



Kurt Vonnegut's Tips for Effective Writing

(from "How to Write with Style")



1 - Find a subject you care about. *"Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style."*

2 - Do not ramble, though. *"I won't ramble on about that."*

3 - Keep it simple. *"As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. 'To be or not to be?' asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long...**Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred.** The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.'"*

4 - Have the guts to cut. *"Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out."*

5 - Sound like yourself. *"The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child... I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am."*

6 - Say what you mean to say. *"If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledy-piggledy, I would simply not be understood. So you, too, had better avoid Picasso-style or jazz-style writing, if you have something worth saying and wish to be understood. Readers want our pages to look very much like pages they have seen before. Why? This is because they themselves have a tough job to do, and they need all the help they can get from us."*

7 - Pity the readers. *"They have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and make sense of them immediately... So this discussion must finally acknowledge that our stylistic options as writers are neither numerous nor glamorous, since our readers are bound to be such imperfect artists. Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify—whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing like nightingales."*

8 - For really detailed advice... *"For a discussion of literary style in a narrower sense, in a more technical sense, I commend to your attention The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White (Macmillan, 1979). E.B. White is, of course, one of the most admirable literary stylists this country has so far produced."*