

ON WRITING: BONE & MUSCLE

by DAVID SUMMERFIELD

Craft and substance are the bone and muscle of creative writing; precision, research, clarity, and detail are the connective tissue.

When I started writing creatively, I tried to imitate the craft of my favorite authors. I thought imitation would teach me the craft of creative writing. I thought imitating the craft of accomplished writers would be a surefire way to a successful creative writing career. I was wrong.

I discovered that the best writing can never be imitated; only Hemingway can write like Hemingway. No matter how hard I tried to duplicate the work of a great writer, I could never create a product with the same weight and effect. I had discovered the first flaw of creative writing is to copy the craft of another writer, especially a famous one, because the work a writer is famous for defies imitation.

This futility led me to the first rule of creative writing—you can only write like yourself. A realization that left me with a blank stare. How can I bend tenets of craft to write like myself when I don't know who that self is? I had a vision of life and the world that was only muddled at best.

So I stopped trying to hijack the work of great authors, with standard tenets of craft, the bones of my writing. After endless drafts, clarifying, organizing, and uncluttering my mind, I was able to overlay bone with muscle of substance, muscle that came from the authenticity of my own thoughts and values, not someone else's. I began to read the classics again and in the works of many unknown writers found tenets of craft married to unique visions like the one I had informed for myself. After many full-scale workouts struggling to build out that substance of my own themes and ideas, I was finally able to graft that muscle with precision and clarity onto the bone of craft. I had found the inspiration to write in a unique voice that was wholly my own, and I wanted each new piece to be a muscle pump in the mind of the reader.

Forming my own thoughts and opinions left me free and eager to write. Pretty prose became more incisive, clever writing more insightful. Toward developing my own style of writing, I had become better at weaving around obstacles of people telling me how to write, some bits helpful, most not. One useful bit of advice included holding on to scraps cut from earlier pieces, building an archive of connective tissue to graft into new work. I was told there was good connective tissue, such as metaphor and simile, and bad connective tissue – to use certain words to make the writing more interesting, to not use excess adjectives and adverbs, but I found this advice made writing more difficult than it needed to be. I found that sometimes metaphors and similes were window-dressing and just pretty language, that

some forbidden words afforded a precise number of syllables to improve and maintain a certain flow, rhythm, or emphasis in a sentence, paragraph, or in between sentences and paragraphs.

Craft and substance are the bone and muscle of creative writing; precision, research, clarity, and detail are the connective tissue. Craft comes with constant disciplined writing; rarely does it emanate from inspiration, with precise cutting and tightening constantly working and re-working those fibers of muscle that are the details of sentences and paragraphs into the most clear and concise presentation possible, remembering always that the bone of craft is inert without the muscle of substance to give it movement, force, and power.

Research is the fiber that imbues that muscle of substance with strength, not research for accuracy in time, place, and setting, although these details are important, but rather research regarding the author's own sense of himself, his/her ideas, values, and beliefs, which inform a vision of life, a view of the world which enables one to write. The creation of serious, thoughtful literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry begins with researching oneself first, continuing to explore, develop, and discover that self through subsequent writing so that the substantive self and craft progress together along a path toward accomplishment, enlightening an audience, and continuing to create from that ongoing exploration. Writing created not from the heart of an examined life, an enlightened self, but solely from objective research renders creative writing soulless and not worth writing. Writing should come from the desire to know more of that self, and a desire to impart to an audience the results of that continuing journey. Substance is not born from craft or objective research; craft is born from innovation and imagination built on substance, the desire to form that examined inner world into an accurate, comprehensible view of life and the outer world, its brutality and its beauty, its glorious successes and its abject failures.

The most important bone in the creative writing process is the one that protects the most important muscle in the creative writing process, the brain. The brain grows stronger with exercise, constantly marrying substance to craft at a regular time in an ordered place conducive to a vigorous and fruitful work-out session called creation. Not having made something from nothing but from the exercise of having already analyzed one's individual and practiced attitudes, the art itself being a by-product of such, until the act of creation becomes habit, builds on itself, and not in a negative sense, an addiction of endless discovery, never arriving at a point of stagnation or boredom. Such a routine that becomes normal and has an automatic trigger against becoming satisfied is the common denominator of living one's life as an artist; such a routine keeps one moving forward on a path to the future and self-actualization, the essence of true artistry. When the bone and muscle of creation is strapped to an arrow of substance and craft the journey of creation becomes a missile upon which to ride bronc-busting style, a rocket to shoot out over the abyss on, hat waving boot kicking past dread, despair, nothingness and the absurd, straight into the laughing face of the sun, with a feeling of well-being, and except for eternal slumber, no pink slip.