how-to books.
 - How many titles consist entirely of a metaphor with no content?
 - How many titles have only one, two, or three words?
 - Look at the list of six elements that often characterize great ideas and titles:

- Simple
- Concrete
- Emotional
- Unexpected
- Credible
- Stories

Now, for the first ten books in the bestseller list you chose above, list which of the six criteria are reflected in each title.

- Which are the weakest titles in the whole list and why?
- Take the weakest titles and brainstorm a half dozen alternatives for each.

CHAPTER 11. CREATIVITY, THE MYSTERIOUS MUSE

1. Convergent thinking means seeing links between objects or ideas that aren't ordinarily combined. As the chapter notes, for example, the words *cottage*, *Swiss*, and *cake* are all linked by the word *cheese*. What word links each of the following? (Answers are found at the end of this appendix.)
 - rock, soul, folk
 - grade, high, medical
 - white, gingerbread, doll
 - news, wrapping, tissue
 - sound, color, gender
2. Divergent thinking means starting with one object or idea and going in many possible directions. List as many uses as you can with for each object listed. You get sixty seconds for each.
 - coffee cup
 - baseball
 - pencil
 - paper clip
 - chair
 - toothbrush
3. What kind of reading do you do most on your own time? If fiction, for example, what particular type—literary, sci-fi, mysteries, young adult, graphic novels, romances? Pick a popular book in a genre you don't usually read and read it this week.
4. As the chapter says, physical exercise can actually help our ability to think and be creative. What do you do for exercise? If you don't exercise

regularly, do something physical every day this week—walk or run a couple miles, play tennis, ride a bike for thirty minutes, play basketball for an hour, or the like.

5. Go to a website with writing exercises, such as writingexercises.co.uk/index.php, authority.pub/creative-writing-exercises, or writetodone.com/10-best-creative-writing-exercises. Pick two exercises and do them.

CHAPTER 12. BREAKING THE RULES

1. How do you respond when the author suggests that there are no rules in grammar?
2. According to the author, when are good times to break the rules of grammar and when are bad times? How do you know the difference?
3. Print out a copy of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. Circle every time he begins a sentence with a conjunction.

CHAPTER 13. THE KEY TO POWERFUL PROSE—TONE

1. Lemony Snicket opens his book *The Bad Beginning* this way:

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming, and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features, but they were extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery, and despair. I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes.

- What's the tone of this opening?
 - What specific things does Snicket do in his writing to achieve the tone?
 - What's the message?
 - How does the tone contribute to and make the message stronger?
2. Here is the opening of Judy Ruiz's "Oranges and Sweet Sister Boy," in *The Best American Essays 1989*, ed. Geoffrey Wolff (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1989).

I am sleeping, hard, when the telephone rings. It's my brother, and he's calling to say that he is now my sister. I feel something fry a little, deep behind my eyes. Knowing how sometimes dreams get mixed up with not-dreams, I decide to do a reality test at once. "Let me get a cigarette," I say, knowing that if I reach for a Marlboro and it turns into a trombone or a snake or anything else on the way to my lips that I'm still out in the large world of dreams.

The cigarette stays a cigarette. I light it. I ask my brother to run that stuff by me again.

- What's the tone of this opening?
- What specific things does Ruiz do in her writing to achieve the tone?
- What's the message?
- How does the tone contribute to and make the message stronger?

3. Douglas Adams begins *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* like this:

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun.

Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-eight million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

- What's the tone of this opening?
- What specific things does Adams do in his writing to achieve the tone?
- What's the message?
- How does the tone contribute to and make the message stronger?

CHAPTER 14. FOR THE LOVE OF METAPHOR

1. Why does the author say nonfiction writers should use metaphors?
2. How, if at all, do you think metaphors work similarly or differently in nonfiction than in fiction?
3. Look in books, magazines, or online to find two examples of nonfiction writers using long- and short-form metaphors. How well do the metaphors work and why?

4. Here are some clichés. Rewrite or edit five of them to give each a fresh twist.
- All hands on deck.
 - An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
 - I'd do that at the drop of a hat.
 - He's a babe in the woods.
 - She's going bananas.
 - I drew the short straw.
 - Life is just a bowl of cherries.
 - It all boils down to money.
 - That's just child's play.
 - It's time to deep six that laptop.
 - Time for a gut check.
 - You went away with your tail between your legs.
 - She's not a team player.
 - He threw in the towel.
 - When it rains it pours.
 - You're a day late and a dollar short.

CHAPTER 15. LESS IS MORE

1. Describe how a movie you've seen told too much (didn't trust the audience to get it, as described in the opening of the chapter).
2. Describe how a movie you've seen instead effectively showed what was happening without telling too much (trusting the audience to understand).
3. Why do writers often tend to say too much, to explain too much, and to tell rather than show?

CHAPTER 16. CALLED TO WRITE

1. Write out two or three paragraphs in response to each of the five rubrics mentioned in the chapter:

- *Keep your eyes open to what God is already doing.* What themes, people, events, ideas, concerns, interests, and issues keep coming up in my life?
 - *Pay attention to what gives you joy and energy.* What do I find myself doing even when I don't have to or when no one asks me? What do I do that makes me feel great afterward? What makes me feel productive? What gives me a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment?
 - *Listen to others.* What do others affirm that I am doing and encourage me to keep at? When do I get compliments and words of thanks for my efforts in a particular area?
 - *Don't ignore dreams.* What dreams have I had that might relate to God's call on my life? Ask trusted friends and counselors if they have any response to what they may mean. If you don't remember dreams much, keep a pad of paper and a pencil by your bed for a week, and as soon as you wake up, write down what you remember dreaming.
 - *Follow Jesus.* What is already in the Bible that you know you need to pay attention to?
2. Try your hand at drafting a one-sentence statement of your calling. If several options come to mind, draft a sentence for each one.

CHAPTER 17. THE QUEST FOR VOICE

1. Who are your heroes or models for writing? Select a representative passage from that writer and explain what you like so much about his or her voice.
2. How would you define voice?
3. What are the positive aspects of voice? What are the potential problems?
4. Explain why you agree or disagree with Anne Lamott's contention that

We write to expose the unexposed. . . . Truth seems to want expression. Unacknowledged truth saps your energy and keeps you and your characters wired and delusional. But when you open the closet door and let what was inside out, you can get a rush of liberation. . . . The truth of your experience can only come through in your own voice.²

5. T. S. Eliot contends that we don't move forward by breaking from the past but by building on the past. Do you agree or not? Explain.
6. What might it look like for you to use writing to make the world a better, truer, or more beautiful place?

CHAPTER 18. THE SPIRITUALITY OF WRITING ABOUT YOURSELF

1. How can writing about ourselves be tricky for our spiritual lives?
2. What key ideas are offered in the chapter for keeping ourselves in perspective as we write?
3. At the end of each day this week, write a sentence or two in response to each of these questions:
 - What was a high and low for me today?
 - When did I have a deep sense of connection with God, others, and myself? When didn't I have a sense of connection?

CHAPTER 19. SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND WRITING

1. How are you the beneficiary of history, culture, family background, or social circumstances?
2. Why can listening to others help us grow in humility?
3. What friend, spouse, teacher, pastor, coworker, or relative in your life can be or is completely honest with you about your writing? If you don't have people in your life like this, who might be able to fill that role for you?

CHAPTER 20. THE COURAGE TO CREATE AND LET GO

1. When have you been stuck in your writing, when you just couldn't get started or restarted? Describe what it looked and felt like.
2. What projects have you just kept reworking, refining, adding to, and subtracting from, but never finished? Why do you think you have had difficulty saying it was done?

CHAPTER 21. STEWARDS WITH A MESSAGE

1. How is writing both about you and not about you?
2. What does the chapter say about being a steward as a writer?
3. How can you grow in having your identity in Christ?

¹The first two examples are adapted from unpublished writing exercises by Jeff Yourison.

²Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 198-99.

Answers to Chapter 11, Question 1: rock, soul, folk—music; grade, high, medical—school; white, gingerbread, doll—house; news, wrapping, tissue—paper; sound, color, gender—barrier