Leaders are often writers, and great writing is a potent form of leadership; it can heighten consciousness, outrage us, encourage us to protest or even to wage war. Writing can be an effective means of communicating, persuading, and changing how people think, dream, and behave. Machiavelli, Jefferson, Madison, Marx, Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Orwell, Rachael Carson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Alexander Solzhenitsyn provide inspiring examples.

Writers always have advice for aspiring writers: Read good writers and good writing. Use as many words as you must and as few as you can. Don’t use long words where short ones will do. Use the language of everyday life, yet don’t
substitute common words for striking and distinctive words just to keep it simple. Say what you mean and sound like yourself. At the same time, strive for cadence, smoothness and freshness. Clarity of writing flows from clarity of thought. Write five pages a day, every day. Make every word count.

Direct your writing to a single reader, or at least to a distinct audience. Signal your voice, tone, and theme in your first two paragraphs. Write to inform, arouse, persuade. "Readers . . . have a tough job to do," notes Kurt Vonnegut, "and they need all the help they can get" from writers. After all, readers have to decipher thousands of little notations and make sense of them. Unlike symphony musicians, they have no conductor to lead them through an essay or book. Few phrases signal how fast or slow, or loud or soft a text is to be read. Punctuation can help. "Punctuation marks," writes Pico Iyer, "are the road signs placed along the highways of our communication &endash; to control speeds, provide directions and prevent head-on collisions."

Ernest Hemingway emphasized that writing, at its best, is exacting and often frustrating, in part because it is something you can never do as well as it can be done. Hemingway rewrote his ending of *Farewell to Arms* 39 times before he was satisfied. "There’s no rule on how it is to write. Sometimes it comes easily and perfectly. Sometimes it is like drilling rock and then
blasting it out with charges," Hemingway remarked. "I love to write," he added, "but it has never gotten any easier to do and you can’t expect it to if you keep trying for something better than you can do."

Hemingway believed each writing project should be a new beginning -- a time to try again for something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed. One cannot, he said, be satisfied to write in another way what already has been well written. No. It is precisely because we have known such fine writers in the past that we who write are driven far beyond where we are comfortable, to where no one can help us.

The joy of research and writing comes from the challenge of being out there on your own, rethinking the explored realm of human relations and vision, and examining the unexplored. Writing itself is one of the grand, free, human activities. Working back and forth between experiences and ideas, evidence and imagination, data and theory, a writer has more than
space and time can offer. And a writer with a sense of justice can remind us what ought to be, what might be, and where we have failed. No one has made this point better than Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his 1970 Nobel Prize address:

- The task of the artist is to sense more keenly than others the harmony of the world, the beauty and the outrage of what man has done to it, and poignantly to let people know . . .

Literature transmits condensed and irrefutable human experience in still another priceless way: from generation to generation. It thus becomes the living memory of a nation. What has faded into history thus keeps warm and preserves in a form that defies distortion and falsehood. Thus literature, together with language, preserves and protects a nation’s soul . . .

What is the place and role of the writer? . . . A writer is no sideline judge of his fellow countrymen and contemporaries; he is equally guilty of all the evil done in his country or by his people. If his country’s tanks spill blood on the streets of some alien capital, the brown stains are splashed forever on the writer’s face. If, some fatal night, his trusting friend is choked to death
while sleeping, the bruises from the rope are on the writer’s hands. If his young fellow citizens in their easy going way declare the superiority of debauchery over frugal labor, abandon themselves to drugs or seize hostages, the stink of it mixes with the writer’s breathing.

**Focus and Outline**

It helps to have a map of where you’re going. If you don’t know where you’re going, you just may end up there. The moral is important. In the past you may have sat down at your computer and produced a first draft you thought was a final product. Your essay may have been put together by cutting and pasting odd descriptions and definitions and tagging on a rough conclusion. This is unacceptable.

At the very least, prepare a statement of purpose to clarify your objectives. What do you intend to do? Why are you writing on this topic? What’s the problem? What is your main theme? Write out, in pen or pencil and in sentence form, each major point you believe is needed to support your thesis. Jot down, under each sentence, the evidence you will use to support your central points.

**Write Honestly, with Voice and Power**

Once you have sketched an outline, sit down
and start writing, or turn on your computer. Put your ideas into words, composing freely. Try shotgun writing, thinking in terms of blocks or chunks of ideas. Your first inclination with words is usually what you really mean. Go back later and search for a better way of saying it. Don’t expect to get the vocabulary or flow exactly right on the first try. Concentrate on getting your ideas down in any way you can. Writing technically correct prose about irrelevant ideas is a waste of talent, time, and energy. So focus first on the ideas and revise afterward.

At this stage, it’s okay to be sloppy. Make a mess. Who cares? Allow your ideas to begin to take shape. Serious thinking is far more important at this stage than error-free paragraphs. Later you can get them in more concise and elegant form. "If you are like most people, you can’t do much precise thinking until you have committed to paper at least a rough sketch of your initial ideas," writes Sylvan Barnet of Tufts University. "Later you can push and polish your ideas into shape, perhaps even deleting all of them and starting over, but it’s a lot easier to improve your ideas once you see them in front of you, than it is to do the job in your head. On paper one word leads to another, in your head one word often blocks another."

Each of us writes with a distinctive flavor and voice. Be yourself. Write from the heart. Some stylists advise writers to place themselves in the background. They contend, with some
justification, that writing and talking are two separate modes of communication. A speaker, for example, has a rapport with listeners and takes into account what they already know. Formal writing and putting yourself in the background will work for many of you. It is absolutely required if you are writing for the *Yale Law Review* or *The New England Journal of Medicine*. But those who have made political writing into an art have written in their own voice with a compelling political purpose in mind; they exposed lies, drew attention to facts and sought a hearing for their views. Voice is the character and passion of the writer revealed.

**Then Revise, Revise, Revise**

Starting to write is the most difficult part of writing for some people. For others, like me, rewriting, revising, and editing are more exacting. If you are not already ruthless about editing, erasing and discarding unnecessary words, get that way. Ask: Can I write it more concisely? If it is possible to cut a word, cut it. Leave out the parts the reader will skip.

**Select Your Words Carefully**

The most common writing deficiency is an overly casual approach to the use of words. Ask yourself: What is it I’m trying to say? Why am I using this word? Does it look right? Does it sound right? Is there a better word, a fresher
way to say it? Is it clear, direct, brief, and bold? Can one word suffice for two or three now used? "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts," advises William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. "This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

In addition to using accurate words you will usually want to use familiar, simple, unadorned words. Simplicity increases readability. Complexity, unorthodox usages, transitional adverbs, and abstract nouns diminish readability.

Strive for lean writing, using simple words. Avoid jargon, pedantry, or foreign phrases designed to show off your erudition. Arrogance pervades the work of certain scholars and professors. The greatest discovery in history is useless if no one understands what it means. One of my students summed it up perfectly: "It is a cardinal sin of so-called ‘teachers’ to write and talk so their students cannot understand them -- I hate that." There is nothing wrong with using exotic words if they are the best ones to describe what you’re talking about; yet if your work is aimed at a lay audience, use words ordinary readers will understand.
Let Verbs and Nouns Do the Work

Short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs are preferable. The challenge is to avoid oversimplification as well as mindless overwriting. Carefully selected verbs and nouns seldom need a string of adjectives and adverbs to amplify their meaning.

Strong verbs (verbs that show action) infuse sentences with life-giving nectar. You can accomplish more with one carefully chosen, vivid, telling verb than with a boxcar full of highfalutin adjectives. A common verb offense committed by writers is the use of the lame verb forms, there is, there are, it is, and it seems where it is impersonal and has no referent. People fall into the habit of using these forms out of pure laziness. They are the first and easiest resorts. And the worst. Don’t even think of using them. They weaken most, if not all, sentences. And they can almost always be replaced by more telling verbs. Further, using strong verbs rather than these flaccid and unimaginative forms contributes to word economy. Take the following simple yet universally applicable example: "There is one legislator who writes most of the committee’s bills and reports." Remove three bland words: there, is and who. Now your sentence reads: "One legislator writes most of the committee’s bills and reports." The sentence is now three words shorter and contains a strong verb as its
Active verbs make for vital sentences. An active verb has the person performing the action as its subject, as in "I am voting," or "She leads her team." A passive verb is a form of the "to be" family plus the past participle, as in "The group is being lead by Heather," or "The election results have been counted." Try: "Heather leads her team," and "They tallied the votes."

The active voice verb provides pace and movement. It uses verbs to push, strike, carry, and persuade. "Joe led the discussion" is strong. "The discussion was led by Joe" is limp. The passive voice makes for sluggish reading. It slows the pace. And the passive voice usually requires the use of more words. "The active voice strikes like a boxer moving forward in attack," writes Theodore M. Bernstein. "The passive voice parries while backpedaling."

**Use Qualifiers and Modifiers Sparingly**

Be bold. Be definite. Say it in positive form. Take a stand. Avoid using qualifiers: *it seems, it appears, very, quite, pretty, rather, definitely, usually, mostly, generally, a lot, all right, some, often, sort of, various, frequently, really, probably, basically, and essentially*. Don't even think of using: *somewhat unique, very unique, or almost unique*. Unique is unique.

Avoid using *pretty, really, sort of* and similar words as qualifiers of intensity in formal writing.
Be careful not to confuse qualifiers of size (huge, tremendous) with qualifiers of intensity (significant, important).

A qualifier is necessary, of course, if a statement or partial evidence is open to doubt and hence an occasional perhaps or reportedly or on the whole has to be used. Also restrain the temptation to hedge with, if only, moreover, furthermore, the fact that, it is believed that, it is sometimes said that, on one hand, however, that which, notwithstanding, and to the contrary notwithstanding.

Avoid "Twinkie" Words

A "twinkie" word takes its meaning from junk food, which has little or no substance or nutrition. My nominations for twinkie awards are: needless to say, to say the least, interesting, nice, meaningful, exciting, hopefully, key, insightful, great, there are, there is, there was, and so forth, and the like, and so on, crucial, drastic, stimulating, sensitive, and parameter. Most are good words, yet they have been spoiled by excessive and careless use until they have become hollow.

Don’t use jargon. Adding -wise and -ize to the end of words may be fashionable, but it undermines clarity. The suffix -wise has a place in established forms like clockwise, otherwise, and likewise, but adding it to nouns to indicate in relation to is sloppy thinking and writing.
Made-up words like *politicswise*, *P.R.-wise*, *leadershipwise*, *policywise*, *datawise*, and *mediawise* are unpleasant to the eye as well as to the ear.

Although *finalize*, *prioritize*, *divisionalize*, *definitize*, *analogize*, and *bureaucratize* are formed by the same process that created the acceptable *popularize*, *concertize*, and *modernize*, I still object to them. Better words can be employed. For *finalize*, try *complete*, *conclude*, or *end*. Beware of being a *wiseacre* or *izeguy*.

Please also avoid trendy words like *scenario*, *input*, *interface*, *impact*, *effectuate*, *bottom line*, *awesome*, and *political actors*.

**Leads and Conclusions**

Put effort and imagination into coming up with an apt, and if possible, intriguing title. An effective title telegraphs your theme and arouses interest.

Your essay’s first few sentences are more important than any others. If your first paragraph doesn’t interest readers enough to proceed to the second, you might as well stop right there. An effective lead signals your thesis and hooks readers with a few calculated teasers. As they look at your title and leading sentences, readers are asking: What’s the big idea? Where is this writer going? What’s in this for me?
Conclusions should flow from the rest of the paper. They don’t need signals like in conclusion or in summary. They should tie ideas together, not simply restate what already has been said.

Last Words

Good writers invent their own rules and conveniently ignore traditional usage and style if these impede their writing. Mark Twain broke some rules and told his stories with poetic and lyric descriptions, similes and colloquial turns of speech; Faulkner went on and on and on, and yet he succeeded because he made his long sentences sing and his paragraphs dance. Walt Whitman was a congenital rule-breaker. Hemingway redefined lean writing.

Yet even the great ones acknowledge at least a few basic guidelines. To be good, you have to read and observe a lot. To write well you have to revise and revise. "I began to write seriously when I had taught myself the discipline necessary to achieve what I wanted," observes the gifted novelist Bernard Malamud. "When I touched that time, my words announced themselves to me." Revision, he notes, became not only essential but also one of the exquisite pleasures of writing. He would write everything three times: once to understand it, the second time to improve the prose, "and a third time to say what it still must say."

Writing is a performing art. Yet unlike music,
drama, or sports, no conductor, director or coach leads your reader through the performance. Word selection and punctuation are the only aids suggesting how fast or slow or loud the writing should be. Reading is a solitary, detached experience. Your writing must be its own conductor and coach. Unworthy writing repels and confuses. Dull or devitalized writing confines the reader. Active, lean, clear writing, on the other hand, informs, persuades, entertains, empowers, liberates. Understand that it depends on you.

Writing matters. But what matters even more is the power of your ideas. Be brave. Writing is invariably an act of courage. Just as our leaders define, defend, and promote values, so also writers help define and clarify critical choices. Writing is a grand opportunity to tell your story, to tell the truth about yourself, to advocate your beliefs, and to share your creative ideas about your community, your nation, your world. A writer writes to understand, to teach, to persuade, to celebrate, to criticize, to lead, to improve and to tell useful stories.