



## Learning from the King

By Dahlynn McKowen

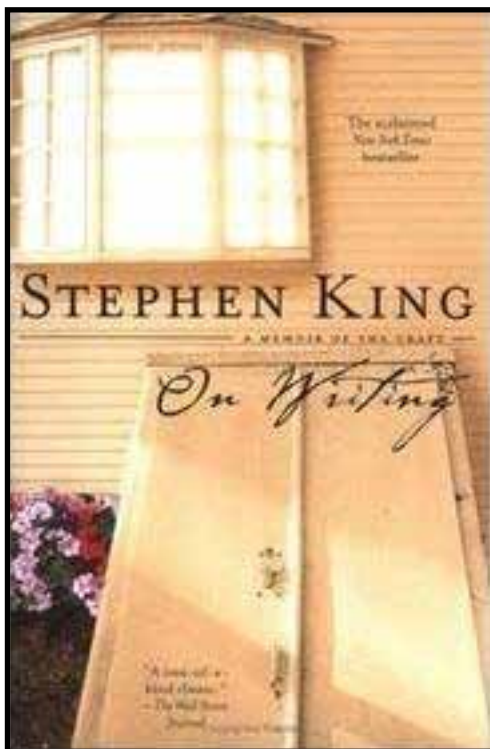
*The following article previously ran in our October 2007 issue.  
But the lessons taught are just as pertinent today  
as they were seven years ago. Enjoy!*



In keeping with the spirit of October, our main article for this month will feature the master of horror writing—Stephen King.

First and foremost, I have to admit that I don't read books often. I write, read story submissions and edit manuscripts all day long, so when it comes to sitting down and reading "a good book," that's the last thing on my agenda.

But I have to admit that when I found Stephen King's paperback *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (year 2000) at a used bookstore, I was intrigued. Here was one of the most successful writers of our time sharing his thoughts about writing. I couldn't resist, so I bought it for \$1.50. It was one of the best purchases I have made this entire year, bar none.



As soon as I opened the book, I was glued to King's every word. He sucked me in and spit me out on the other side a more enlightened writer. I've been in this business for 20 years, and I learned things that blew me away. Now for those of you who aren't writers, you may have a different view, but to me, it was worth every free moment of my already crammed schedule. I just couldn't put the book down.

*Continued...*



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Dahlynn McKowen  
Ken McKowen

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Quick synopsis: King starts with *three* forwards. Yes, three. My favorite is the second forward—fill in the blanks below as you deem appropriate:

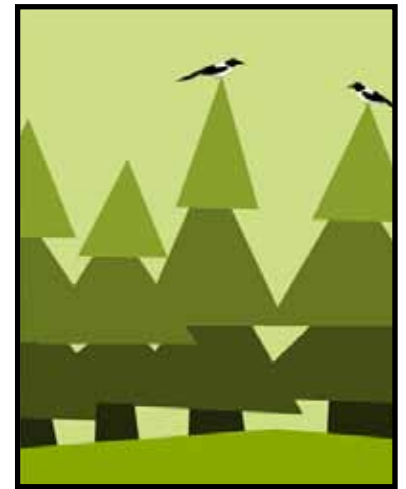
“This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with b\_\_\_\_\_. Fiction writers, present company included, don’t understand very much about what they do—not why it works when it’s good, not why it doesn’t when it’s bad. I figured the shorter the book, the less the b\_\_\_\_\_.”

King continues in this vein, from his writing beginnings to his failures to his great successes, and he sprinkles the book with his vision of what makes a great story. And what’s great about this is that his advice can be applied to both fiction and nonfiction. He finishes with an actual edited version, with handwritten notations, of one of his books.

I’m going to include a few of King’s tips in this article, but you really need to read the book to gain a full understanding of his writing wisdom.

Stephen King (pp. 200-201): “When you write a book, you spend day after day scanning and identifying the trees. When you’re done, you have to step back and look at the forest.”

This is true of all writing and comes down to editing. Get your thoughts and story on paper—everything—then start to thin. King has a unique way he “thins” or creates second drafts of his novels, which is shared in the next tip.



King (pp. 224-226): “In the spring of my senior year at Lisbon High . . . 1966 . . . I got a scribbled comment that changed the way I rewrote my fiction once and forever. Jotted below the machine-generated signature of the editor was this . . . Not bad, but PUFFY. You need to revise for length. Formula: 2nd Draft = 1st Draft – [minus] 10%. Good luck.’ ”

Without a doubt, the above editing formula has proven highly successful for King throughout the years, and it can work for your writing, too. For those of us not good with numbers (which included me!), if you create a 60,000 word first draft, then cut 10 percent, which is 6,000 words. King adds, “If you can’t get out ten percent of it while retaining the basic story and flavor, then you’re not trying very hard.”

King (pg. 220): “Call that one person that you write for [the] Ideal Reader.”

King explains that the Ideal Reader (I.R.) is the person you know who will read your first draft, so have them in your mind at all times as you create your manuscript.

*Continued...*

King (pg. 221): "I.R. will help you get outside yourself...to actually read your work in progress as an audience would while you're working. This is perhaps the best way of all to make sure you stick to story . . ."

King uses many examples of Ideal Reader throughout the book. My Ideal Reader is Ken, and I'm his; he's in my head when I write. This forces me to make sure my ideas and storylines are clear, my back story is concise and the flow is not too forced. He also adds comedy to my writing, as I'm not funny . . . I'm usually the only one who laughs at my jokes!

This article barely scratches the surface of what you will find in this funny, gracious and, for a writer, very inspiring book. King's sage advice of the publishing industry is worth the cost alone. I highly recommend this book to novice, experienced and professional writers; it is a writing master class for the ages.



**Update:** In July 2010, Scribner Books released a 10th anniversary edition of this book: *On Writing: 10th Anniversary Edition: A Memoir of the Craft Paperback – Deluxe Edition*. Be sure to add this book to your holiday wish list!



## BOO! Stage Fright for YOU?!

We have all been there, that moment when we're about to go out onto stage and the nerves attack.

Email us your stage fright story—the good, the bad and the ugly—no later than November 20th and it might appear in the November issue of *The Wow Principles*. Try not to exceed 100 words and if you can, include a photo of the event or a headshot (send only hi-res images). Email: [Dahlynn@PublishingSyndicate.com](mailto:Dahlynn@PublishingSyndicate.com)

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