Since starting this tech-writing thing (vernacular gratis my teenage daughters), I have read, been sent (thanks!), and heard a gaggle of insightful, inspirational, and funny quotations on writing, editing and review, and related topics. If you find one or two particularly suitable, hang it or them on your wall.

On Writing

"Without publication, science is dead."
—GERARD PIEL, scholar

"Grasp the subject, the words will follow."
—MARCUS PORCIUS CATO, THE ELDER, ancient Roman scholar

"For there are plenty of mistakes made by writers out of ignorance, and which any man finds it difficult to avoid. But if we knowingly write what is false ... what difference is there between us and hack writers?"
—POLYBIUS, ancient Roman scholar

"A bad beginning makes a bad ending."
—EURIPIDES, ancient Greek playwright

"If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things of worth, or do things worth the writing."
—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, statesman, author, inventor, etc.

"You write with ease to show your breeding, but easy writing's curt hard reading."
—RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN, playwright

"To find out the true state of facts, to report them with fidelity, to apply to them strict and fixed principles ... to inform as far as possible ... appear to me to be the first duties of those who write."
—HENRY REEVE, author and editor for the Times of London

“A moment’s thinking is an hour in words.”
—THOMAS HOOD, poet and humorist

“There are no dull subjects. There are only dull writers.”
—H. L. MENCKEN, author

“Your manuscript is both good and original, but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.”
—SAMUEL JOHNSON, poet, scholar, and lexicographer

“In our experience, the misplacement of old and new information turns out to be the No. 1 problem in American professional writing.”
—GEORGE GOPEN and JUDY SWAN, writing specialists

“What is wrong with most writing today is its flaccidity, its lack of pleasure in the manipulation of sounds and phrases. The written word is becoming inert.”
—ANTHONY BURGESS, scholar

“Words, when well chosen, have so great a force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves.”
—DANIEL O’NEAL JR., scholar

“The wastepaper basket is a writer’s best friend.”
—ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER, author

“... word processors can be responsible for producing a good deal of flabby writing. The words come out of you like toothpaste sometimes.”
—GARRISON KEILLOR, author and humorist

“Wood carpentry is like any other kind of carpentry: You must join sentences smoothly.”
—ANATOLE FRANCE, scholar

“Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery.”
—HENRY MILLER, author

“Too many scientists and engineers see technical writing as a legacy of technical courses. It’s not. It’s a voyage of a different course.”
—ANONYMOUS

“Having published is neither necessary or sufficient to being a good writer. It may simply indicate an imperfect system.”
—ANONYMOUS

“When ideas fail, words come in very handy.”
—JOHANN GOETHE, poet, novelist, and dramatist

“Good writing is a function of two things: What you say and what you don’t say.”
—ANONYMOUS

“Each researcher has two problems to solve. The first is the research; the second is reporting it.”
—ANONYMOUS

“Don’t underrate the ability of words to shape man’s thinking, polarize his attitude, mold his character, and dictate his actions.”
—H. MICHAELSON, technical writing author

“Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.”
—WILLIAM ZINSSER, author

“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. 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.”
—WILLIAM STRUNK JR., author and grammarian
“Writing is among the greatest inventions in human history, perhaps THE greatest invention, since it made history possible.”

—A. Robinson, author

“Good writing is good manners. You can both please and help your public only when you learn how to be the first victim of your writing, how to anticipate a reader’s difficulties, and to hear yourself as others hear you.”

—Ritchie R. Ward, scholar

“I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published.”

—Vladimir Nabokov, author

“No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader’s intelligence or whose attitude is patronizing.”

—E. B. White, author

“Trouble in writing clearly ... reflects troubled thinking, usually an incomplete grasp of the facts or their meaning.”

—Barbara Tuchman, American historian and author

On Editing and Reviewing

“Nature fits all her children with something to do, he who would write and can’t write, can surely review.”

—James Russell Lowell, poet, essayist, and diplomat

“Editing is like sculpting ... The editor and the sculpture both take a basic form, add elements that are needed to strengthen lines or create interest, and remove elements that distract from a harmonious whole. Each step builds on what has been done before.”

—Jan Vanolia, technical writing author

“Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.”

—Anonymous

“As your experience grows, you will find that revising is pleasurable, even though its purpose is the discovery of your own failings.”

—Jacques Barzun, scholar

“My writing is a process that does not converge: I cannot read a page of my own prose without wanting to improve it.”

—N. David Mermin, physicist

“No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else’s draft.”

—H. G. Wells, novelist and historian

“Editing your own writing, on the other hand, challenges your ability to be objective. To develop distance from your writing, take a break before beginning to revise ... several days ... let it cool off over night ... As a minimum, walk away for a few moments ... whatever is necessary to change your perspectives from those of writer to those of reader. Try to see the document from fresh eyes.”

—Jan Vanolia

“A draconian task.”

—Jon Ake, geophysicist

“... everything you do you have to do again, and your capacity for rewriting is the only thing that separates you from people who do things in a hurry.”

—John Irving, author

On the Rest

“One does not speak of a Euclidean, an Archimedean. When truth is evident, it is impossible for parties and factions to arise. There never has been a dispute as to whether there is daylight at noon.”

—Voltaire (Francois Marie Arouet), French philosopher

“Anyone who isn’t confused really doesn’t understand the situation.”

—Edward R. Murrow, radio and TV newscaster

“... (he) seems to not realize how the appearance of great complexity can be mimicked by noise.”

—Anonymous

Finally, since I am quoting others, I’d like to end with a short essay from Vanolia’s book Rewrite Right! How to Revise Your Way to Better Writing (Ten Speed Press/Periwinkle Press, 1987). I find this essay particularly insightful. Because the essay was written in the 1980s and because the electronic era has changed technical writing, I have taken the liberty of updating it a bit.

Is Good Writing Obsolete?

Who cares about good writing those days? Has the need for good writing disappeared as paper and pencil have been replaced by screen and keyboard, Internet, and Web pages, desktop publishing, etc.? Not at all. In fact, when asked recently what subjects students should study to prepare for business, top executives answered in one voice: Learn to write better. Editors, who must sift through mailbags full of ineptly written manuscripts, would say ‘Amen.’

Many skilled individuals falter when it comes to writing. They may be experts at their science or technology, but tell them to write it up and they turn into wimps. They mask their insecurity by relying on the worn-out expressions and stilted prose they perceive as being authoritative. For writing models they look to their colleagues, most of whom write poorly.

Such mediocre writing can have unwelcome effects. Muddled instructions create confusion. Costly research is replicated because the results are buried in an obscure, two-pound report. Boring writing is tossed aside unread, a waste of the investment made in producing it. Slipshod writing breeds distrust, prompting readers to wonder if language is the writer’s only area of incompetence.

At the other end of the spectrum, good writing can get things done right. Its crisp, clear style requires less of the reader’s time. Good writing is cost-effective; it lowers administrative expenses and lightens workloads. Polished writing has a professional tone that reflects well on the general competence of the writer, suggesting that attention is paid to other areas as well.

Corresponding author: kmahrer@du.edu