



IN FACT

THE BEST OF
CREATIVE NONFICTION

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INTRODUCTION BY ANNIE DILLARD

Introduction: Notes for Young Writers

ANNIE DILLARD

Dedicate (donate, give all) your life to something larger than yourself and pleasure—to the largest thing you can: to God, to relieving suffering, to contributing to knowledge, to adding to literature, or something else. Happiness lies this way, and it beats pleasure hollow.

A great physicist taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He published many important books and papers. Often he had an idea in the middle of the night. He rose from his bed, took a shower, washed his hair, and shaved. He dressed completely, in a clean shirt, in polished shoes, a jacket and tie. Then he sat at his desk and wrote down his idea. A friend of mine asked him why he put himself through all that rigmarole. "Why," he said, surprised at the question, "in honor of physics!"

ANNIE DILLARD is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and numerous other works of nonfiction, most recently *For the Time Being*. She is professor emeritus at Wesleyan University.

If you have a choice, live at least a year in very different parts of the country.

Never, ever, get yourself into a situation where you have nothing to do but write and read. You'll go into a depression. You have to be doing something good for the world, something undeniably useful; you need exercise, too, and people.

Read for pleasure. If you like Tolstoy, read Tolstoy; if you like Dostoevsky, read Dostoevsky. Push it a little, but don't read something totally alien to your nature and then say, "I'll never be able to write like that." Of course you won't. Read books you'd like to write. If you want to write literature, read literature. Write books you'd like to read. Follow your own weirdness.

You'll have time to read after college.

Don't worry about what you do the first year after college. It's not what you'll be doing for the rest of your life.

People in the arts, I read once, take about eight years just to figure out which art they're in! Notify your parents.

MFA and MA writing programs are great fun, and many are cheap or free.

Learn grammar. Get a grammar book and read it two or three times a year. (Strunk and White is classic.)

Learn punctuation; it is your little drum set, one of the few tools you have to signal the reader where the beats and emphases go. (If you get it wrong, any least thing, the editor will throw your

manuscript out.) Punctuation is not like musical notation; it doesn't indicate the length of pauses, but instead signifies logical relations. There are all sorts of people out there who know these things very well. You have to be among them even to begin.

Check the spelling; proofread. Get someone else to proofread, too.

Don't use passive verb constructions. You can rewrite any sentence.

Don't misspell dialect. Let the syntax and words suggest the pronunciation.

Don't use any word for "walk" or "say" except "walk" or "say." I know your sixth-grade teacher told you otherwise. She told me otherwise, too, and is still telling her sixth graders otherwise.

Always locate the reader in time and space—again and again. Beginning writers rush in to feelings, to interior lives. Instead, stick to surface appearances; hit the five senses; give the history of the person and the place, and the look of the person and the place. Use first and last names. As you write, stick everything in a place and a time.

Don't describe feelings.

The way to a reader's emotions is, oddly enough, through the senses.

If something in your narrative or poem is important, give it proportional space. I mean, actual inches. The reader has to spend

time with a subject to care about it. Don't shy away from your big scenes; stretch them out.

Writing in scenes doesn't mean in television scenes. No dull dialogue: "Honey, I'm home! Where's the beer?" "In the refrigerator!" (I think most fiction contains far too much dialogue.)

Capturing the typical isn't a virtue. Only making something new and interesting is. If you find life dull and people hateful, keep thinking until you can see it another way. Why would any reader pick up a book to read a detailed description of all that is most annoying in his daily life?

Don't use any extra words. A sentence is a machine; it has a job to do. An extra word in a sentence is like a sock in a machine.

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Buy books from independent booksellers, not chain stores. For complicated reasons, chain stores are helping stamp out literary publishing.

(Similarly, register and vote. If you don't vote, don't complain.)

Write for readers. Ask yourself how every sentence and every line will strike the reader. That way you can see if you're misleading, or boring, the readers. Of course it's hard to read your work when you've just written it; it all seems clear and powerful.

Put it away and rewrite it later. Don't keep reading it over, or you'll have to wait longer to see it afresh.

Don't write about yourself. Think of books you like. Isn't it their subjects you like best? Boring people talk about themselves.

The work's unity is more important than anything else about it. Those digressions that were so much fun to write must go.

Usually you will have to rewrite the beginning—the first quarter or third of whatever it is. Don't waste much time polishing this; you'll just have to take a deep breath and throw it away anyway, once you finish the work and have a clearer sense of what it is about. Tear up the runway; it helped you take off, and you don't need it now. This is why some writers say it takes "courage" to write. It does. Over and over you must choose the book over your own wishes and feelings.

Ignore your feelings about your work. These are an occupational hazard. If you are writing a book, keep working at it, deeper and deeper, when you feel it is awful; keep revising and improving it when you feel it is wonderful. When you are young and starting out, often it is better, however, to write something else than to labor over something that was a bad idea in the first place. Write something else; then write something else; then write something else. No matter how experienced you are, there is no correlation, either direct or inverse, between your immediate feelings about your work's quality and its actual quality. All you can do is ignore your feelings altogether. It's hard to do, but you can learn to do it.

When you are writing full-time (three to four hours a day), go in the room with the book every day, regardless of your feelings. If

you skip a day it will take three painful days to get to believing in the work again. Have a place where you can leave the work out and open so you don't have to get it all out and spread before you can start again.

The more you read, the more you will write. The better the stuff you read, the better the stuff you will write. You have many years. You can develop a taste for good literature gradually. Keep a list of books you want to read. You soon learn that "classics" are books that are endlessly interesting—almost all of them. You can keep rereading them all your life—about every ten years—and various ones light up for you at different stages of your life.

Don't find an interesting true story—a life, say, or a historical incident—and decide to turn it into a novel instead of a biography or a historical account. The novel based on fact is a muddy hybrid; readers can't tell what's true. Publishers won't touch these. Write it as nonfiction if you want to write it.

If you want to write novels (and if you buy hardcover novels regularly), go ahead and write novels. Publishing has changed, however, and novels are very difficult to publish. If you want to improve the odds that people will read what you write, write nonfiction narrative.

For fiction, poetry, or nonfiction, the more research you do, the more materials you will have to play with. You are writing for readers—a very educated bunch in this country. It's hard and interesting to tell them something they don't know. The more you read, the better you will know what they know.

No one can help you if you're stuck in a work. Only you can figure a way out, because only you see the work's possibilities. In

every work, there's an inherent impossibility which you discover sooner or later—some intrinsic reason why this will never be able to proceed. You can figure out ways around it. Often the way around it is to throw out, painfully, the one idea you started with.

Publication is not a gauge of excellence. This is harder to learn than anything about publishing, and very important. Formerly, if a manuscript was "good," it "merited" publication. This has not been true for at least twenty years, but the news hasn't filtered out to change the belief. People say, "Why, Faulkner couldn't get published today!" as if exaggerating. In fact, Faulkner certainly couldn't, and publishers don't deny it. The market for hardback fiction is rich married or widowed women over fifty (until you all start buying hardback books). The junior editors who choose new work are New York women in their twenties who are interested in what is chic in New York that week, and who have become experts in what the older women will buy in hardcover. Eight books of nonfiction appear for every book of fiction. The chance of any manuscript coming into a publishing house and getting published is one in three thousand. (Agents send in most of these manuscripts. Most agents won't touch fiction.)

When a magazine rejects your story or poem, it doesn't mean it wasn't "good" enough. It means that magazine thought its particular readers didn't need that exact story or poem. Editors think of readers: what's in it for the reader? There is a cult of celebrity, too, in this country, and many magazines publish only famous people, and reject better work by unknown people.

You need to know these things somewhere in the back of your mind, and you need to forget them and write whatever you're going to write.