

# **On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft Study Guide**

**On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King**

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# Plot Summary

On Writing is part biography and part how-to. Stephen King writes about his childhood and young adulthood, relating stories that made him the writer he has become. Stephen King then moves into the mechanics of writing, offering advice and insight into a successful career that has worked so well for him but remains distant for thousands of others. On Writing is a poignant, educated, and inspiring book, a book that is sure to help hundreds of struggling writers and motivate still others who picked up the book not for inspiration, but curiosity.

Stephen King was the child of a single mother. Stephen King and his family moved frequently in his early years in order to be closer to family members. Stephen King struggled as a child, missing a whole year of school due to chronic ear and throat problems. When Stephen King was in high school, writing had already become an important outlet for his creativity. Stephen King helped his brother publish a small family newspaper, worked on his school newspaper, and got himself into trouble publishing and selling his own stories. In college, Stephen King continued to send stories to publications, achieving publication on several occasions. At the same time, Stephen King met the woman who would be his wife.

After college, Stephen King had a number of laborious jobs before getting a job as a high school English teacher. While working hard to provide for his family, Stephen King would continue to work on his own stories and novels, a few magazine publications helping to keep his growing family afloat. One day Stephen King got the idea to write a story about a young woman with telepathic ability. However, after writing several pages of this possible novel, Stephen King found that he disliked his main character and did not have the knowledge necessary to make the story believable. Stephen King threw the manuscript away. Stephen King's wife, Tabitha, found the story in the trash and insisted her husband continue writing it. This novel turned into *Carrie*, Stephen King's first published novel.

Riding on the success of his first published novels, Stephen King threw all his creative energy into writing. Always a heavy drinker, Stephen King soon became an alcoholic, wrongly believing the alcohol helped his writing. Along the way, Stephen King also added cocaine to his addictions. Eventually the situation became so difficult that Tabitha King gave her husband an ultimatum. Soon after, Stephen King became sober and came to a place in his life where he finally understood the priorities in his life.

Stephen King offered a great deal of advice to aspiring writers. Stephen King began with what he called the writer's toolbox and the things it should contain. The most important of these are grammar and vocabulary. Stephen King believed that vocabulary could be as simple as the writer wants, or more complicated if desired. However, Stephen King cautions against actively increasing a writer's vocabulary, claiming that being honest would be better than sounding intelligent. Grammar, Stephen King believed, was much more important to the writer's arsenal. A writer should strive to expand their knowledge of grammar in order to avoid common mistakes that make



writing weak. Stephen King advises writers to use active verbs rather than passive, as well as paying attention to paragraph structure and the proper use of fragments and run-on sentences.

Stephen King continued his advice by describing the process in which he uses to write his own novels. Stephen King recommended writing the first draft of a novel all at once, taking no more than three months to write an eighty thousand word novel. Stephen King then recommended putting the finished novel into a drawer for no less than six weeks in order to get some distance. Then Stephen King said to take the novel back out of the drawer, read it through, and make appropriate changes in order to fix narration holes and to emphasize theme and symbolism. At this point Stephen King suggested that a writer give their new work to a number of friends to read, considering their suggestions when doing a final draft.

Stephen King felt as though writing were an important aspect to his life, but that writing was not his life. When Stephen King was hit by a blue Dodge van in 1999, he thought he might never write again. However, during his recovery, Stephen King's wife, Tabitha, suggested that he get back to work. Tabitha set up a workspace for Stephen King in their home's back hall. At first, the writing was a struggle, but soon Stephen King found that writing was like a soothing balm for his injured body. In this way, Stephen King suggested that writing is a part of life that should not be the center of life, but a support to it that all writers should embrace.



## C.V.

### C.V. Summary and Analysis

On Writing is part biography and part how-to. Stephen King writes about his childhood and young adulthood, relating stories that made him the writer he has become. Stephen King then moves into the mechanics of writing, offering advice and insight into a successful career that has worked so well for him but remains distant for thousands of others. On Writing is a poignant, educated, and inspiring book, a book that is sure to help hundreds of struggling writers and motivate still others who picked up the book not for inspiration, but curiosity.

Stephen King openly admitted he does not remember a great deal of his early childhood. However, Stephen King does remember how he had a lot of babysitters as a child since his single mother had to work to provide for the family. One of these babysitters would hit Stephen King with unexpected cruelty and once fed him too many eggs, then locked him in a closet for throwing up on the kitchen floor. Stephen King also remembered how he missed his whole first grade year of school because he had chronic ear infections and throat infections that eventually culminated into a surgery to remove his tonsils. It was during this time that Stephen King began to put stories down on paper.

Stephen King remembered a great deal of adventures with his brother, Dave. One of these includes an unpleasant brush with poison ivy that left the young boy in terrible discomfort. Another memory was of a time when Dave was making an electromagnet for a science project. However, Dave was not happy with a small magnet. He wanted something large. Dave took a nail and wrapped the bare wires of an electrical plug around it. Then Dave handed it to Stephen King and told him to plug it in. Stephen King did as he was told and ended up blowing a transformer outside their apartment building, sending the entire neighborhood into darkness. No one ever found out it was the King boys who had done this, however.

By the time Stephen King had entered junior high he had begun to submit stories to magazines. Many of them were rejected by generic letters that Stephen King would stick onto a nail in his bedroom. However, a few would contain messages of encouragement that gave Stephen King hope that he would one day be published. The closest Stephen King came to being published during this period, however, was through the small newspaper he helped his brother Dave publish. This newspaper was a weekly newsletter filled with local gossip and family news.

In high school, Stephen King discovered horror movies at the local theater. Stephen King would go every weekend to watch these movies, particular enjoying the movies based on Edgar Allen Poe stories. Once Stephen wrote a book based on the plot of one of these movies and sold it at school. However, the school did not like the subject of the book and forced him to return everyone's money. Stephen King would get into trouble at



school again a few years later when, as the bored editor of the school paper, he decided to write a satirical version to be seen by his friends only. However, one of the teachers got a hold of the paper and was offended by it. Stephen King was sent to the office and threatened with suspension. Instead, Stephen King was encouraged to take a job with the local paper as a sports writer. This proved to be one of the best things that could have happened to the young writer because the editor of the paper showed Stephen King how to edit his writing in such a way that it would appeal greater to publishers.

Stephen King spent the summer after his graduation from high school working Worumbo Mills and Weaving in order to help pay for college. Once at college, King joined a work-study program at the library. In 1969, while still in college, Stephen King met a fellow library worker, Tabitha Spruce. Stephen King was drawn to Tabitha from the beginning, finding her intelligent and more aware of what she wanted to say than the other people around them. Stephen King and Tabitha were in a poetry workshop together. All the other students would write in an abstract way about things that did not make sense. However, Tabitha's poetry touched Stephen. The couple would be married a few years later.

Stephen King and his wife Tabitha had two children in the first three years of their marriage. Stephen King worked in a laundry while his wife worked for Dunkin Donuts in order to make ends meet. Later Stephen King would get a job in a high school teaching English, which made things somewhat easier, but not much. Despite their financial struggles, Stephen King continued to write. Some of Stephen King's short stories would sell to magazines, often saving his family in times of particular difficulty.

It was shortly after taking a teaching job at the high school in Hampden, Maine that Stephen King got the idea for his novel *Carrie*. Stephen King sat down one afternoon and wrote three pages of the story. However, Stephen King did not like his main character, Carrie White, and did not feel he knew enough about what went on in a girl's locker room in a high school to write the story. Stephen King threw it away. Tabitha King saw the pages in the trash and saved them. Tabitha read the pages and returned them to her husband, insisting he continue writing the story. Stephen King did, basing his main character on two girls he had known in high school. One was a young woman who wore the same clothes to school every day until they wore down to threads. The other was a girl whose mother was a religious zealot. These two girls were horribly tortured by bullies in school. By the time Stephen King wrote his novel, both girls were dead.

Stephen King finished *Carrie* and sent it off to a publisher, quickly forgetting about it. One afternoon Stephen King got a phone call at work from his wife saying she had gotten a telegram from the publisher. The novel had been accepted and they were being offered an advance of twenty-five hundred dollars. This was a huge sum of money for the struggling Kings. The Kings spent the money on a new car and a few other essentials. *Carrie* was quickly forgotten, replaced by the daily struggle of surviving. However, months later when the novel sold to a paperback publisher, it sold for four hundred thousand dollars, half of which would go to the King family. Suddenly their lives had changed.



Stephen King had always been a heavy drinker. The first time he got drunk was on a school trip to Washington, D.C. Stephen King was so sick the next day, he swore to never drink again. However, Stephen King drank again the very next day. Over the years, Stephen King's drinking became heavier and more frequent until it turned into a problem. Stephen King was a functioning drunk, believing that the alcohol helped his creativity. As his drinking problem grew, Stephen King's mother, Ruth, became ill. Ruth developed uterine cancer, but did not seek help until the disease had progressed beyond treatment. Dave moved Ruth to his home where he could care for her. Ruth died with both her sons at her bedside.

Stephen King's alcoholism soon included an addiction to cocaine. By 1985, Stephen King's addictions were out of control. Tabitha arranged an intervention and told her husband that if he did not get help she would ask him to leave. Stephen King asked for two weeks to think about it. Finally, he agreed and became sober. Afterward, Stephen King made some changes to his life, including moving his desk into the corner of his office rather than having his massive desk in the center of the room. To him it was a metaphor for rearranging the priorities in his life.

This chapter, Stephen King's curriculum vitae, relates relevant events of his childhood and young adulthood that pertain to his writing. Stephen King shares with the reader the illnesses he had as a small child that led to his early interest in writing. By high school, Stephen King was submitting stories to magazines. Stephen King also wrote novels based on movies and sold them to his classmates, getting himself into trouble. Stephen King also went to work for a newspaper, working with an editor for the first time who taught him how to remove excess words from his stories and trim the excess details. Stephen King claims that this is the first time he felt he could write stories worthy of publication.

Stephen King went to college but found himself no better off afterward. Stephen King had a wife and two children within three years of leaving college and needed to make money to support this family. Stephen King worked in a laundry, and later as a high school English teacher, while working on his own writing in his spare time, of which there was little. Eventually Stephen King stumbled on an idea that would culminate in his first published novel, *Carrie*. Despite the fact that Stephen King did not like the main character of this novel, he sent it off to a publisher and it was accepted. Stephen King's life changed with the sale of this book, making it possible for him to concentrate solely on his own writing.

After his initial success, Stephen King fell into a spiral of alcohol and drug addiction. The addiction was so bad that Stephen King now admits that he does not remember writing one of his most popular novels. Stephen King's wife, Tabitha, arranged an intervention and convinced her husband to get help. Stephen King did get help and rearranged his priorities, returning his writing to the corner of his office where he felt it belonged. Stephen King's decision to remove his massive desk from his office is a part of this rearrangement of priorities. This action also touches on the theme of writing as life support. Stephen King realized that writing was not his life, simply a portion of his life, a thing he liked to do.

# What Writing Is

## What Writing Is Summary and Analysis

Stephen King presented an image to the reader, describing it with as little detail as possible in order to allow the reader to see the scene in their own way. Stephen King described a cage sitting on a table. The table was covered with a red tablecloth, but King did not specify the color of red, nor did he provide any pattern detail that he felt the reader should feel free to add for themselves. Inside the cage was a rabbit with a number on its back. Again, King did not give specific detail of the rabbit other than the number, hoping the reader would focus on the number and what it might mean. By doing this, Stephen King was trying to share with his reader what writing is. Stephen King believed that writing is telepathy. The writer saw an image in his head and he wrote it down on paper, thus giving this same image to the reader. Although the reader may have seen it differently than the writer, it was the same image. Stephen King asked his writer to accept the magic of writing, but to take it seriously. Stephen King suggested if the reader could not do this, than perhaps it was time to put the book away.

Stephen King presents this chapter in order to express to his reader that he is not going to write a common writing book. This book is not to be about mechanics, it is not a grammar text or an instruction handbook. Stephen King wants to make it clear to his readers that writing is a serious job, but it is a job that has aspects that are highly unexplainable. If the reader cannot accept this simple fact, Stephen King wants the reader to stop reading his book. The suggestion to take writing seriously touches on the theme of writing as a career versus writing as a passion. Stephen King wants to stress to his readers that writing is not something you take lightly, nor is it something that is done in anticipation of making money.





# Toolbox

## Toolbox Summary and Analysis

When Stephen King was a child, he helped his uncle fix a window screen. The uncle had inherited a large toolbox from Stephen King's grandfather. The box was large and hard to carry around, but Stephen's uncle insisted on taking it to the front of the house with him. However, the uncle only used a screwdriver. When Stephen asked him why he brought the whole box, his uncle explained that a person could never know what job he might find to do or what tools he will need to do the job. Stephen King always remembered this advice and applies it to his writing.

Stephen King told the reader that they need their own toolbox to be a successful writer. The top of the toolbox should include the most important tools to writing. The first one was vocabulary. Stephen King believed that vocabulary is essential to good writing. Stephen King said that it did not matter if a writer's vocabulary was highly educated or simple, as long as it is honest.

Second, Stephen King believed grammar belonged beside vocabulary. Grammar rules should be followed, although there were moments when these rules could be ignored, if done properly. Stephen King did not believe the writer should study grammar at length, but a thorough reading of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* should be a priority. The most important aspects of grammar Stephen King believed a writer should remember included use of the active verb rather than the passive, limited use of adverbs, and minimum use of speaker attributes other than said. Other advice Stephen King offered to aspiring writers was careful attention to paragraph length and number, including attention paid to the white space on a page. Finally, Stephen King told his readers to be honest above all else and to not write in fear.

This chapter is the closest Stephen King gets to presenting the mechanics of writing to his readers. Stephen King offers advice on grammar and vocabulary. Stephen King suggests that an aspiring writer should not strive to increase their vocabulary, but be honest with the words they chose to use. On grammar, although he does not want his readers to go out and take in depth courses on grammar, Stephen King stresses a thorough reading of the grammar book, *Strunk and White's Elements of Style*. Stephen King believes this book to be the ultimate authority on grammar, even though some of its advice tends to be a little over the top, and suggests that in order to be a good writer the reader should follow the simple rules laid out in it. Stephen King especially points out the use of adverbs, words that end in -ly and tend to do the thinking for the reader. Also suggested is using an active voice, watching paragraph length, and watching the use of speaker attributes other than said. Finally, Stephen King stresses that a writer should be honest in his writing.



# On Writing

## On Writing Summary and Analysis

Stephen King wrote that some people believe anyone can be taught to be a good reader. Stephen King did not believe this. Stephen King believed a good writer could become an excellent writer, but a bad writer would always be a bad writer. Stephen King admitted that this idea was rejected by many. Even Stephen King has been called a hack over the years. However, many famous writers over the years have been told the same things but now their writings are considered classics.

Stephen King's first piece of advice to readers was to read. Stephen King believed that if a writer was too busy to read, he was too busy to write. Reading, Stephen King believed, was the best tool in making a writer because it was through reading that a writer could learn his craft. Reading good prose could teach a writer a few things, but nothing, in Stephen King's opinion, could teach a writer better than reading bad prose. Practice makes perfect, as they once said, and reading was a writer's practice.

Stephen King also believed that writing a lot was the best way to become a good writer. Stephen King once told a reporter that he worked every day except his birthday, the Fourth of July, and Christmas. However, Stephen King admitted to his reader that he even worked those days if he was in the middle of writing a new novel. Stephen King believed in writing every day, at least two thousand words a day. Stephen King held himself to that schedule while writing the first draft of all his novels.

Stephen King also believed that every writer should have a specific space in which they write. Stephen King told his reader to have a simple place to write with little or no distraction. The writer should have only a computer, or pad of paper, and perhaps some music. There should not be a telephone, a window, or any other possible distraction for the writer in this space. Stephen King suggested these things with the awareness that any distraction, no matter how small, could make writing two thousand words a day impossible.

There was an old adage, write what you know. Stephen King suggested to his reader that they follow this advice, however not necessarily in a literal way. Stephen King pointed out several examples of writers who wrote what they knew. Stephen King mentioned John Grisham, a lawyer who made it to the top of the bestseller list with novels whose main characters were lawyers. Situations that occurred in these novels were clearly not realistic, but Grisham wrote about his profession, something he did know. Stephen King suggested to his reader that they attempt to do the same.

Stephen King moved on to plot. Stephen King suggested that plot was less necessary to a novel than an aspiring writer might believe. Stephen King said that all stories are based on three things, narration, dialogue, and description. To try to plot out a novel before writing it, Stephen King thought, would be dishonest to the characters. Stephen



King liked to create a character, place him in a difficult situation, and allow the character to tell the story himself. Stephen King used as an example of this the novel *Misery*. The novel began as a dream Stephen King had on an airplane in which he was being held captive by a fan. Stephen King sat down that night and wrote the first chapter, thinking it would only be a short story. However, as Stephen King continued to write the story it bloomed into a novel. Stephen King then offered an exercise to the reader. Stephen King described the back-story of a woman who was abused by her husband and then came home to find her husband, who has escaped prison, waiting for her. Then Stephen King told the reader to change the woman into a man and the husband into a woman. This exercise was intended to show an aspiring writer how to rearrange characters or a situation to make it fresh and unique.

Stephen King then began to discuss description. Stephen King felt that the smallest amount of description was the best technique to use. Stephen King felt if a writer provided too much detail, it would make the description boring, like the descriptions in a clothing catalogue. Stephen King suggested providing enough description to give the reader an idea of the setting, but not enough to paint an exact picture. The writer should leave some things to the reader's imagination. Stephen King also suggested the use of simile and metaphor in description to make it more interesting, but to avoid clichés and comparisons that made little sense.

Dialogue should be a representation of normal speech. Stephen King felt that dialogue that was stilted or illogical weakened an otherwise strong novel. Dialogue should also not be a monologue, but a give and take between two or more characters. Dialogue could be a strong tool in a writer's toolbox, showing a smart or stupid character through their speech. However, this tool should be used properly to be effective. Once again, Stephen King urged his reader to be honest with his writing.

Stephen King explained to his reader that characters should be multi-dimensional, not cardboard cutouts. Characters should not be pigeon holed, as in one character is the bad guy, the other good. Stephen King maintained that all characters could have evil characteristics, but also good ones. As an example, Stephen King pointed out that while Annie Wilkes was a psychopath who kept a writer prisoner in her own home, she also had redeeming qualities that made her almost sympathetic to her readers. Another example Stephen King used was the main characters from *Dead Zone*. Due to the situation of the novel in which a nice, normal boy was going to attempt to assassinate a politician, King had to make his main character nice, but flawed so that the reader would believe in him, but he would not seem too perfect. The same held true for the politician. The politician would seem too good to be true to the reader in his role as politician, but he had to have a bad side to make Johnny's desire to kill him realistic.

Symbolism and theme are two things that Stephen King does not believe a writer should consciously add to a novel before the first draft. Stephen King felt that the second draft was the place to find these things and flesh them out, adding more to them when it seemed appropriate. Stephen King changed the initials of his innocent man in the *Green Mile* when he realized the man was innocent. This caused many of Stephen King's critics to point out the simplistic of this move, but King felt that it just seemed



appropriate. King did the same thing in *Carrie*, emphasizing the symbolism of blood when it showed up at every critical point in the book. Symbolism, King felt, was useful, but not necessary if it did not fit in the story.

Theme was the same thing in Stephen King's mind. While writing the novel, *The Stand*, Stephen King ran into a wall and realized that violence was a strong theme in the story. Stephen King used this theme to help him find an answer to a roadblock he reached when he could not decide how to continue the book. Since then, Stephen King had used theme to help him stay on course while writing his novels.

Stephen King believed that the first writing of a novel, the first draft, should be a highly private affair. Stephen King suggested that the aspiring novelist not talk to anyone about his writing, not show anyone his writing, until the first draft is completed. Then Stephen King recommended putting the manuscript away for at least six weeks. After this point, Stephen King suggested getting the manuscript out, reading it in one sitting, and writing down any notes the writer might notice about holes in the story or possible themes to be flushed out. Then Stephen King told his reader to give the manuscript to several friends who could give an honest opinion on the book. Stephen King told his reader to consider these suggestions when writing the second draft, but not to take every suggestion too literally. If one suggestion differs from another, the writer should not make any changes at all.

Stephen King mentioned that allowing others to read a writer's work before the second draft helped with gauging if the pace is correct. Fast paced novels tend to be a drain on the reader, although there are times in which a fast pace is appropriate, it is always ideal to aim for a happy medium. Back-story was another element where a new pair of eyes could come in handy. Stephen King said that there were times when a writer could fall so in love with back story that it becomes too much. Stephen King suggested that back-story should only include what was absolutely necessary to know to understand the plot of the novel. To make back-story authentic, Stephen King also recommended some research, though he cautioned against too much research. As an example, Stephen King told how when he was writing *From a Buick Eight* he spent a day with the Pennsylvania State Police to be sure he got the bulk of his story correct.

Stephen King told the reader that it was not necessary to attend writer's retreats and creative writing classes. While these retreats sounded nice on the surface, Stephen King thought that the pressure of being expected to write something profound everyday would be too stressful and lead to writer's block. Stephen King suggested it would be better to write at home, despite the obvious distractions, and be under less pressure to perform. The only advantage Stephen King could see to these things would be access to grants for writers. However, Stephen King suggested perhaps it would be better to get a job teaching than to depend on grants.

Stephen King then suggested that a writer should have an agent. However, there was no special club where these agents find their clients. Many good agents existed who were looking for good writers. The secret to finding an agent was getting the writer out there and present themselves and their work, hoping the strength of their work would get the



attention of an appropriate agent. Stephen King offered the example of an aspiring writer who was a composite of three writers he knew. This writer had successfully published six stories in reputable magazines and had won an award for one story. Based on these successes and the new novel he was writing, the writer sent out dozens of letters to potential agents. Through these letters, the writer got a promise of representation from an agent when his novel was completed.

In this chapter, Stephen King presents his knowledge of writing that he was confident and eager to share. Stephen King speaks of his own writing schedule, his editing habits, and his confidence in his wife as his first reader. Stephen King stresses reading as well as writing, suggesting that a writer cannot learn how to write without having the time to read. Stephen King also stresses writing on a regular basis. A writer cannot improve his or her skills without writing often, so Stephen King suggests that a writer should write every day.

Stephen King also talks about some of the mechanics of writing. Although plot seems it would be important to a novel, Stephen King suggests that plot is not as important as narration, dialogue, and description. Stephen King maintains if a writer puts a character in peril, the rest will take care of itself. Characters have a way of taking on a life of their own, leading the writer through the story rather than the other way around. It is during the second draft that the writer should concentrate on things like plot, theme and symbolism.

Stephen King also suggests that writing conferences and courses are unnecessary, as are writing books. These how-to situations can be repetitive and misleading. The idea of being in an environment where the writer is expected to produce profound works every day is not only unrealistic, but stressful. A writer under pressure to perform will often fail with stress acting as a sort of writer's block. It is best, according to Stephen King, for the writer to work in a familiar space, as free of distractions as possible, and work at their own pace. However, an agent is very important. A writer does not need to know someone in the business to get an agent, but needs to do the work to get their writing out there, seen by all the right people. Writing is work and the aspiring writer should be willing to do what it takes to succeed.



# On Living: A Postscript

## On Living: A Postscript Summary and Analysis

On June 19, 1999, Stephen King had taken his son to the airport and decided to take a walk before he, his wife, and his two other children were to leave to go see a movie. While walking on the side of the road, Stephen King was walking up a blind hill when a blue Dodge van came barreling over the hill. Stephen King was hit, fracturing several bones in his legs, ribs, and spine, as well as cutting his collar bone and head. The driver of the van, Bryan Smith, was driving into town to get a candy bar. His dog, Bullet, was trying to get into an ice chest to eat some meat and Smith was turned around attempting to control the dog. Smith never saw Stephen King.

Smith called for help. Stephen King lay on the side of the road for what seemed a long time before the EMS came. Stephen King was taken to a local hospital, but the extent of his injuries was so traumatic that he had to be moved to another hospital via helicopter. Stephen King spent more than three weeks in the hospital, suffering many operations to repair his shattered legs. Once home, Stephen King spent most of his days in pain, enduring long hours of physical therapy. Writing was the last thing on his mind, but Stephen King's wife suggested that he get back to work. Stephen King allowed his wife to set up a workspace in their back hall. Stephen King pulled out the manuscript of this book and got to work, finding the act of writing therapeutic. It was through this accident and his recovery that Stephen King realized that writing was not life, but life support.

This chapter describes an event that most readers had heard about on the news or in gossip magazines. Stephen King was walking along the side of the road near his family's vacation home when he was struck by a van. The accident was tragic, made even more so with the knowledge that it was completely preventable. Stephen King suffered terrible injuries that left him in a great deal of pain, unwilling to think about anything, let alone work. This was a very difficult time in Stephen King's life that happened to correspond with the writing of this very book. Stephen King had set the book aside when he hit a spot where he did not know how to continue. Stephen King had just gotten back to writing the book when his accident took place. The last thing on his mind was work, especially a non-fiction book with which he was blocked. However, Stephen King eventually got back to his writing and found that rather than being work, it was therapy. Stephen King found the truth to the theme of this book, writing as life support, through this accident and his decision to return to work.



# Characters

## Stephen King

Stephen King is a successful novelist who has more than forty books to his name. Stephen King writes mostly horror novels, as these are the kinds of stories that fascinated him as a child. Stephen King grew up as the younger of two children to a single mother. Stephen King's father left his family when Stephen King was a small child. Stephen King's mother moved around frequently when he was a child, often moving to be close to one of her many siblings. Stephen King remembers very little of his childhood. However, when Stephen King was in high school he recalls a job working for the local newspaper that introduced him to an editor who greatly influenced his writing with his remarkable editing suggestions.

Stephen King came from a working class background. Stephen King worked his way through college and then took several jobs, some laborious, to provide for his young family after graduation. Stephen King, his wife, and their two children were living in a rented trailer, barely making ends meet, when *Carrie*, his first novel, was sold. Stephen King remembers the impact that first sale had on his family, especially when the paperback sale provided his family an income twenty times larger than anything they had seen before.

## Tabitha King

Tabitha King is Stephen King's wife. Tabitha is a writer in her own right, the author of several novels. Stephen King met his wife in college when they both worked in the college library and attended the same writing seminar. Stephen King believes his wife to be a brilliant writer, especially in the sixties when they first met. Tabitha would write about real things, things that mattered, while all their classmates concentrated on abstracts.

Tabitha King is her husband's first reader. Whenever Stephen King finishes a novel or a short story, after he has read it and made changes, he allows his wife to read it. Stephen King judges the success or failure of his work on his wife. In fact, *Carrie* would never have been written if not for Tabitha King. When Stephen King began writing *Carrie*, he was unhappy with the character and the situation, so he threw it away. However, Tabitha found it in the trash, read it, and felt that it was a strong story. Tabitha gave it back to her husband and insisted that he continue it. Stephen King did and *Carrie* became his first published novel.

## Carrie White

Carrie White is the main character in Stephen King's novel, *Carrie*. Stephen King never liked Carrie. Carrie is a bullied high school student who has telepathic ability. When



Carrie is humiliated during her senior prom, she kills most of the students in the gym. Stephen King based Carrie on two different girls with whom he went to school with. Both these girls were tortured by their classmates, isolated and teased to the point of cruelty. Carrie too was the subject of terrible harassment that culminated in the spilling of blood on her head moments after she was crowned queen of the prom.

Stephen King never liked Carrie, because he felt she was weak, as though she asked for the trouble she received. Stephen King also did not like the novel as it took place in a world he did not understand. Stephen King had never spent time in a girl's locker room where one of the pivotal scenes of the novel takes place. Not only this, but Stephen King could not, as a man, know what goes on inside the head of a girl, especially a tortured, unhappy girl. However, with the help of his wife, Tabitha, Stephen eventually learned enough to turn Carrie into a successful novel that would become his first published novel.

## Dave King

Dave King is Stephen King's older brother. Dave was an intelligent young man who was often getting himself and Stephen King into trouble. Stephen King can remember once when his brother was working on a science experiment for school. Dave was attempting to make a magnet that he read about in a book. However, Dave wanted to make a bigger, better magnet. Dave wrapped the wires from a power cord over a nail and told Stephen King to plug it in. Stephen King did, and the transformer outside their apartment building blew, causing a power outage all over the block.

Dave was also the first one to get Stephen King into publishing. Dave wrote and published a small newspaper every week, filled with local gossip and information for family members. Stephen King would help his brother print the paper on an old hectograph. This machine caused Stephen King a great deal of trouble because it was messy and took a long time print all the required copies. Dave upgraded to a drum printing press a year later. The printing press made printing much faster. In fact, after seeing *The Pit and the Pendulum* in the theaters, Stephen King used his brother's printing press to write a book based on the movie to sell it at school.

## Ruth King

Ruth King was Stephen King's mother. Ruth was a single mother ahead of her time. Ruth worked many jobs, many of them laborious, in order to provide for her children. Ruth would move around a lot, moving from town to town in order to be close to her many family members. When Ruth's parents became old and infirmed, Ruth moved into their home in order to care for them. Ruth would remain in this house until the last few months of her life.

Ruth suffered uterine cancer at the end of her life. Ruth ignored the symptoms because they were personal and she did not believe in sharing personal information with anyone. By the time Stephen King and his brother learned of their mother's illness, she was





already near death. Dave moved Ruth to his home and cared for her those final months. Stephen King and his brother Dave were at their mother's side when she died.

## **The King Children: Naomi, Joe, and Owen**

Stephen King and his wife, Tabitha, have three children. Naomi is the oldest. Stephen King has a clear memory of how his writing helped support his children when they were small. Returning home one weekend, Naomi had a fever, and he knew that she had an ear infection that would require antibiotics. Stephen King was worried about how to pay for this medication. However, when Stephen King checked his mail, he found a payment for a story he had submitted to a magazine that would not only pay for his daughter's medication, but would pay some bills and a nice meal for him and his wife.

Stephen King's middle son, Joe, was a handful. Joe's life began with a bang. Stephen King was at a drive-in movie when his wife went into labor with Joe. An announcement went out on the sound system calling Stephen King home. When he drove out of the drive-in, Stephen King found himself the center of attention of dozens of honking car horns. Owen, Stephen King's youngest is a writer in his own right now. Stephen King had just returned from driving Owen to the airport the day he was hit by a blue Dodge van.

## **John Gould**

John Gould was the first editor with whom Stephen King worked. John Gould was the editor of the Lisbon Weekly Enterprise. Stephen King was forced to take a job as a sports writer for the paper after getting into trouble at school for writing a satirical version of the schools paper. When Stephen King turned in his first story for the paper, John Gould edited the copy mercilessly. Rather than becoming upset at the changes Gould made to his story, Stephen King watched closely to what Gould was doing. Stephen King was fascinated with Gould's suggestion and believes that it was this experience that helped him become a stronger writer.

## **Bryan Smith and Bullet**

Bryan Smith is the man who was driving the blue Dodge van that hit Stephen King as he was walking on the side of the road near his summer home in Maine. Bryan Smith was camping at a campground nearby and had gotten a craving for a candy bar. Bryan Smith was driving into town with his dog, Bullet, when Bullet attempted to get into an ice chest that had some meat into it. While driving, Bryan turned around to stop the dog from eating the meat, causing him to drive onto the shoulder of the road where Stephen King was walking. Bryan Smith would be charged with driving to endanger and aggravated assault. Bryan Smith would eventually plead to the lesser charge of driving to endanger.



## Annie Wilkes

Stephen King discusses the various types of characters used in fiction. As an example, Stephen King discusses Annie Wilkes. Annie Wilkes is the antagonist of his novel *Misery*. Annie is a psychotic nurse who takes her favorite author hostage in order to force him to write a novel that brings the main character back to life. Annie is insane. There is no question of this when the quiet, mild mannered woman suddenly cuts off her captor's foot when he tries to escape. However, Stephen King finds sympathy with this woman through the development of the novel, and this comes across in his writing. It is for this reason that Stephen King uses her as an example as he wants the reader to see that all characters are multi-dimensional rather than like cardboard cutouts.

## Aunts and Uncles

Stephen King has many aunts and uncles. During his childhood, Stephen King and his family move from place to place, often to be close to these aunts and uncles. Stephen King learns many lessons from these relatives, especially an uncle who tells him the importance of a toolbox. This uncle teaches Stephen King that it is important to take a toolbox with him whenever he has a job to do because you never know what tool you will need. Stephen King uses this lesson as a metaphor for the tools a writer needs when sitting down to the task of writing.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Rejection Slips appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King started submitting stories to magazines as a child and collected the rejection slips he received.

### **Dave's Rag appears in non-fiction**

Dave's Rag is a newspaper Stephen King helped his brother Dave print once a week when they were kids.

### **Massive Desk appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King always wanted a massive desk to set in the middle of his office for his work. However, after becoming a recovering addict, Stephen King realized that his desk should be simple and in a corner rather than the focus of the room.

### **Cocaine and Alcohol appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King was addicted to both cocaine and alcohol for many years during his adulthood until his wife finally convinced him to get treatment.

### **Trailer Laundry Room appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King wrote his first novels in the laundry room of his family's rented trailer. When Stephen King was forced to write in the back hall of his home after his accident, he felt as though he had returned to that small laundry room.

### **Carrie appears in non-fiction**

Carrie is Stephen King's first published novel.

### **The Stand appears in non-fiction**

The Stand is considered by many of Stephen King's fans as his best novel. The Stand took Stephen King the longest to write due to plot problems.



## **Blue Dodge Van appears in non-fiction**

While writing this book, Stephen King was hit by a blue Dodge van while taking a walk near his summer home.

## **Strunk and White's Elements of Style appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King believes White and Strunk's Elements of Style is an invaluable tool for new writers.

## **Toolbox appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King's grandfather handed down a toolbox to Stephen King's uncle. Stephen King uses this toolbox as a metaphor for the tools a writer needs in order to be successful at their craft.

## **Narration, Description, and Dialogue appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King says that narration, description, and dialogue are the three essential elements to strong fiction.

## **Maine appears in non-fiction**

Stephen King has lived the majority of his life in Maine, and many of his novels are set in Maine.



# Themes

## Writing as a Career Versus Writing as a Passion

Stephen King feels that if an aspiring writer sits down to write a story with the hopes of making money, he should quit before he has begun. Stephen King admits that there are writers out there who do it for the money, but feels that these writers are not good writers. These writers review theater or sports for the local papers. These writers butcher words and miss the meaning of symbolism and theme.

Stephen King sees writing as a passion, calling it magic. Stephen King believes that the writer has to truly love what he is doing. Writing is a lonely career. A writer is often locked alone in an office with nothing but a blank sheet of paper or computer screen as his company. It is often difficult for the new writer to face these blank sheets of paper without becoming afraid that they are not good enough or do not have the skills to be a writer. It is then that the magic comes in, when the writer suddenly finds words jumping onto the paper through some sort of magical telepathy that creates characters and dramatic situations that others will want to read. A writer has to write for himself without thinking about the potential reader because worrying can only block the flow of the magic.

Writing can be a career. However, Stephen King believes that writing to be successful, to make money, kills whatever it is that makes a person want to write in the first place. Not only that, but it changes the words that the writer puts on paper, turning a good or competent writer into a bad writer. Passion should be the only motivation to write. This is a theme of the book because it is an idea that Stephen King explores many times throughout his prose.

## Inspiration

A great deal of this book is about the things that made Stephen King a writer and how to be a competent writer. However, Stephen King also offers blunt advice and inspiration. This is not a common, grammar-filled book on the mechanics of writing. Stephen King shares with his reader moments of his childhood that have shaped the man he became, his early success with his writing, and the alcohol and drug addiction that he believed fueled his creativity. These are personal stories, things that did not have to be shared with the reader in order for Stephen King to share advice on writing. Stephen King offers these stories in order to build a rapport with his reader, to show the reader that he is a normal person with normal frailties, not some superhero who knows the secrets of the publishing world.

These personal stories inspire the reader when the reader can find similarities between themselves and Stephen King, this famous writer. Nothing is more inspiring than seeing that a person a reader admires is human, is just like everyone else. However, Stephen



King takes this a step further. Stephen King offers inspiration and support by telling the reader outright that if they are good at what they do, if they are passionate about writing, then they can do what needs to be done to become a published writer. Stephen King tells his reader to go write. Unlike other books of its kind, Stephen King never suggests that an aspiring writer must do things his way, must write in a specific way, but says any good writer can succeed. These are words that every aspiring writer needs to hear.

## Writing as Life Support

Stephen King admits that at one point in his life, writing was his life. Stephen King illustrates this idea by discussing this massive desk he once owned. Stephen King has always dreamed of having a massive desk in the middle of his office on which he would write. However, when Stephen King recovered from his addiction, he discovered that he had made writing his life. While writing was important to Stephen King, there was a life going on around him that was just as important. Stephen King got rid of that desk, created a casual sitting area where it had sat, and placed a smaller, more humble desk in the corner of his office, thus placing writing further down on his list of priorities.

In telling this story, Stephen King expresses the idea that writing is not life, simply a support to life. Stephen King suggests that writing enhances life, gives it meaning and purpose, but should not be the focus of life. This advice is important to an aspiring writer because it is too easy for someone to allow this craft become their whole life to the detriment of everything else. However, one of the secrets to good writing is writing what you know, but if all you know is writing, your writing soon runs out of inspiration. The idea of writing as life support is an important theme not only to the book, but to a writer's life.



# Style

## Perspective

The book is written by Stephen King, a successful novelist. Stephen King wrote this book in order to share his thoughts on writing to the aspiring writer. Since Stephen King is a highly successful novelist, he has lived the experiences that an aspiring writer would not only like to learn from, but perhaps live some day. Every aspiring writer dreams about the day when they will see their name in print. Reading how success happened to someone that the aspiring writer might admire makes the dream seem more real, almost attainable. This success as a writer makes Stephen King an expert on this subject, thus making his perspective authoritative.

Stephen King's intended audience is the high school student, college student, or frustrated professional who has recently decided to become a writer. These aspiring writers are new to the craft, or new enough that they have no clue how to get an agent or a publisher. Stephen King speaks to these writers on a personal level, hoping to offer sound advice and support that these aspiring writers desperately need in order to pursue the lonely dream of becoming a published author. This book is intended to inspire and support those with the gifts and determinations to see them through the struggle for success.

## Tone

The tone of this book shifts throughout the prose, but tends to be subjective on the large part. The beginning of the book is a short biography of sorts, a curriculum vitae. The tone of this section is clearly subjective as Stephen King shares some of the most personal moments of his life that he believes helped shape him as a writer. Due to the subject matter, it is impossible for the tone not to be personal. However, when Stephen King begins to move into the mechanics of writing, such as grammar and sentence structure, the tone changes to a more objective tone. However, even this objective tone is peppered with a more personal feel as Stephen King offers his personal opinions on these subjects, including his choices to follow or ignore basic grammar rules.

The tone of the book offers a sense of intimacy for the reader. The book is written in such a way that the reader feels as though Stephen King is speaking specifically to this one reader, as though a mentor offering advice to a student. The intimacy of the book offers the reader a closeness that takes away the clinical feel of a textbook, by passing some of the prejudices or boredom a person might normally have when approaching this particular subject. It is the tone of the book that greatly impacts the reader and leaves them feeling inspired. It's as though success is achievable despite the hardships an aspiring writer must face when starting out in this career.

## Structure

The book includes three forewords that are small essays explaining Stephen King's reasons for writing this book, and two appendixes, that Stephen King calls furthermores. These include one large section of a short story that Stephen King marks with proof marking symbols in order to show how a story should be edited and another that includes a list of books every aspiring writer should read. The main part of the book is divided into four sections, beginning with what Stephen King calls his curriculum vitae, moving into his idea of a writer's toolbox, then an in depth discussion on writing itself, and ending with Stephen King's thoughts on life as a writer. Each section contains something important about the craft of writing, some of it mechanics and a great deal of it the personal impact writing has had on Stephen King's life.

The structure of this book works because it offers a personal look at how writing has affected one successful novelist's life. Stephen King allows his reader to see how he became a writer and how that chosen craft has shaped his life. Stephen King does not hide the struggle he endured in the early years of his career, the difficulties success brought, or the way writing saved his sanity after a terrible accident. Writing is more than a career to Stephen King and the reader can see this, thanks in part to the tone of the book, but also because of the way Stephen King presents his views to the reader in the structure of the book.



## Quotes

"I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood, raised by a single parent who moved around a lot in my earliest years and who—I am not completely sure of this—may have farmed my brother and me out to one of her sisters for awhile because she was economically or emotionally unable to cope with us for a time." C.V., pg. 17

"Most of the nine months I should have spent in the first grade I spent in bed. My problems started with the measles—a perfectly ordinary case—and then got steadily worse." C.V., pg. 23

"Let's get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good stories seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up." C.V., pg. 37

"I never got to like Carrie White and I never trusted Sue Snell's motives in sending her boyfriend to the prom with her, but I did have something there. Like a whole career." C.V., pg. 77

"I bargained, because that's what addicts do. I was charming, because that's what addicts are. In the end I got two weeks to think about it. In retrospect, this seems to summarize all the insanity of that time. Guy is standing on top of a burning building. Helicopter arrives, hovers, drops a rope ladder. Climb up! the man leaning out the helicopter's door shouts. Guy on top of the burning building responds, Give me two weeks to think about it." C.V., pg. 98

"It starts with this: put your desk in the corner, and every time you sit down there to write, remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. Life isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around." C.V., pg. 101

"All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe writing offers the purest distillation." What Writing Is, pg. 103

"I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing." Toolbox, pg. 127

"At its most basic we are only discussing a learned skill, but do we not agree sometimes the most basic skills can create things far beyond our expectations? We are talking about tools and carpentry, about words and style...but as we move along, you'd do well to remember that we are also talking about magic." Toolbox, pg. 137



"And no matter how much I want to encourage the man or woman trying for the first time to write seriously, I can't lie and say there are no bad writers. Sorry, but there are lots of bad writers." On Writing, pg. 141

"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut." On Writing, pg. 145

"Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blinding in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work. Especially work. People love to read about work." On Writing, pg. 161

"In my view, stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates a sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech." On Writing, pg. 163

"Writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life. That was something I found out in the summer of 1999, when a man driving a blue van almost killed me."

On Writing, pg. 249

"He and Bullet left the campground where they were staying, he later tells an investigator, because he wanted 'some of those Marzes-bars they have up to the store.' When I hear this little detail some weeks later, it occurs to me that I have nearly been killed by a character right out of one of my own novels. It's almost funny." On Living: A Postscript, pg. 256

"I'd written Carrie and 'Salem's Lot in the laundry room of a rented trailer. The back hall of our house in Bangor resembled it enough to make me feel almost as if I'd come full circle."

On Living: A Postscript, pg. 268

"Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life as well. It's about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy. Some of this book—perhaps too much—has been about how I learned to do it. Much of it has been about how you can do it better. The rest of it—and perhaps the best of it—is a permission slip: you can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, you will. Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink.

Drink and be filled up." On Living: A Postscript, pgs. 269-270



## Topics for Discussion

Why does Stephen King begin the book with a short biography of his life? What does Stephen King's childhood have to do with being a writer? Did Stephen King's childhood influence his writing? Does this short biography describe why he became a writer? What about Stephen King's drug addiction? How does that relate to his writing? Does the short biography help an aspiring writer in his or her own ambitions? How?

Why does Stephen King not believe in plot? Isn't plot essential to a novel? How does Stephen King get around plot? What is the difference between what Stephen King does and plotting? Why does he consider it harmful to plot out a novel before the writer begins to write? Do you agree?

Why does Stephen King consider grammar important to writing? Do you think good grammar is important? Why or why not? Why does Stephen King not place theme or symbolism in the top draw of his toolbox? Are theme and symbolism less important to a novel than grammar? How are symbolism and theme similar to Stephen King's feelings on plot?

What does it mean to write what you know? How does Stephen King handle this idea? Do you believe that Stephen King has faced vampires and monsters in his life? Where does personal knowledge of an event and imagination merge in Stephen King's novels?

Why does Stephen King recommend a writer not share his story with anyone until the writer has completed the first draft? Do you agree with this assessment? Why do you think Stephen King recommends the writer set aside his new novel for at least six weeks before rereading it? Do you think a writer can ever be impartial with his own writing?

Stephen King talks about removing a massive desk from the center of his office and replacing it with a smaller one placed in the corner. Why do you think Stephen King mentioned this? What is the symbolism of the massive desk? How does this compare to the symbolism of the smaller desk? Do you agree with Stephen King's advice on this situation?

Stephen King mentioned many things that help him with his writing, including his toolbox, his family, and his friends. Why do you think a good marriage is so important to Stephen King's writing? How has his wife supported him with his career?

Stephen King has been called a hack. Do you agree with this assessment of his writing ability? Why does Stephen King break the rules of grammar that he has set down in this book for new writers? Do you think this takes away from Stephen King's credibility? How does Stephen King explain these broken rules?