

**W**e talk so much about butt-in-chair time as writers. “A writer is someone who *writes*,” we say, snidely. And that’s all very true, of course. Books don’t magically write themselves. That niggling story idea in the back of your brain will never come to fruition if you never pick up a pen.

Yet so much of my own writing is done with nary a pen in sight. As a cook, I’m a religious believer in the equation of *simple ingredients + time = magic*. A chicken baptized with salt and time is a thousand times more flavorful than one pulled straight from its packaging. Cabbage and salt, when left alone to their own devices in the dark, become complex, tangy sauerkraut. Fruit macerates, cucumbers pickle, and a three-ingredient marinade turns a ten-dollar roast into the stuff of legends.

The missing ingredient from most of the work I reject is not sparkling language or a prestigious bio: It’s time. An editor can tell immediately if a piece is too hot, unseasoned, or raw for consumption; it has not sat in the writer’s own mental pressure cooker for nearly enough time. Perhaps its sharpness needs to be mellowed by reader feedback; perhaps the work’s components have not yet had time to marry and sit angularly in contrast on the page, all elbows and knees and no grace.

The good news, the very best news for busy writers like you and I, is that all the time that your work needs is *hands-off*. Like cabbage and salt, your characters will develop on their own if you let them live in your mind for long enough. Turn the themes of your essay over and over in your mind until they polish as smoothly as river stones. Test dialogue out loud as you stir the soup or scrub the floors.

Better still? All that pressure that comes from filling a blank page? Gone. Vanished. You’re merely auditioning words and ideas, not committing them permanently to paper.

When you land on the right answer, the white-hot solution to your block or the beating heart of your story, *then* run to the page and let your fingers fly to get it all down.

Until then, percolate.

Keep writing.

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# The 33 THE-SES

An article on an underappreciated article.

M. THOMAS GAMMARINO

1\_Sometimes novelists like to bypass introductions and drop us right in the middle of things. The first sentence of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.”

I’m sorry, which flowers? Were we discussing flowers?

2\_On one level, “the” doesn’t seem to signify much.

3\_On a desert island, however, “I drank the water” means something very different from simply “I drank water.”

4\_English distinguishes between the definite article “the,” the indefinite article “a,” and the demonstratives “this” and “that.” Some languages have no articles. Japanese is one such language. It has three demonstratives, however, corresponding to “this here,” “that over there near you,” “and that over there near neither of us.”

5\_Pun: They paid me ten cents a word for the article; I bought a gumball.

6\_“The children love you” vs. “Children love you.” Discuss.

7\_“The” was the first word I learned how to read. On my first day of first grade, my teacher, Miss Kane, administered a diagnostic test to see which reading group each of us belonged in. I remember waiting toward the back of the line, my nerves on edge because I couldn’t read a lick and was shocked to see that many of my classmates, even my best friend, could. Needless to say, I soon found myself in the bottom of four reading groups, The Care Bears.

I stormed home that day after school and demanded that my parents teach me how to read. After dinner, my father sat me on his knee and unfolded the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. “This here,” he said, fingering some letters, “this is the word ‘the.’ You’ll be seeing this one a lot.”

Then I remember he moved his finger somewhere else on the page, isolated a chunk of ink, and asked, “OK, what’s this say?”

I burned with frustration. “I don’t know!”

“But it’s the same word I just showed you!”

The epilogue: By sixth grade, I had climbed to the top reading group. I now have a Ph.D. in English and write novels – I am still trying to escape that early shame, I guess.

8\_It’s really the second “the” that makes the first line of Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* so inimitable: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.”

9\_Like other Romance languages, French has two definite articles, *le* (masculine) and *la* (feminine), as well as *les* for plurals. Some words change meaning entirely if gender-swapped; Compare *le barde* (poet) and *la barde* (bacon wrapped around meat), *le boum* (explosion) and *la boum* (party), *le mari* (husband) and *la mari* (marijuana), *le merci* (thanks) and *la merci* (mercy), *le souris* (smile) and *la souris* (mouse).

10\_“The The” is an English band that was formed in 1979 and is still variously active.

11\_If we really want to reduce our carbon footprint, maybe we should cut back on our words? “The” is the most frequently used word in the English language; how many calories does each of us expend in uttering it throughout the day? Probably not many, but multiply that by every English speaker in the world, and then consider that for every one calorie Americans take in, ten calories of fossil-fuel energy are expended to grow that food.

12\_*Good, Bad, and Ugly. Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe. Beatles. Lord of Rings. Catcher in Rye. Silence of Lambs. Back to Future. Frosty Snowman.*

13\_English is a bitch. Sometimes *th* is voiced, sometimes it isn't, and you just have to know. In “the,” it's voiced, i.e., your tongue goes between your teeth, but you also get your vocal cords vibrating. In “think,” by contrast, the *th* is unvoiced, i.e., your cords don't kick in until the vowel. There's some regional wiggle room here. The *th* in “with,” for instance, tends to be unvoiced on this side of the pond, voiced on the other. “Thither” is the only word I can think of that contains both.

14\_“A baby died” vs. “The baby died.” Discuss.

15\_Brian K. Vaughan's comic book series *Saga* (which I heartily recommend) includes among its characters a mercenary named “The Will.” His sister calls him “Billy,” but no one ever refers to him as simply “Will.” He is “The Will,” and you forget it only at your own peril.

16\_Similarly, in *The Big Lebowski*, Jeff Daniels plays “The Dude.” He is no mere “dude” – there are plenty of those, while he is singular, unique. It's something

like a title – The Duke of Earl, The Duchess of Windsor. The King rests, The Dude abides.

17\_We like to give our families these titles, too. If Angelina had taken Brad's name, they wouldn't have just been Pitts, they'd have been *The Pitts*.

18\_The Englishman went to hospital while the American went to *the* hospital.

19\_The second word of the King James Bible is “the” – unless you count the title, in which case it's (arguably) first. In any event, within 10 words, God has created “the heaven” and “the earth.”

20\_By “the sun” and “the moon,” we really just mean “our sun” and “our moon.” Space-faring will eventually make demands on our grammar. And when time travel comes along, “the past” and “the future” will prove equally problematic.

21\_I used to play the guitar. Now I just play guitar.

22\_I have some money, but I don't have *the* money.

23\_Failed ad campaign: Do impossible!

24\_The “e” in “the” is usually a schwa sound, represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet by the symbol “ə.” This is the most common vowel sound in English, even if we tend to drop it when it appears in the middle of words like “chocolate” and “separate.”

25\_Once in a while, however, we might make the *e* long by way of emphasis, as in “Your friend James Brown isn't *the* James Brown, by chance?”

26\_“The” always accompanies nouns – “the eat” is nonsense – though occasionally those nouns are only implied, e.g., the meek (people) shall inherit the Earth.

27\_“The” separates the known from the unknown. “A boy” quickly becomes “the boy.” “The boy” becoming “a boy” is far less common, and far more jarring.

28\_There's a poignant moment in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (which I really can't recommend enough) where Joel, having loved and lost, refers to Clementine as “just a girl.” The poignancy comes from our knowing better: she's a “the,” not an “a.”

29\_He's single, yes, but is he *the* one?

30\_My wife's first language is Japanese. She has been speaking English since she was a child, but she still occasionally misses a “the” or inserts one where a native speaker would know it doesn't belong, e.g., “Shall we hike *the* Diamond Head?” I wouldn't have it otherwise.

31\_Life is a journey from “a” to “the” and back to “a” again. Discuss.

32\_The T-Rex went extinct some 65 million years ago. That is to say, they all did.

33\_Just before the doors close in Philadelphia's El trains, a recorded woman's voice warns, “Doors are closing.” It's always sounded weird to me – like, without the article there, the figurative overtones practically overwhelm the literal meaning. Depending on your disposition, it might sound ominous as hell (like when, as a young Catholic kid in the early days of the internet, I would occasionally find myself confronted with the message “Connection to host lost”) or it might serve as a welcome reminder, the proverbial kick in the ass. In any event, it's true: Doors are closing. What are you going to do about it?

—M. Thomas Gammarino is the author of the novels *King of the Worlds* (Chin Music Press 2016) and *Big in Japan* (Chin Music Press 2009) and the novella *Jellyfish Dreams* (Amazon Kindle Singles 2012). In 2014, he won the Elliot Cades Award for Literature, Hawaii's highest literary honor.

## WRITERS ON WRITING

### Benjamin Kunkel



Benjamin Kunkel is a New York-based writer, critic, and co-founder of the literary journal *n+1*. He is the author of the best-selling novel *Indecision*, the essay collection *Utopia or Bust*, and the play *Buzz*. Kunkel's writing has also

appeared in publications including the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and *The New Yorker*.

#### WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING? AND HOW HAS THIS HELPED YOU AS A WRITER?

Obviously everyone who writes wants to write well. But I've learned that it's best to avoid evaluation of your own work until you've finished a draft. This is important for me because, like many writers, I'm liable to experiencing extremes of mood, which come from extremes of evaluation, as I write. You write a paragraph or a scene and pat yourself on the back, thinking “I'm a little bit of a genius, aren't I?” and then, upon encountering some trouble the next day, or even in the next sentence, you think: “There is something profoundly wrong with me – I have no memory, no intelligence, no ear! Why even try to write when I'm so bad at it?” And bouncing between such extremes is emotionally brutal and, worse, unproductive. Excessive pride tempts you to take a bit of a break, as a reward, and excessive despair tempts you to take the rest of the day off, or the month. And neither feeling is likely to be accurate. You're not as good as you suspect you are when you're happiest with yourself, and you're not as bad as you fear you are when you're most disgusted with your prose. So I try to postpone evaluation, one way or another, until I've finished a draft. In editing yourself, evaluation is necessary, but not before then. I call this a valuable lesson mainly it's necessary for me to learn it again and again.

—Gabriel Packard is the author of *The Painted Ocean: A Novel* published by Corsair, an imprint of Little, Brown.

Chris Anderson