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# *GREAT ASPIRATIONS*

*Some thoughts and suggestions to help  
us become better Christian writers*

*by Joe Story*

## Introduction

I talked about writing a book for over twenty-five years. In the end my wife Catherine suggested I either did it or shut up about it. In order to help me make up my mind, she presented me with the details of a short residential writing course and told me to sign up and get it out of my system.

It was wonderful. It would be exaggerating to say that I had come home, but at least I discovered in what direction my home lay. I realised that I had two things in common with many other people; a burning desire to write and an almost total ignorance of how to go about it.

Considering the level of aspiration I had maintained for twenty-five years, and also the fact that I had worked as a bookseller for over half of those, I concluded that I knew very little indeed about the basic mechanics of writing.

I learnt quickly. I started attending numerous other writing courses and reading what seemed an innumerable quantity of books. I began experimenting, and within a short while managed to get a few articles published. Over the next ten years that crept up to about a hundred and fifty, most of which have been in national magazines and papers and the rest in local ones. But I would still consider myself an amateur. There are two reasons for this. One is that I have made hardly any money out of my writing – perhaps a few pounds a week – and the other is that every time I put pen to paper (fingers to keyboard doesn't have quite the same ring about it), I realise how much I still need to improve.

So why I am I presuming to offer advice to others? I am still close enough to the frustrated beginner to remember what it was like, and what I wished someone had told me, and I am also a firm believer in the fact that a good guide only needs to be one step ahead of those who are following. I am also encouraged to do so because people have told me that my tips have been helpful, and a previous book, 'I'm Writing a Book Actually' (which contained some of the material I am using here) has sold out of a modest print run.

There are some great authors out there such as Anne Lamott and Stephen King who have written for aspiring authors, and if you only have time to read them or me, then please read them. But if you do have a bit of time and a commitment to improve what you are doing, then it is quite possible you will find what I say helpful as well.

The aim of this booklet is not so much to teach you the art of writing, as to help you understand the sort of things that will be good for you to learn from others more experienced and able than me. What it does also aim to do though, is to stimulate aspiring Christian writers to think about whether they should actually carry on with writing. Part of a teacher's role is not only to encourage and help those who have potential in a subject, but also to gently discourage those who do not, so that they can be released from an inappropriate burden (and any professional writer will tell you, that although writing might sometimes be a joy, it is also a burden).

There is enough bad writing on the market already. My prayer is that we may all move forward and improve what we do, but if not, to desist from our efforts so that both we and our potential readers may be saved from further pain.

## Why do I want to write?

Writing is one expression of creativity that requires no elaborate or expensive equipment. It can be engaged in at any stage of our lives. A child may begin to link words together using no more than a wax crayon and a bedroom wall. Many elderly people write poignant poems or snippets of wisdom, and their writing is only discovered after their death. In between, thousands of us write for fun, for therapy, or for publication.

When we articulate our inner longings or casual observations onto a piece of paper, we clear our minds and encourage our sanity. Releasing the story within us, whether real or imaginary, can be the key to unlocking emotions from the past and hopes for the future.

At an objective level writing may be described as ‘the forming of words on paper or screen in an order which enables the transference of a comprehensible mental image from one person to another.’

Now ‘apple washing run beautiful the very sponge inoculated cutting pencil pussycat’ is not, by that definition, writing. True, the words are formed on paper, but they do not transfer a comprehensible thought from writer to reader.

Many a good detective story hinges upon discovering the meaning of an obscure written clue. A man lies dying, and writes a message in his own blood to disclose the perpetrator of the crime. Though the name and face of the murderer is still clear in

his mind, strength ebbs and only a few words are written. The problem is not that he does not know what he wants to communicate, but that he lacks the ability to do so.

Unsuccessful writers do not usually fail for want of an idea, a story or specific knowledge, but for lack of ability to communicate it clearly and effectively. This becomes more or less important according to the reason we write.

There are many valid and varied reasons to do so, and our motives may be a mixture of several. They are listed in two main groups:

### *Writing because we get something out of it*

*For catharsis.* Writing (perhaps in a journal) releases our emotions. Like cleansing a wound, it may be painful to do, but it brings healing once it is done. This is an appropriate reason to write, and because our work is only intended for our own eyes, it requires little skill. We know what our words mean, however obscure they may appear to others.

*For own our pleasure.* Ordered self-expression can be satisfying, and while this may not require a high level of skill if only intended as a hobby, we will want to do it well, to increase our enjoyment.

*To leave memories.* We may want to leave something for others to remember us by (such as a family history or anecdotes from our past). Although this requires a certain level of ability, some inadequacies in our writing may be excused because in the main it will be read by family and friends.

*To earn money.* Journalists, ghost-writers, advertising copy writers, compilers of text books as well as many novelists have this as their primary motive. Their publisher often presents them with the subject matter, and as professionals, they need to have a high skill level to fulfil their task.

### ***Writing because it benefits others***

*To give pleasure.* Novels, plays, poetry, humour.

*To teach.* How-to books, textbooks.

*To record.* Hansard, news reports.

*To equip for action.* Training manuals, cookery books.

*To instruct.* The Highway Code, safety manuals.

*To inform.* Newspaper and magazine articles, sales brochures, government health leaflets, travel books, guide books.

There are many other motives: to inspire, support, challenge or reinforce opinions, to promote or prevent action, to develop character or to bring clarity of thought.

We need to assess the purpose of our writing and this will give an indication of the level of skill we need. We also need to decide:

#### ***For whom am I writing?***

‘Dear Aunt Mary.....’ Letter writing may be the easiest of all forms of writing because we know who will read our words. Writing a book is less straightforward.

Who is our target readership? Moving outwards, this may be ourselves, family, friends, acquaintances, strangers who are in agreement with us, strangers who are impartial to us or strangers who disagree with us. We can express this from the commercial standpoint: there are those we are happy to have as readers at our own expense, those we are happy to have as readers if we can break even, and those whom we wish to pay us. Finally, we can view the issue from the standpoint of literary ability: do our readers have the same literary ability as ourselves, a little more, or a little less?

It is much less demanding to write for someone close to us, at a similar level of literacy, who generally agrees with our world view, and whom we are not asking to pay to read our work, than it is writing for a stranger of a higher literary ability, who may disagree with us, and who we expect to pay for the book.

Many beginners want to write their autobiography. However, publishers will only be interested in such stories if they know they can sell the finished book. That means the story must be sufficiently interesting to persuade strangers to buy it, not just family and friends, and it must be sufficiently well written to meet their professional standards. We also need to be aware:

#### ***What readers are looking for***

Readers generally want to be informed, instructed or entertained.

As far as the first two of these go, prospective purchasers are generally looking for information on a specific subject, and they are willing to pay money to obtain it. What will make them consider our book among all the others available? The main criterion (apart from cover price) will be whether the book is clear and easy to read and understand. If readers want to be entertained, then we are up against stiffer competition. The main categories are biographies and novels.

A reader who enjoys biography will generally want a famous subject. In order for a book about an ordinary, unknown person to appeal, it must be either relevant to a specific area of interest, or exceptionally well written. A general account of someone’s life, written in a mediocre way will rarely be read.

Why do people buy particular novels? There are many different genres, and tastes obviously differ. However, people browsing in bookshops generally act on word-of-mouth recommendation and

reviews, or seek out well known authors. They will assess a new book quickly. Is the cover appealing? What does the ‘blurb’ on the back cover say? What about dipping into the first few pages? A well-crafted novel can capture the imagination in a few paragraphs. It is generally this, rather than the subject matter, that seals a purchase. It is worth noting that no one ever buys a novel in order to be taught something. If we have a didactic motive in writing a novel, it should be very well hidden.

In fiction, as in many other genres, there are readers whose primary pleasure comes not from personality or plot but from savouring genuine literary craftsmanship. Just as there is pleasure in running a hand over a wooden sculpture that has captured the feel and flow of the grain, there can be intense pleasure in drinking in the words of an author who has handled them with consummate skill. That is often the reason why books on apparently obscure or uninteresting subjects, such as the history of the codfish or the use of the apostrophe, manage to get into the best seller lists from time to time.

Prospective readers owe us no favours. Our book is only one of the options available to them and we are simply tradespeople with a particular product that we are offering for sale.

Too many new writers (especially Christians) feel that the public (especially the Christian public) ought to buy their book. To us it is attractive, precious, and often part of ourselves. We have made ourselves vulnerable and we feel that we deserve to be read and recompensed for our sweat, tears and hard work. Unfortunately, to the prospective buyer that means nothing.

Whatever the reader is looking for, our book will be bought, should only be bought, if it offers to fulfil the needs of the purchaser better than anything else accessible and available.

## **Why should I want to write well?**

The worst introduction to any book I have ever read began, ‘I am not a very good writer, as you will soon discover. But I have a great story. God has been good to me, and if you can share in my sadness and joy, this book will have been worth it.’

That is the equivalent of putting up a notice outside a restaurant which says: ‘Our chef is not a very good cook, as you will soon discover, but the quality of the food before it was cooked was excellent, and he really enjoyed buying the produce. If you can share just a little in that experience, it will have been worth the money you pay for the meal.’

Or could you ever imagine a pianist introducing an evening’s entertainment with the words: ‘It is a privilege for me to be able to play Rachmaninov’s piano concerto No. 1 tonight. I am not a very good pianist as you will soon realise, but it is the quality of the music, not my playing which is the important thing, and so if you can share in the experience with me, the concert will have been worthwhile.’

Because we love them, we will of course be forgiving of family members or old friends. We will happily read their story, eat the meal or listen to their performance whatever it is like. However, if we are being asked to pay for an inferior book, meal or concert, which has been produced by someone we do not know, then we would be most unhappy if they sought to justify poor workmanship, on the grounds that the raw material was excellent before they got their hands on it.

If we purchase a book, take it home, begin to read and find the cover splitting down the spine, we would rightly complain of shoddy workmanship. If that book contains paragraphs that don't hold together or a storyline that falls apart, shouldn't we raise a similar complaint about the content?

When we write for a readership beyond our friends and acquaintances, the relationship is essentially that of manufacturer (us) and purchaser (them). Our skill at communicating what we have to say becomes an ethical question. Are we willing to be involved in marketing shoddy goods?

If your purpose in writing is mission, persuasion or conversion, and it is born out of agonised prayer, then the remedy is simple. Produce the book to the best of your ability, *give it away*, and look to God to bring forth fruit from it on the basis of faith not excellence. But as soon as you put a price on your product, quality becomes an issue. Should our consciences be fully at ease with offering something substandard, when our only defence is that the material was fine before we messed around with it?

The two principal requirements for writers are that they have something to say and the ability to say it. Generally speaking, Christians who aspire to write, do so from the possession of the former rather than the latter.

There is widespread misunderstanding on this matter. There is a vague but persistent assumption on the loose, which views ownership of an experience, a good idea, a story or even a revelation of truth, as somehow automatically bestowing the ability to communicate it. The fact of the matter is that even if we were to have the most incredible experience ever, whisked off to Mars, fêted as royalty and then returned with a fortune in diamonds, if we could not write before we went, we would not be

able to write when we came back. The acquisition of an experience does not automatically confer the ability to communicate it to others.

For a writer the possession of a story, an experience or some special insight is a great asset, but that is the easy part. It is so much harder to learn good writing skills that will enable us to pass it on, so that others can enjoy it or benefit from it.

If our desire to write springs primarily from the fact that we have something to say, it is important to assess the level of our ability to say it, and whether we might need to get outside help in the form of an experienced writer in order to do that. If we decide that is the case, that is an honourable decision. Our best way forward may be to forget about learning to write, get a part-time job for a few weeks, and use the money earned to pay someone to write on our behalf.

## Evaluating our writing

I am the sort of person who, if offered the good or bad news first, will generally opt for the bad in order to get it out of the way.

The most painful aspect of writing can be assessing whether we are actually any good or not. Over the years I have done a number of manuscript assessments for both publishers and individual writers. I think it fair to say that most of us are not as good as we hope we are. So in order to get the unpleasant bit out of the way, I suggest that you use the following exercise in order to evaluate something you have written. It is simply a checklist, and I have called it a 'Manuscript M.O.T.'

An M.O.T. on your car at your local garage will not aim to solve any problems; it simply identifies them so that you can get them sorted out as a separate task. A Manuscript M.O.T. works on the same basis. It lists a couple of dozen checkpoints and each should receive a mark out of five. Any work that averages four will be very good indeed, a mark of three will be good, but an average below two will suggest you should not give up the day job.

The assessment can be done by yourself, though it would be best if you could get someone else to do it as well (but preferably, not someone who would not want to hurt your feelings).

Have a look at the form and then read the explanatory notes before actually filling it in. Not all things are applicable for everything. A how to book on motor cycle maintenance will not utilise characterisation, so be as flexible as you need to be.

### MANUSCRIPT M.O.T.

(Ratings 1=poor, 2=not very good, 3=OK, 4=good, 5=excellent)

1 2 3 4 5

#### VOCABULARY

Choice of words  
Clarity of meaning  
Spelling  
Mood

#### GRAMMAR

Punctuation  
Parts of Speech  
Figures of speech  
Idiom

#### CONSTRUCTION

Sentence  
Paragraph  
Chapter  
Overall

#### STYLE

Rules of convention  
Reader appropriateness  
Consistency  
Page layout and headings

#### SUBJECT MATTER

Storyline  
Plot  
Setting  
Characterisation

#### HANDLING SUBJECT MATTER

Descriptive narrative  
Dialogue  
Pace  
Show not tell

## *Manuscript M.O.T. Explanatory Notes*

Just as an M.O.T. on your car will show those things which need attention, a Manuscript M.O.T. is intended to help you identify the weak points in a piece of writing, and also encourage you with the good points. Are you fit to be let loose in charge of a pencil?

Chambers's Dictionary defines the word write as 'To form letters or words with a pen, pencil or other implement.' On this basis, most people can write. But the task of a writer is to put words together in such a way that others will want to read them, will be entertained or informed by them, will encourage others to read them and – the ultimate issue for many of us – will be prepared to pay good money in order to do so. Since we start off with the same basics (words, paper and pencil or keyboard), what makes the difference between someone who writes badly and someone who writes well?

Just as a carpenter can turn a tree into a fence or a chest of drawers, and a bricklayer can turn bricks into a garage or a palace, competent writers will craft their words to create the desired end product. That may be a love letter, a novel or a guarantee for a washing machine.

The writer's raw material is language: vocabulary (words and their meaning), grammar (words and their form and order), construction (the ordering of groups of words into sentences, paragraphs, chapters and books) and style (the way that a particular writer does these things). We then add subject matter which is shaped by and with language.

The M.O.T. is simply a checklist that enables you to look at how you handle these things, and to award yourself a rating on each applicable section, which should be most, if not all of them.

## *Vocabulary*

### *Choice of words*

We generally have a choice of words to express precisely what we want to say, but there are a number of considerations:

Will our readers understand it?

Does it fit into the flow of what we are writing?

Does it feel right?

Does it resonate with the words around it?

Is it the very best word for the task?

English is the richest language in the world when it comes to offering a choice of appropriate words. That is because we have absorbed them from so many other languages: Latin, Greek, French, Anglo-Saxon, Indian and many others. Each of these has offered a particular service. Latin and French have given us many formal, legal and romantic words, Anglo-Saxon has contributed words that are plain and earthy (much favoured by C.S. Lewis), Greek has been the source of many modern constructions and scientific words, and the Indian languages have given us words relating to food, sport and slang.

Imagine a conversation between three people who are looking at a diamond brooch:

*'Are you able to confirm that it is the genuine article?'*

*'Yes, sir. Do tell us it's real.'*

*'Oh it's the pukka thing, all right.'*

'Genuine article', 'real' and 'pukka' all mean essentially the same in this conversation. By putting the different words in the mouths of the different people we get a feel of their characters. In this case, we might imagine, a smart well-to-do man in a suit and tie, his twelve-year-old granddaughter, and a cockney market trader.

spot of dry humour, are all delivered without variation, in a manner reminiscent of a tailor's dummy. It is what happens when someone is concerned only to fulfil the task of imparting information, with no consideration of the effect on the recipients. The following is written in a style that is tedious and boring:

*He opened the door and went into the kitchen. There was a bloodstained knife on the sink next to a box of matches and a dirty cup which looked as if it had a bit of coffee in the bottom, or it could have been tea. Then Mary who was his sister's best friend and lived in Chatham, followed him into the room, which he thought was untidy and could have done with a clean before inviting her in, and she saw the dead body on the floor. She was very frightened because she had never seen a dead person before, and she screamed. John looked out of the window because the postman was delivering mail next door, which was number 58 Landsdale Road, and he might have heard. John decided the postman had not heard, as he went into number 60 to deliver a letter there as well, (or it might have been a small parcel), so John turned back and looked at the body which Mary had seen. He reached for the telephone and dialled 999. Meanwhile Mary washed the dirty cup, which had the bit of coffee in and made a cup of tea. She thought it was very exciting but also very scary.*

Everything in this passage is on one level. There is no build-up of tension. The box of matches, letters and cup are as important as the bloodstained knife, the body, and the phone call to the police.

A fuller description of the key elements, and a variation in style would have helped. An inexperienced author may be unaware of the techniques which change the pace of a passage. Readers generally don't notice such techniques, but if used, they will find themselves drawn into the narrative rather than standing back as an impartial and bored observer.

and the picture takes pride of place. Try to sell it to a stranger and it will be dismissed out of hand. Similarly, when there is a relationship between the writer and reader, and perhaps also a shared love of the subject being written about, the skill of the writer may be secondary. However, try to sell the piece to an editor and it will be rejected as readily as the child's picture.

Reader and writer may share a common interest, but if this relationship is commercial, as buyer and seller, the standard of craftsmanship becomes a primary issue.

New writers tend to think that readers will put up with poor writing if the subject-matter is interesting. This may sometimes be the case but it should never be assumed. Subject matter is important, but it must still be communicated in a clear and accurate manner. Christian writers tend to be more likely to fail on this aspect of writing than their secular counterparts. Because we often have a strong belief in our subject, we are tempted to rely too heavily on it, instead of using all the skills at our disposal to present it well.

Arguably, the most interesting subject in the world is the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but I have rarely come across a piece of writing that has released and revealed its intrinsic beauty and fascination.

### *No variation of pace*

At some time or other, most of us will have come across a speaker or lecturer who personifies boredom. They may be knowledgeable, highly qualified, even a world leader in their field, but as soon as they open their mouths the minds of their listeners begin to close down. The usual reason for this is monotonous delivery. Crucial facts, anecdotes, ground breaking discoveries, trivia, mildly relevant information and even the odd

### *Clarity of meaning*

The words we choose should enable the reader to understand the meaning that we want to convey. This can obviously overlap with the need to choose words for accuracy, but sometimes it can be in conflict with it. A precise technical word will not always be understood by everyone.

### *Spelling*

It is our responsibility to check our spelling and aim for 100% accuracy. This is obviously made much easier with the use of aids such as Spellcheck. One point to watch out for is consistency when a word may be spelt in two different ways.

### *Mood*

Words not only convey meaning, they can create mood. Words containing 'l', 'f' or 'w' (the waterfall fell softly) will create a completely different feel to words containing a hard 'g', 'ck' or 'ct' (the gurgling cataract crashed on the rocks). Words with pairs of open vowels such as 'ou' can help to slow down the reader (the man walked through the forest), whilst short words ending with a 't' can help to speed things up (don't sit, get up).

### ***Grammar***

All words play a specific part in the group to which they belong. So in the sentence 'The man hit the car', 'man' is a noun and also the subject of the sentence. If we say 'The car hit the man', 'man' remains a noun but is now the object of the sentence.

The addition of some punctuation such as: 'The man hit the car?' 'The car hit the man!' alters the meaning of the sentences. So the same four words – 'man', 'car', 'hit', 'the' – retain their individual meanings but combine to give different meanings as a group. The way they do this is not arbitrary, as we cannot convey a meaning simply by writing the words in random order.

Grammar is the way in which words and punctuation relate, and the rules which govern those relationships. We grasp how this works instinctively when we learn to speak. Small children often absorb grammatical rules surprisingly well, but they do not necessarily know they are doing it, and will often do so imperfectly. So unless we specifically learn how to recognise and to correct our mistakes, we will carry them into adulthood and hence into our writing.

Grammar is the heart of the relationship that words have with each other. Words in juxtaposition should enhance each other and expand the intended meaning of the key words. We can increase or decrease the intensity of their relationship by the use of grammatical tools.

### *Punctuation*

Punctuation alters the relationship that words have with one another. Good punctuation will enhance that and bad punctuation will detract from it. It is especially important to pay attention to this if you are submitting a manuscript to a publisher. Whilst standards are undoubtedly dropping, there are still those who will object to the use of an exclamation mark to emphasise something, rather than indicating an exclamation. Apart from being incorrect it reveals the inability of the writer to bring an emphasis by skilful writing. Some modern Christian song writers seem to ignore punctuation completely, which can have the effect of rendering their lyrics down to a slurry of nonsense.

### *Parts of speech*

A part of speech describes the particular function that a word plays in its relationship with other words and with the sentence as a whole. A sound grasp of the way in which we should use parts of speech correctly is essential. Perhaps the most common errors

made by inexperienced writers is the excessive use of adjectives and adverbs. This will again reveal the inability of the writer to bring emphasis through their writing rather than the liberal use of ‘very’ or ‘extremely’.

### *Figures of speech*

These are words or small groups of words that carry a thought or make an inference that is different, or which adds to the word’s plain meaning. ‘He ran like the wind’ or ‘he sank like a stone’, are nonsense expressions if used literally, but used as similes they can expand the reader’s imagination. A new writer may find it best to use a few different figures of speech well, whereas an old hand may draw on a couple of hundred different forms available.

### *Idiom*

An expression that is peculiar to one language or culture. The English say, ‘I didn’t see a soul in town today’, whereas the French would express it, ‘I didn’t see a cat in town today’ (but in French of course). When using idioms, the important thing to watch is that they are culturally and chronologically accurate and consistent with the context into which we place them.

## **Construction**

### *The sentence*

How we use sentences will determine how the reader reacts to what we say. If the meaning of a sentence is clear, the reader will come along with us, but if the meaning is unclear and requires a pause for consideration, the reader will back off. We can vary the speed of the reader or the feel of what we are saying by adjusting the length of sentences. We should be in control. Most of us will easily recognise the use of metre in poetry, but well-chosen and

well-constructed metrical sentences in prose writing can also be used to considerable effect, especially when setting the mood for a new scene.

### *The paragraph*

Paragraphs should be like stepping-stones across a river. Each paragraph should help the reader progress from one place to another. If paragraph breaks are made in an arbitrary way, related to how a page looks or when we fancy a cup of coffee, rather than to progression of thought or plot, we may well lose the reader. It may mean that they have to work out where we want them to go, when it is us who should be leading them there. A paragraph can also be thought of as a brick, a whole entity, but meant to be snugly connected to the adjoining bricks.

### *The chapter*

Chapters are like scenes in a play. Each one should be complete in itself and conveying to us one or more aspects of the plot or of a character.

### *Overall structure*

The essential thing is that the reader is taken on a journey where they know where they have come from, where they are going, and when they have arrived there. It does not have to be a journey in a straight line. All sorts of patterns are permissible, and if well thought through, diversions and digressions can make for gripping reading, but in the end the journey needs to be traceable.

## **Style**

### *Rules of convention*

This incorporates the agreed rules of the writing game and is too big a subject to cover here. At some point every writer should spend some time browsing through and taking note of The Oxford

Manual of Style. Again the importance of this depends on whether you are approaching a publisher or not. Many of them will not take kindly to a flagrant disregard of convention. If you are self-publishing you can ignore it, but why would you want to? Related to this is the particular 'house' style in which publishers choose to present their material (compare the Sun and the Times newspapers). If you are submitting to a publisher, it is imperative that you have studied their house style and adhere to it as closely as possible. An individual style which bears the mark of the writer's preferences is obviously acceptable when a writer is famous or when they have publishing control, but should not be assumed otherwise.

#### *Reader appropriateness*

If you are writing for teenagers, you will obviously utilise a different style than if you are writing an academic paper for a group of university professors. You should identify your target readership and work out a style suitable for them.

#### *Consistency*

Whatever style you adopt, the whole piece of writing should consistently adhere to that.

#### *Page layout and headings*

This should reflect the type of book or article that you are writing. A small 'How to' booklet such as this one will have a completely different structure and layout to a blockbuster novel. The important thing is to choose something appropriate and stick to it.

#### *Subject matter*

##### *Storyline*

Taken in its broadest sense, every book will have a storyline. This is obvious in the case of a novel, but it is also true for non-fiction

books and even for a text book, an instruction manual or a report of an event. The storyline should enable us to understand what the book is all about, and not leave the reader with a puzzled frown on their brow.

##### *Plot*

This is closely connected to the storyline but may be seen more as the plan of the route rather than the journey itself. A well laid out plot will enable the storyline to move forward without getting lost.

##### *Setting*

Every storyline has a context. This may involve any or all of a number of things such as history, a timescale, geography, culture, local or world events, politics and religion. It is permissible to choose a real context or to invent everything. If it is real, it should be accurate, and for both it should be consistent.

##### *Characterisation*

One of the most frustrating things for the reader is to find that they get characters mixed up. They need be able to form a mental image of the person which they can bring to mind when that character is mentioned. They should also be able to form an emotional response to the person. This need not be at a great depth, but it should be clear whether the reader should feel warm, cold, or indifferent toward them.

##### *Handling the subject matter*

A weak story well told will be more satisfying to a reader than a great story told badly. In the main, the 'Vet' stories of James Herriot are lightweight cameos of inconsequential events, but they are superbly told so that the reader is rarely unsatisfied. This is where the technical aspects of vocabulary, grammar, style and

construction are brought to bear on the subject matter in order to create a desired response in the reader. The principal areas to assess are:

#### *Descriptive narrative*

The James Herriot 'Vet' stories are one of the best examples of popular books that demonstrate how descriptive narrative should be written. They draw the reader into the scene but from the perspective of a comfortable armchair.

#### *Dialogue*

This should do two things, record what each person is saying and communicate something about that person. This will also include monologues and Alan Bennet's 'Talking Heads' are some of the best examples.

#### *Pace*

It is very difficult for a reader to cope with a one-paced story. There should be variations in the speed at which it is told, and also of the intensity. The writer should not try and maintain a level of high tension or interest for too long. Sometimes it can be helpful to the reader to be given a lightweight passage that they can skip over or slow down and relax with. The C.S. Lewis 'Narnia' stories contain some good examples of pace variation.

#### *Show not tell*

I have found that inexperienced writers fall down on this point more than on any other. A newspaper journalist will (quite rightly) tend to concentrate on recording the facts as they see them. The writer of a novel, an historical account or a journey to exotic places will want to do much more than that. They will want to show their readers what it is that they see, and do it in such a way that their readers experience the same emotions that the writer feels.

Saying that 'Mary was very excited' is telling. Describing how Mary looked, how she moved, what she said and, if appropriate, how others responded to her, so that the reader concludes 'Mary was very excited', is showing. Showing rather than telling is very hard work. Simply relying on strong adjectives and adverbs to create a response in the reader is lazy and rarely achieves the effect that we want it to.

Because this is an area many writers fall down on, we will come back to it later on in more detail with some practical advice.

## So can I write?

Hopefully the Manuscript M.O.T. will have enabled you to make some evaluation in respect of your own ability, and if you are still reading this, you will have concluded that at the very least you have some potential.

When I first began to consider writing seriously, this was the crucial question that had still not been answered. I had numerous ideas, I loved jotting them down and playing around with them. I loved daydreaming about having things in print, but could I write? Ah! That was the question.

We may want to write. We may already write. We may even have had something in print. But is it any good?

When we think about this, we probably acknowledge a kind of hierarchy of writers. Firstly, there are the *great writers*, the geniuses, people such as: William Shakespeare, Jane Austin, Charles Dickens and C.S. Lewis. These are people whose shopping lists would be worth reading and we would pay for the privilege of doing so. It can be assumed that none of us come into this category at the moment.

Secondly there are the *good writers*: James Herriot, Bill Bryson, Richmal Crompton, Alan Bennett, Keith Waterhouse, Philip Yancey and the like. Not only have they made a living by writing but they are widely read, and what is more, recommended to others. We will not come into this group either.

Thirdly come those who make part or all of their living from writing. Some may be quite good. On the whole we might describe them as *competent writers*. The list would include some very wealthy people such as Barbara Cartland or LaHaye and Jenkins, plus most other popular authors, as well as newspaper and magazine writers, producers of text books, or writers of advertising and leaflets for the local library. They may be very professional, but only a few will ever come into the best-seller category. One or two of us may edge into this group.

The fifth category is the *bad writers*. Bad writers do not know how to fit words together. They have no sense of rhythm, no sense of rightness. They put apostrophes in the wrong places and omit them from the right ones. No one would pay to read anything they have written. We dare not be in this group.

This leaves us with the missing fourth group of *aspiring writers*, those who long to write for pleasure or profit, who would like to be published, and who believe they write moderately well and have the capacity and desire to improve. Almost all of us will be in this section, and if we are, we have the potential to move on. Perhaps not to be great writers, probably not even to be very good writers, but at least to join the ranks of the competent.

### *How do I know if I can write?*

Hopefully the M.O.T. will have given us some indication, but on its own, that will not be enough. If most of our writing has been done at home and just shown to a few friends, we may be uncertain about the level of our ability. As we practise, there are some things that will help us evaluate our writing and to discover how we might improve it.

The simplest thing is to read as much and as widely as we possibly can. Apparently when some banks train their staff to spot forged

banknotes, they do so by maximising their exposure to the real thing. The more we expose ourselves to top-quality writing, the easier we will find it to evaluate our own work.

If you are lucky enough to know a professional writer, they may be willing to critique something you have written. Friends and family are rarely honest enough or skilled enough to be helpful. A professional is more likely to tell you the truth.

It is also helpful to assess the level of your linguistic ability. When vocabulary, grammar and construction are used properly and are in harmony, the result is a smooth and easy read. If we do not actually know how language works, if we do not have a grasp of basic linguistic principles, the likelihood of writing anything worth reading will be slim. It is hard to know what you do not know – you are unlikely to pick up all of your own errors – so try to get help from someone who is a competent writer.

The important thing is to be honest with ourselves. If we know where we are, we can set a target for where we want to get to. It is not enough merely to ask whether we can write now, but to establish whether we will be able to do so in a year or two if we apply ourselves to study and practice.

### ***Am I boring?***

This is possibly the unforgivable sin of the publishing world. When it occurs, it is nearly always because the writer has assumed that their content is more important than their delivery, or because there is a lack of variation of pace.

### ***Reliance on the subject***

When a four-year-old draws a picture of mummy and gives it to daddy for his birthday, the whole family will enjoy the experience

and the picture takes pride of place. Try to sell it to a stranger and it will be dismissed out of hand. Similarly, when there is a relationship between the writer and reader, and perhaps also a shared love of the subject being written about, the skill of the writer may be secondary. However, try to sell the piece to an editor and it will be rejected as readily as the child's picture.

Reader and writer may share a common interest, but if this relationship is commercial, as buyer and seller, the standard of craftsmanship becomes a primary issue.

New writers tend to think that readers will put up with poor writing if the subject-matter is interesting. This may sometimes be the case but it should never be assumed. Subject matter is important, but it must still be communicated in a clear and accurate manner. Christian writers tend to be more likely to fail on this aspect of writing than their secular counterparts. Because we often have a strong belief in our subject, we are tempted to rely too heavily on it, instead of using all the skills at our disposal to present it well.

Arguably, the most interesting subject in the world is the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but I have rarely come across a piece of writing that has released and revealed its intrinsic beauty and fascination.

### ***No variation of pace***

At some time or other, most of us will have come across a speaker or lecturer who personifies boredom. They may be knowledgeable, highly qualified, even a world leader in their field, but as soon as they open their mouths the minds of their listeners begin to close down. The usual reason for this is monotonous delivery. Crucial facts, anecdotes, ground breaking discoveries, trivia, mildly relevant information and even the odd

spot of dry humour, are all delivered without variation, in a manner reminiscent of a tailor's dummy. It is what happens when someone is concerned only to fulfil the task of imparting information, with no consideration of the effect on the recipients. The following is written in a style that is tedious and boring:

*He opened the door and went into the kitchen. There was a bloodstained knife on the sink next to a box of matches and a dirty cup which looked as if it had a bit of coffee in the bottom, or it could have been tea. Then Mary who was his sister's best friend and lived in Chatham, followed him into the room, which he thought was untidy and could have done with a clean before inviting her in, and she saw the dead body on the floor. She was very frightened because she had never seen a dead person before, and she screamed. John looked out of the window because the postman was delivering mail next door, which was number 58 Landsdale Road, and he might have heard. John decided the postman had not heard, as he went into number 60 to deliver a letter there as well, (or it might have been a small parcel), so John turned back and looked at the body which Mary had seen. He reached for the telephone and dialled 999. Meanwhile Mary washed the dirty cup, which had the bit of coffee in and made a cup of tea. She thought it was very exciting but also very scary.*

Everything in this passage is on one level. There is no build-up of tension. The box of matches, letters and cup are as important as the bloodstained knife, the body, and the phone call to the police.

A fuller description of the key elements, and a variation in style would have helped. An inexperienced author may be unaware of the techniques which change the pace of a passage. Readers generally don't notice such techniques, but if used, they will find themselves drawn into the narrative rather than standing back as an impartial and bored observer.

## Teach yourself ...

Leonardo Da Vinci always had the desire to improve. Arguably one of the most talented people ever to have lived, he undertook exercises to develop and train his mind and physical talents.

Whatever you feel about your level of ability in the light of what you have read so far, you now have to make the decision whether you are going to remain at that level, or continue to improve. There are no great secrets and most of the suggestions that follow are fairly obvious.

There is a consensus of advice from many of the great and good writers who are prepared to share what they do themselves. It is not usually the sort of advice that most writers are hoping for. It is, however, excellent advice and honest advice, from those who have trodden the path with some measure of success.

### ***The ten most common tips are:***

Read a lot.

Write a lot.

Read and write a lot.

Tell the truth. You don't have to tell everything, but what you do tell should be true. Even your fiction should be honest fiction. Write what you know, even if you need to research to find it out.

Know your motive. You can write because you want to, because you love to, because you have to, because you are good at it, even because you believe God wants you to, but be clear why you are doing it.

Don't give up the day job. If you are not a good writer, you have a nil chance of making a go of it. If you are a good writer, even a very good writer, you will still only have a small chance of earning enough to live on.

Come to terms with it. Writing is very hard work. A good bricklayer will lay more bricks in a day than most writers will get words down on paper.

First attempts are meant to be bad. You do not put a first coat of paint on a wall and expect to get a top coat finish. Write in order to rewrite and then rewrite again.

Go easy on the adjectives and adverbs. Less is more.

Do not let the blank pages defeat you. Write. Write something, write anything, write often. Eventually you will write something worth reading.

### ***Write regularly***

I once walked 200 miles in two weeks. During the six months beforehand I took every available opportunity to walk any distance that I could. The smaller walks, over one, two, five, and ten miles prepared me for the big one. When it came I was ready.

I always feel uneasy about those who have ambitions for the long haul of writing a book, but who pass by the training opportunities. Someone somewhere is always looking for writers. Newspapers want letters. Church magazines need material each month. Chess clubs, drama groups, all types of societies, need publicity, and that publicity has to be written. Blogging is open to all.

Just as we would be sceptical about a couch potato who kept talking about the marathon he was going to run, we should be cynical about the person who talks about the book they are going to write, when they go days – or even weeks without exercising their mind and their fingers putting pencil to paper.

### ***Practise writing***

Set yourself exercises and try to do them regularly. One of the easiest and most helpful things is to write a few lines – anything at all – and then re-write it in different styles. The example below is an exercise, which I recently did myself. Firstly, I told the bare facts, and then I re-wrote them for different scenarios: A book for a small child, a poem in a magazine, a report for a railway inspector and an article for a local newspaper.

*It was a snowy day. The driver drove the railway engine along the line. He did it well.*

*The choo choo train huffed and chuffed,  
Along the snowy line.  
The engine driver puffed and snuffed,  
But did it really fine.*

*The snow fell softly,  
The engine moved slowly,  
And clouds of steam arose above the railway line.  
The pace then quickened,  
As the snowy fog thickened,  
And clouds of steam arose above the railway line.  
As the driver firmly steered,  
His mate leaned out and peered,  
And clouds of steam arose above the railway line.  
The fog began to lighten,  
The brakes began to tighten,  
Smiles began to brighten,  
The station was in sight.  
And clouds of steam arose above the railway line.*

*The driver of the steam locomotive engaged the appropriate gearing so as to skilfully navigate along the snow covered railway line.*

*There were five inches of snow last Tuesday, when Bill Jones, 34 year-old father of two, drove the vintage steam engine 'Lakewood' between Pudsey and Birkbeck stations. Fred Smith, secretary of the Friends of Pudbeck Steam Locomotives remarked 'Bill did a good job and we are all very proud of him'.*

It might be stuff and nonsense, but it is stuff and nonsense like this that helps build up and form literary muscles.

Another exercise I recommend is to look out of your window and write about 500 words on what you see. Then re-write it several times with different variations. Omit all adjectives and adverbs, include an adjective or adverb for every noun and verb, omit all conjunctions, omit all punctuation, reduce it to as short sentences as you possibly can, use as long sentences as you possibly can, replace all the key nouns with alternatives of similar meanings, do the same with verbs etc. When you do this you will begin to recognise what effect the addition or subtraction of different things has on your writing and this will enable you to bring more variation into it.

Write exactly 200 words on any subject. Then reduce the piece to 100, then increase it to 300. Virtually anything you do of this sort, will first loosen and then build up your literary muscles.

At the moment I am writing an average of two or three limericks a day. Some are very poor and most will probably end up in the bin, but, and this is the nub of the matter, I know that my sense of metre and the ability to choose the right words for a sentence is improving.

### ***Reading to train the mind***

Few of us ignore the health consequences of what we eat, but how many consider the need for a balanced diet in what we read? Reading may be one of the ways in which we are entertained. A good novel will give us a similar pleasure to watching a good film or pursuing a hobby. We may use books as a source of information and learning, most of us will have used a dictionary or a map.

We might also expect that some books will stimulate us. A daily devotional, a biography, something inspirational or biblical, or on wellbeing.

How many of us, however, view books as a major resource to enable us to train our minds to think properly? We may acknowledge the difference between a fit and a flabby body; we may not see the need to develop fit rather than flabby minds.

In the Screwtape Letters, the senior devil advises Wormwood, his apprentice, that whatever else he achieves; he should not allow his human charges to *think*. If there are such things as personal demons endeavouring to carry out this task, they would no doubt be very grateful that we make their job easy. Real thinking is inconvenient and requires discipline. One of the easiest and most accessible aids we can have is a controlled programme of reading. There are several useful items to include in a healthy reading diet.

### ***Books written from a different cultural perspective***

We are all culturally biased. Our historical or geographical world view will be deeply coloured by the limitation of our experience. It is unlikely to be challenged if we only interact with those of a similar background.

If we deliberately and systematically expose ourselves to literature produced in other times and other places it will help us to evaluate our own cultural milieu, to loosen our attachment to its weaker points and to appreciate better its stronger ones.

### ***Books of exceptional quality***

Just as a fast-food diet will dull the taste buds, mass-produced mediocre literature will deaden the mind and senses to quality. We may need to work at acquiring a taste for literature which is skilfully composed and grammatically well structured. We need to expose ourselves to writing where artistic merit transcends mere subject matter.

Good literature can be found in every genre. The Calvin and Hobbes cartoons of Bill Watterson or the Talking Heads monologues by Alan Bennett are at the top of their categories just as C.S. Lewis or Shakespeare are of theirs.

### ***Books that we disagree with***

Have you ever heard an argument between two people who will not listen to each other? Apart from the possible benefit of letting off steam, it really is pointless. But many of us carry a similar stance into our reading habits. We form a particular view on a subject and read to reinforce that, whilst refusing to read anything that is likely to contradict it. In so doing we lose the ability to reason or argue a point, and this will seriously affect our writing skills.

When we want to persuade people to agree with us, the first effective step is to give them the confidence that we understand where they are coming from. No position will be 100% wrong (nor 100% right) and one of the first tasks in an argument should be to affirm what is correct in our opponent's thinking. When we

do this, we isolate the particular issues that we think are wrong, and we then stand a much better chance of confronting them in a sensible way. In both classical Greek and Jewish thinking, an opinion would be considered inconsequential unless it was accompanied by a thorough knowledge of other views, and an ability to refute them point by point. The modern Western mind somehow feels it has a right to hold an opinion without the need of subjecting it to challenge and scrutiny. By regularly reading opposing positions, we will become equipped either to change our minds or to strengthen our own arguments as appropriate.

No one makes the conscious choice that their reading will only include books which will result in fuddled thinking, but we slip into lazy habits in the same way that some of us slide into a sedentary lifestyle that results in creaky bones and bodies. But let us be under no illusion about the matter; it is simply not possible to maintain a fit mind – one that thinks both efficiently and clearly – unless we utilise some means to keep it in trim. It is difficult to write well if we are unable to think well, and choosing to read widely is one such way of achieving this.

## Show not tell

As mentioned earlier, one of the most common errors of new writers is to describe a situation as they see it, describing the facts but keeping the reader at arms-length because they tell the reader what they see, instead of showing them.

If you witnessed an incident or an accident on your way to work and reported it to the police, they would want you simply to *tell* the facts as you saw them. However, our readers want more than that. They want us to draw them into the situation we are describing, so that they can begin to sense the emotions and feel the atmosphere for themselves.

You will not achieve this by including statements such as ‘She was very happy’ or ‘He was miserable’. How do you know that the characters were happy or miserable? You have to see them in your mind’s eye and then to describe what you see, not tell the conclusions which you draw.

I have included a couple of examples here of ‘before and after’ makeovers. In each pair, the first passage is as it was originally written and the second after it had been improved.

**1a.** It was sometime late in the morning that Susan Smith was called. The usher led into the dock a pretty girl, 17 years old, medium height, well dressed in high heels and a short skirt, her hair neatly drawn back into a ponytail, but she was obviously terrified.

**1b.** *‘Susan Smith!’ The booming voice echoed down the brown and cream corridor and the usher strode in and held the door open for the pretty teenager as she walked toward him. She stopped and hesitated. Chewing the side of her lip she twisted her neat pony tail between long white, red tipped fingers and glanced at the clock. It was 11.30, her mouth was dry and she wanted her strong morning coffee. As she walked across the bare tiles her high heels clacked, drawing attention to her short skirt that she self-consciously tried to pull a little lower, hoping that the judge would not notice. Stepping into the dock she gripped the rail so hard she broke a nail. Standing on one leg with the other twisted to control her bladder, her shoulders tensed and the first of many tears dropped onto the stained brown carpet.*

In the first passage the reader was told that Susan was terrified, but in the second, without the writer mentioning the word, the reader will reach that conclusion for themselves.

**2a.** John ran in from school and asked his mum if he could sleep over at Jim’s and watch Liverpool versus Manchester United on Match of the Day.

John’s mother said no because she had asked him to clean his room and she was disappointed to find that he had not done it.

**2b.** *‘Mum, mum.’*

*John nearly tripped over his sports bag as he tried to remove his jacket with one hand while undoing his tie with the other.*

*‘Mum, its Liverpool and Man U on telly tonight.’*

*He caught his breath as his tie refused to slip up over his nose. It suddenly came free.*

*'Mum, can I sleep over at Jim's – please mum.'*

*Mrs Clarkson leaned her shoulder against the door frame. She crossed one leg in front of the other and slowly folded her arms.*

*John watched as she turned her head towards his bedroom. Through the open door, he could see a confusion of gadgets, dirty washing and his half-dismantled bike.*

*She looked at him and raised one eyebrow.*

*'No chance,' he thought.*

In this second illustration, the whole scene is transformed from a boring, factual, exchange to a visual one, full of tension and feeling (for both mum and John).

If you are still uncertain on this ground, then read and re-read good books until you become saturated with the techniques of great authors.

This is also something that will improve with practice. A simple way to begin, is to look at someone when you sense an emotion, and then describe what you are seeing that makes you come to the conclusion about how they are feeling. Probably the easiest is a child at Christmas or a birthday party expressing happiness, and then build on that until you can sense and describe even subtle moods.

## **Writing in faith**

Most of the first texts ever to be printed were bibles, or books on Christian themes. Things have changed. There are still thousands of new Christian books produced each year but they now constitute a small, specialist segment of the market. So what is special about the Christian book trade?

### **Christian books**

In many major towns and cities and even in some villages there are shops specialising in Christian books. In spite of numerous closures, there are still several hundred in total. There are few shops given over to the sale of books on football, even though roughly the same numbers of people attend football matches on Saturdays as people attend church on Sundays. On the other hand, most newspapers will dedicate several pages to football news whilst almost totally ignoring anything related to Christianity. This anomaly shows us that the Christian scene is not just another segment of life – like sport, music or the arts – it is a peculiarly different segment, and Christian literature is a peculiarly different form of literature.

There are Christian books that cross over, merge into the general market and sell in the same way that other books do, but they are in the minority.

I would suggest therefore, that there are three possible ways in which people might refer to a book as a 'Christian book':

A book that is written by a Christian.

A book that is likely to be of interest to a Christian.

A book where the content is specifically Christian.

The first of these— a book written by a Christian — is probably insufficient on its own to warrant the description. Excellent novels, books on plumbing, tennis or ballroom dancing may be penned equally well by Christian or non-Christian alike, but the market is, and should be, a general one.

The second definition is also limited: a book on the maintenance and repair of church buildings may be written by an engineer or architect with no personal faith, however, it will still be of interest to the Christian community, and the specialist Christian bookshop or website will be an appropriate outlet for it. There are not many books though which fit into this category.

In practice therefore, it is usual for Christian books to be defined primarily by their content.

This is where there may be a divide between the motive of a Christian and a general writer. A general writer may write for any number of reasons, including financial gain, a love of writing, a desire to entertain and a love of the subject. Whatever they are writing about, and whatever part any similar motives have in their own thinking, many Christians have an additional motive; the desire to teach, inform or inspire. This peculiarity in the Christian book trade, the desire to produce books with a didactic motive in virtually every category of writing, has sometimes resulted in a reduction in quality.

In the general trade, there has always been a place for books which have little content but which are superbly written or illustrated. This is rarely so in the specifically Christian market. From the reader's point of view this means that Christian literature has often been presented to them with the intention to inform and generally do them good, rather than to simply give them pleasure.

Throughout history thousands of artists have made Mary and Jesus the subjects of their paintings. The *content* of their work is therefore of the highest order. The only issue is how well they execute the presentation of that content. Great art is primarily determined by the standard of the work, not by choice of subject. Writing is no less an art form than painting, and it is incumbent upon Christian writers to become masters of the craft and make quality of presentation of the highest priority. We have the privilege of writing about some of the greatest subjects known to humanity, it would be irresponsible to write badly about them.

If Christian books are less skilfully written than their secular counterparts, the long-term effect may be to discourage Christians from reading them. While it is right to offer high-quality subject matter, it is essential that we deliver that subject matter with a high-quality presentation as well.

### **Where does faith fit in?**

I do not know of any professional writer who claims their craft is easy. On the contrary, not only do many emphasise just how hard it is, but some consider themselves bordering on insane to have chosen it as a way of earning a living. The consensus is that you should only do it if you really cannot contemplate doing anything else. People whose jobs require them to fly all over the world may often be envied for their glamorous lifestyles, but in reality, their days are no more than a blur of changed time zones. The views

they have seen are no more spectacular than a series of airport lounges or lonely hotel rooms, and their highest moment of happiness is when they finally get home to a real cup of tea.

Writers too, are often perceived as walking an elevated path, one that other mere mortals can only wistfully sigh after, sitting at home in comfort while the words stream effortlessly onto the computer, and the royalty cheques pour in through the letterbox. In fact, although there may be a handful of authors who make a fortune in this way, the majority are more likely to be discovered huddled over a laptop at a kitchen table or scribbling on a pad perched on their knees. They groan in anguish as they pace the floor at four in the morning, convinced that nothing they write will ever be accepted for publication.

If we are drawn to writing for glamour, for the satisfaction of seeing our work in print, and because we want to be able to say truthfully to our friends, ‘Yes, I have had one or two things published’, then we have misunderstood the matter. Most of us write because we need to, for it has become the way in which we describe all that is best in life, our deepest thoughts and our aspirations. What it means to us may be excitement, or just the relief which comes from striving to express our creativity. It is a kind of addiction.

Many of us also write because we believe it is a God-given ability, or because we truly believe we have something valuable to say. That something may have spiritual value, whether it is a prayer, a poem, a devotional or an inspirational book. We may also trust that we are following the leading of the Holy Spirit. None of this necessarily makes our task easier.

Writing has sometimes been compared to childbirth; the conception, nurturing, and growing of an idea which is ultimately

brought forth at full term amidst pain, sweat and tears. There the analogy ends. The mother can forget the pain when a child is born, and look forward to years of companionship with her son or daughter. Not so the writer. As soon as the book or article is completed, it is wrenched away into the hands of foster parents at the printer or publisher, and the writer is thrust back into the creative cycle.

This is of course a rather melodramatic description, but consider a story told of James Joyce. Whilst truly an innovative writer, he was not prolific and would sometimes spend hours wrestling with just a few words. A friend once found him slumped over his desk.

‘How many words have you written today?’ he asked.

‘Seven,’ groaned Joyce.

‘But that is good – for you,’ remarked his friend.

Joyce’s reply was barely audible. ‘But I don’t know in what order.’

If writing is so arduous, where does faith fit in? Are we writing to please ourselves or to please God?

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:6-8 NIV)

Writing is not mentioned specifically as a gift in the bible, but we know that it was an ability used in the service of the church because Luke tell us that many people wrote about what had happened, including himself of course.

Any person who wishes to write should aspire to excellence in what they do, irrespective of their position of faith. But for those of us who are Christians, excellence will not be the only issue. It is possible that we are also hoping to stimulate faith, inspire confidence, build up knowledge, or challenge inappropriate thinking. If we are seeking to serve others and further the kingdom via our writings, then it is essential that we also write in faith, just like those who preach in faith or pray, evangelise and otherwise serve in faith. If this is the case, then it is appropriate to describe ourselves as Christian writers.

If this is not so, if our writing is purely for fun, pleasure or profit, then it will be more accurate to describe ourselves as Christians who write. This is perfectly OK. It is legitimate to write simply as an expression of our humanity, just as a footballer, pianist or plumber may follow their hobby or occupation. As Christians, it will be likely that our faith will be reflected in everything that we do, but that is a consequence rather than a motive.

If we want to write, then we will find a way to do it. As Christians, if we approach the task humbly and prayerfully, we can hope that our efforts will be guided and blessed. It may be that traditional publication is God's will for us, or it may be that we need to seek for other ways to use our gifts – through writing letters or articles within or outside our church communities. Whatever we write, there are openings for all of us. We need to work out whether we want to earn money or are willing to pay our own way, whether we are writing to teach and challenge, or simply writing for our own pleasure. We must decide whether we write for a hobby or whether we see it as a dedicated ministry.

Once we have clarified our purpose, we can then apply ourselves with the appropriate measure of faith, fun and diligence, to become the better writers we aspire to be.