

The Rhetoric of Chiasmus #5

Literature

Many write to live. Others live to write. I count myself in the latter group. Occasionally, I do manage to sell a few ebooks, now and then, to my niche market. If you are a writer, you'll find here some chiasmic quips about writing; if you're new to writing, you might like the writing tips....

Writing began long ago as a means of communication. Most humans today are aware of it and are able to use it, more or less. Literacy rates, of course, vary within different cultures and countries. Crucially, without writing, humanity's progress would have been more difficult at the outset; today, logically, you would not be reading this without it....

So, there's no doubt that writing is a necessity these days, not an option. Yet, also long ago, there was a Greek called Socrates who warned against its pitfalls. Too much knowledge can be a dangerous thing, he asserted.

Philosophy aside, my own motivation, however, stems mainly from the sheer pleasure of playing with words and meanings; if I eventually succeed in giving up my day job as an old age pensioner for a career in writing, I won't complain, though. In other words, **I never write because I want the money; I only need the money so I can write.**

Art for art's sake, of course, is a point of view held by many, including Roger Rosenblatt, one of America's "national treasures" and a writer interviewed by Jeffrey Brown on the PBS News Hour recently.

When asked by Brown specifically 'Why write?' Mr Rosenblatt rolled off four distinct reasons: to make suffering endurable; to make justice desirable; to make evil intelligible; and to make love possible. Essentially, according to Rosenblatt, you should write *to make the world better*. Putting aside the paradox lurking when defining 'better' (e.g. a better world in what way and for whom?), that's a position I've maintained since I began my foray into words that sound the same and chiasmus – simply by helping, in my own way, to reduce confusion about words and word meanings. And provide a few laughs along the way, I hope....

Frankly, I think *most* people could make things better by writing and reading. Most of us have read at least one book; many have read books of all types. While each book is different, there is a commonality to all: authors open their minds to readers, much like a true friend will confide in and with you. Hence, a good book is indeed like a good friend: **so treat both well and be well treated by both.** And, just as you expect honesty and

candor from a friend, so also **a book should challenge your thinking as much as your thinking should challenge the book.**

Writing is a craft; and, like any other, it can be acquired, to a greater or lesser degree. There are, as you probably know, many universities that now offer some of those degrees in writing. I have completed two such courses some years ago; it was time well spent. Hence, if I were to offer a succinct piece of advice to aspiring writers, I would say this, first: **Less is more, more or less....** To see that from another perspective, I'd focus on the suggestion that **scarcely-used words need to be used scarcely.** Note I could have used the adverb 'rarely' in place of 'scarcely'. Or any other *suitable* synonym.

So, how do you 'acquire' the craft of writing? In a word: write. But, write often – every day, if possible. Write whatever you like. When I decided to do just that, I read a few books about it, one of which was called *Immediate Fiction* by Jerry Cleaver (you'll find it at Amazon and other outlets). In that, he defines the story, flash fiction, the short, the novel and so on. I particularly liked what he said about the novella: **“Too big to be little and too little to be big.”**

So – read, also. Read copiously. The more you read, the more you understand words and how they can be used, misused and abused. Always remember: **you can read without writing, but you can't write without reading.** Go out of your comfort zones with what you read. If you've never read a financial newspaper, read one; if you've never read sci-fi, do so; if you can't bear the thought of poetry, read at least one to find out if you can. You'll throw away some stuff, but you might just open a new door to your mind. To put that chiastically, **as a writer, I often feel that I'm missing out on what I should read, and sometimes reading what I should be missing out on.**

Always search for the right word, not just a close synonym. That means using dictionaries and thesauri to make sure that what you're trying to say is what you're actually writing. *Feel* your writing, as you write because **words shape feelings as much as feelings shape words.** Don't stare too long at a page: write in the next word, even if you're not satisfied. When you edit and re-edit (as you *must*), the right word will come.

So, what's the *right* word? Obviously, that depends upon context, because context *always* determines meaning. Which brings me to my mini-rant about a couple of words that are so misunderstood and misused, I almost gnash my teeth when I see or hear of their mangling by too many people. I speak of the words 'discrimination' and 'prejudice', both of which are thrown about like confetti by people who should know better.

For those who have never bothered to note the difference, the former basically means to note a difference between any two things, like night and day, chalk and cheese and so on; so, it has nothing to do with prejudice, *per se*. That latter word, however, is not used as much as discrimination but, when it is, it's often misused as a direct synonym for the former. Prejudice, however, means to judge unfairly, or to have a preconceived opinion about something. Hence, after some judicious thought, I resolved the issue, I think, with the following example of chiastic criticism: **The word 'discrimination' is so much used,**

perhaps its meaning is somewhat prejudiced; 'prejudice', however, is so little used, perhaps it lacks discrimination?

Whatever you write – fact or fiction – always remember you’re telling a story. In the hands of a good writer, even the driest of factual topics can become, and should be, an interesting narrative to read (which is another rant of mine about academia that I won’t get into here). From the fictional perspective, don’t write so that your story becomes a bore (too didactic or repetitive, maybe) and a chore (too many big words that confuse the reader) to read. Because, like you I’m sure, **I’d much prefer to read a thesis that reads like a story than a story that reads like a thesis.**

And, when you get to “The End” of whatever you wrote, keep this in mind: when all is said and done – literally – **a story without a good ending is worse than a good ending without a story.**

Finally, today’s joke: should you ever read about an actor who refuses a part, maybe this is what s/he said to the producer/director: **Hey - I won’t be seen dead in a dead scene, okay!**

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