

EXCERPT



Write Better
A Lifelong Editor on Craft, Art, and Spirituality

October 8, 2019 | \$18, 272 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4569-9

In this primer on nonfiction writing, Andrew Le Peau offers insights he has learned as a published author and longtime editor. In this book you'll find practical advice on how to develop writing skills and strategies that can move writers toward fresher, more vital, and perhaps more beautiful expressions of the human condition. You'll also discover how the act of writing can affect your life in God.

Don't Worry About Your Audience, but Do Worry About Your Audience

The book I most often recommend to writers is William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. It is wise, practical, and enjoyable to read. Friends have even heard me talk about Zinsserizing a manuscript—a mischievously ironic term since Zinsser abhors such neologisms.

In *On Writing Well*, however, Zinsser self-consciously makes an apparent contradiction. On the one hand he tells writers not to worry about the audience, what people will like or understand or agree with. Don't write for an audience. Write for yourself, he tells us confidently. Write about what interests you. If you think something is funny, put it in. If you like a word, say *neologism*, don't fret over whether most people will know what it means. If it fits you, use it.

If you find cockroaches to be fascinating, then don't let your fear of squeamish readers deter you. Do chess-playing bronco riders give you a kick? Then make the move. If the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg sends your heart into rhapsodic palpitations, then strike that chord in your prose. Don't be concerned if Aunt Henrietta doesn't know the difference between a twelve-tone scale and the twelve apostles. Just have fun.

As I write, podcasts are widely enjoyed. Of course, true crime stories have been a popular genre for generations in many mediums. No surprise then that podcasts should enjoy success there too. But many other types abound. No topic is too specialized for *How Stuff Works*, which has episodes like "How Lion Taming Works" and "How Commercial Jingles Work." Neither life nor death nor my pocketbook depend on being informed on such subjects. But the producers and reports do a fascinating job, and we listen.

I personally enjoy *This American Life* and *Radiolab*. They lean on telling stories about what otherwise might be considered an arcane subject. Where did the legal phrase "We can neither confirm nor deny" come from? Why are US cities opposed to fighting crime using successful techniques developed by US companies for places like Mexico and Iraq? Why did badminton players try to lose in order to win a tournament? When *Radiolab* puts together stories like these, they keep our interest. They tell stories with drama, with compelling narrative questions as we learn something new. They don't give a second thought to what others may or may not like. If they alone think it's a good story, they tell it.

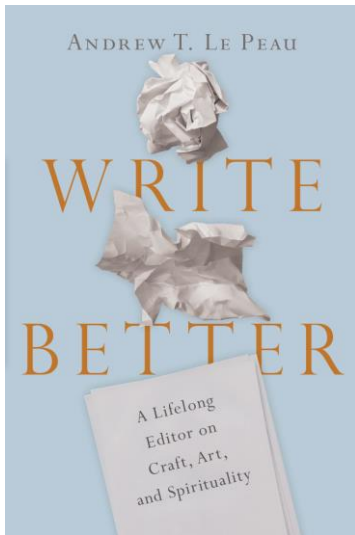
But here's the contradiction. While Zinsser tells writers not to worry about what readers might think, he also advises writers to work hard to keep readers' attention, to not let them get distracted in the middle of a paragraph. "The reader is an impatient bird, perched on the thin edge of distraction or sleep." So we must also be aware of and concerned about readers.



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“Andy Le Peau’s Write Better—witty, down-to-earth, and informed by a lifetime in publishing—combines a wealth of practical advice with a distinctively Christian perspective on the writer’s craft. It will be useful to aspiring young writers just starting out and to seasoned academics who want to reach a larger audience.”

John Wilson, Englewood Review of Books

How can we do both at once? How can we not worry about readers and worry about readers at the same time? By realizing that two different issues are involved. One, he says, is a matter of attitude. The other a matter of craft. Be willing to express your opinions or interests or personality regardless of what others may think (attitude). But do so in a way that engages them and compels them to read on even if they disagree with you or may not have a natural interest in the topic (craft).

The best podcasters think a lot about audience. While their choice of topic may be their own, the audience influences how they cover the subject. They make assumptions about what their audience knows and doesn’t know, what may need to be explained and what doesn’t. They consider what might motivate their listeners and what might seem boring.

Likewise, the best writing comes when authors follow Zinsser’s apparently paradoxical advice. How do we keep our audience in mind and not keep our audience in mind? We do it at different times. When we are first picking a topic, researching, drafting, and smashing down ideas on the page, we need not give one thought to the audience. We just do our best to get into a flow.

But later, after we’ve got the semblance of a draft together and go back to rework, refine, and edit our own material, then we keep our audience in mind. Zinsser himself hints at this. When talking about whether to put in humor, he writes, “If it amuses you in the act of writing, put it in. (It can always be taken out, but only you can put it in.)” That’s the key—we can always take it out later. We just shouldn’t take it out early in the process.

When we revise, we need a guide, a grid, a set of criteria for what to leave in and what to take out. Sometimes too much of a good thing can make a piece fail. We may think all the illustrations are spot-on, but too many of them (or the wrong ones or even too many good ones) can put readers off.

How do we determine what may work for our audience and what may not? We will have a hard time figuring that out with a big amorphous readership in mind, thus, the earlier suggestion to make it specific. Having one person in mind is a great way to do that—someone who is not on the fringes of the kind of people you want to reach but someone at the center.

Who should that person be? How do we choose? Another way to phrase the question “Who is your audience?” is this: *Who do you want to reach and why?* That is, What is motivating you to write? What have you learned that you want others to know? Who could benefit from it? A friend? A coworker? Someone you worship with? A customer? A family member?

Write for that person, and let it be your gift to them.

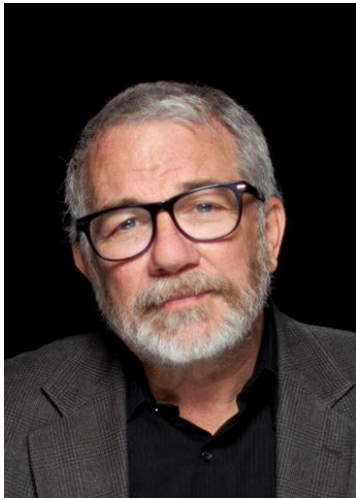
—Taken from chapter two, “Knowing Your Audience”



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Q & A



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Andrew T. Le Peau is a writer and an editor living in the Chicago area. He was the longtime associate publisher for editorial at InterVarsity Press where he worked for over forty years. He is the coauthor of several Bible study guides, including *James* and *Ephesians* in the LifeGuide Bible Studies, and author of *Heart. Soul. Mind. Strength.* and *Mark Through Old Testament Eyes*. Visit his blog at AndyUnedited.com.

Writing Wisdom from a Widely Respected Editor

What is your hope for *Write Better*?

Andrew Le Peau: Writing is hard work. I wanted to make the job easier for writers and help them do it better. I've loved words, reading, and writing almost my whole life and want to share some of what I've learned with others.

What is the main theme in this book?

Andrew: Writing is hard work. Writing well is even harder. But there are ways not only to make it easier but better. Having spent my whole career as a writer and editor, I offer a book on craft and character for nonfiction writers because who we are as writers is as important as how and what we write.

What makes this book unique as a writing tool and guide?

Andrew: Two things—first, many books on writing are actually memoirs of the writing life without much help on how to write. Many other books get into the weeds of grammar, punctuation, and very specific style issues without considering broader topics. My book instead considers larger issues of craft and art in writing, but with a practical angle. Second, I don't know of any book that so deeply considers the spirituality of writing—that is, how the act of writing and publishing affect our life with God.

What are the two-to-five main things you want readers to take away from *Write Better*?

Andrew:

- It's okay to break the rules of grammar—sometimes. We should know the rules and usually follow them. But breaking the rules often gives our writing freshness and power.
- Being creative is not the sole domain of people who seem to have especially creative personalities. Creativity is for all of us. It is a skill that we can all develop by following some simple, concrete practices.
- Using story and narrative is vital for nonfiction writing that touches not just the mind but the whole person, moving us not just emotionally but to live differently.
- Working to develop the right tone in our writing can set our writing apart and give it a power that lasts in the lives of readers.
- Writers can often bounce between great insecurity and a sense of superiority. Nurturing the spiritual disciplines of humility and thankfulness is especially important in properly ordering our relationships with God, with others, and with ourselves.



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