

Writing Tips by Natalia Singer

1. Brevity is the soul of wit, and lingerie. Dorothy Parker said that once and even though a lot of will soon be wearing long johns, not lingerie, the advice applies.

Go through your writing before you hand it in and tighten things. Wherever you see an unnecessary repeated word, especially in close proximity, it often means that you could combine two sentences or cut to the chase sooner.

Aim for more immediacy and power by removing unnecessary filters. Instead of “I saw an eagle swoop overhead and land on the hemlock branch” try “An eagle swooped overhead and landed on the hemlock branch.” You could add “above me or six yards away on the riverbank” so we see how close you are.

Look for clutter in your prose and see what you can streamline to make things pop.

2. Don't be flowery. Give us the flowers instead. Write with specificity, active verbs, and visual acuity. Take us there. Take us closer. Help us see the world. To write about the earth, you have to be down to earth. Try not to live in your head too much. Help us see things clearly.

3. Don't be general. Ever. Go right into the specific.

Note the specific word choices and active verbs in the prose poem below, “The Cough.” Instead of hearing there is a garden we see what grows in it and the author does this concisely. Instead of hearing passively that one exists, the narrator makes it active by showing the mom planting “sage and primrose.” Note how there is no big warm-up. We're there. In this mining town. The father is doing something—whistling a song that evokes the story's theme (the poor man is dying) and all the ideas are carried in images. The men in the town are rendered vividly with their tongues and shoulders.

The Cough

Our young father walked Ash Alley whistling
"Rescue the Pershing," but already he carried
mine tunnels home in his black-streaked breath.
It was like first sleet against an attic window.
My mother would look at him, her lips a line
of impatience and fear. Your lungs will soon be stone, she said.
It's good money, Dorse. It's the only money.
Some of the miners who stopped at our house
to see my father had tongues like fish
that stuck out between words.
Gray-faced, shoulders bony,
they all seemed about to cave in.
My mother would leave the room,
her lips thinner than ever, but the cough
followed her across the linoleum, down cellar steps,
hunkered close when she planted sage and primrose.

The cough was like a child.
It was always hungry. It demanded attention.
It woke us up at odd times and sat in the good chair by the window.
In winter, it trailed behind my father
like a peacock feather on a woman's hat.
One summer he told us we were on a planet going nowhere fast.
He made a model he called an orrery, and showed us how the heavens worked.
The center was bright and hung there like one of my mother's peony blossoms.
That there's what pushes it, he said. And that's what made the coal.
We looked at him and nodded,
but we had our own ideas about what made it go.
We could hear it behind the least little thing.

- by Harry Humes

4. **Play with language too to make things lively and colorful.** Have fun! Note how the cough becomes a character and it stalks everyone in the story. It follows people. It sits in the good chair, it follows the family members down the linoleum, down cellar steps, and in hearing this we are also getting in a sneaky extra description of the house.

Maybe the cough won't follow you in your earthly endeavors. Maybe what will trail you are earthly smells, a stink you can't escape, dirt under your nails. Make that entity come alive too.

5.. **Play with the elasticity of language to evoke a theme without having to overstate it.** Get multiple uses out of words. Note how in "The Cough" the men's shoulders are "about to cave in." What else would cave in in a world of coal miners? In "Gardens" note how the word "plant" gets multiple uses, and some of the metaphors of baseball get recycled at the end to bring "home" the theme of finding a home.

You don't need long, multi-syllabic words or flowery language to evoke themes and emotions. You can use simple words like cave and plant and use them in more than one way to render the themes of your essay without strain.

6 Always have a **specific title** that narrows down your topic. "Expedition narrative" or "Farmer Profile" won't cut it.

7. **Using the senses:** Your goal is to help us see the world you wish to bring alive with visual acuity. To smell and taste it and hear it too. Use words that appeal to the senses and not empty-calorie judgment adjectives like "pretty" or "majestic." If you take us there and let us really see this place, we'll feel what it was like to be there.

8. Try as often as you can to give us a **you-are-here map** so that we **see** the immediate scene, the lettuce shoots coming up from the soil, and the larger setting beyond it, the red barn and the green wheelbarrow and the chickens running toward you. Think of what the camera would show in each snapshot; you are the master photographer deciding what is in the frame. We are you, in your shoes, seeing this world, so don't forget that you need to show it to us before you tell us what you felt.