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Distant Noises: Expert Voices

Abstract

Human writing has been, arguably, man's supreme creative achievement. It has given humanity a world of books; an infinite galaxy of language and thought. By investigating the thoughts of expert writers on the craft and purpose of writing from an "analogue" perspective, we may make some progress in our thinking about the role and importance of writing in the digital age. Including some thoughts about the role and importance of books and writing by the founder of OpenAI may also begin to make more interesting connections about writing and communication in the age of AI. This paper looks at contributions to the act and process of writing by a range of acclaimed fiction writers of the 20th century taken primarily from interviews in the first and second 'Writers at Work' series (1959 and 1963 respectively) published by the Paris Review and is an initial investigation as part of a longer-term research project to identify writers" expertise and how that may prove beneficial to writers of all levels of ability in this digital age.

Keywords: writers, expertise, writing process, language, creativity

Introduction

> Words are tools, learned late and laboriously and easily forgotten, with which we try to give some part of our experience a more or less permanent shape outside ourselves. (Ted Hughes 1967:119)

Here's Sam Altman, OpenAI founder, in a 2024 interview:

> So, when you say it's essential that people learn to write, what does that mean?
> It means that I've figured out how to use this tool to think more clearly. Now, if there's a better way to think more clearly, great, I would switch to that. Not found that yet (Perell 2025).

This is an incredibly revealing statement from the founder of the world's largest AI company, primarily responsible for the AI age we are now firmly in. It is a digital world thoroughly dominated by text; our daily lives are saturated

with a barrage of digital communication forms, both receptive and productive. In the age of artificial intelligence, this has multiplied by factors beyond comprehension. We seem to be at a cognitive saturation point in keeping up with the flood of text-based information that constantly bombards our brains daily, hourly (Turós et al 2024). Often at what seems like warp speed.

There seems to be hardly any time to take a step back and reflect on the language we are using, or the communicative acts we are engaged in. The very act, process and meaning of writing seems to be a lost art that, at most, may come to the fore when there is a demand for a more complete written product, such as a student essay or an academic paper. There are two powerful effects of this increasingly rapid communication digitisation. Firstly, we may be losing the art of more profound, creative thought and secondly, by losing this very ability to think we may lose the act of thoughtful, imaginative human written expression; an act that has been, arguably, the most precious contribution to humanity since humans first developed the ability to write (Dominek 2022).

Books and words

The imagery of the stacked bookshelf is still a powerful visual metaphor for many of the qualities we still hold as indicators of human intelligence, even today. If we take a moment to reflect on the hundreds, if not thousands, of online talks, meetings, presentations and even examinations we have participated in, one of the most obvious ways that expertise is visually demonstrated is with a stacked bookshelf in the background – a powerful visual metaphor for learning, intelligence, thought and experience.

In a 2024 interview with OpenAI founder, Sam Altman, there was an incredibly revealing insight into this metaphor for intelligence – the private library at the heart of his organisation: Built at Altman's request and stocked with titles suggested by his staff, the OpenAI library is an apt metaphor for the world's hottest tech company, whose success was fuelled by language – lots and lots of language. (Star 2024: 1).

Here we have the founder of OpenAI placing knowledge, in the form of physical books, right at the heart of his company. Yes, books provide a distinct visual metaphor for intelligence, but far more importantly, what is contained inside those books is of essential value. Therefore, with genuine interest, I open up to the words of expert writers and look at what they have to say about the craft and purpose of writing. By investigating what they say about the writing process, we may start to pick up some valuable advice to help us with our own productive, written world.

The skills of professional writers

When summarising expert writers' features, Kellogg says: "Much has been discovered about the skills of professional writers that can benefit those aspiring to the role" (Ericsson et al. 2018: 1147). This central section looks at some of those skills from the perspective of expert writers in five main areas: note taking, getting started, rewriting, techniques, and purpose.

Note Taking

I'm a huge notetaker (Perell 2025)

Writing often starts with ideas. An idea may "pop into" one's head, or "float into" one's mind. It can come any time, any place. A wonderful anecdote by a truly great writer is recounted by Robert Graves in his autobiography, when he was visiting Thomas Hardy at his home. Hardy related the story of when he was pruning his trees and a story came to his mind, but as he had no pencil and paper to hand, when he had finished the gardening, "all was utterly gone" (Graves 2014: 381). Note-taking is something that many expert writers do. Here is Angus Wilson on whether he takes notes: "Books of them. The gustatory period before I start to write is very important to me" (Paris Review 1959: 256).

However, other writers do not always share this advice, although some recognise its value. When asked whether he takes notes, Alberto Moravia replied: "Never. I never work from notes. No, I have never taken notes or even possessed a notebook. My work is not prepared beforehand in any way" (Paris Review 1959: 218). William Styron is of a similar opinion: "No, I don't feel the need for it. I've tried, but it does no good, since I've never used what I've written down. I think the use of a notebook depends upon the individual" (Paris Review 1959: 271). An opinion shared by Aldous Huxley: "No, I don't keep notebooks. I have occasionally kept diaries for short periods, but I'm sluggish, I mostly don't One should keep notebooks, I think, but I haven't" (Paris Review 1963: 164).

Getting started

Getting started is often the most challenging part for everyone who writes, whether professional or amateur. Expert writers have much to say about getting words down on the page, usually revealing what happens once the process is in motion.

Dorothy Parker upon being asked how she writes a story says: "It takes six months to do a story. I think it out and then write it sentence by sentence – no first draft" (Paris Review 1959: 79). Robert Penn Warren provides an insight into what happens once the words start to be put on a page: "When you start any book you don't know what, ultimately, your issues are. You try to write to find them. You're fiddling with the stuff, hoping to make sense, whatever kind of sense you can make" (Paris Review 1959: 190). Alberto Moravia also illuminates this: "When I sit at my table to write, I never know what it will be till I'm underway. I trust in inspiration, which sometimes comes and sometimes doesn't. But I don't sit back waiting for it, I work every day" (Paris Review 1959: 218).

Many expert writers express the importance of a writing habit and even a specified time for writing, often in the mornings. William Styron says this about this aspect of his writing process: "When I'm writing steadily…I average two-and-a-half or three pages a day, longhand on yellow sheets. I spend about five hours at it, of which very little is spent writing." (Paris Review 1959: 271). Truman Capote takes a different approach: "I am a horizontal author. I can't think unless I'm lying in bed or stretched on a couch with a cigarette and coffee handy. I've got to be puffing and sipping. As the afternoon wears on, I shift from coffee to mint tea to sherry to martinis" (Paris Review 1959: 294). Henry Miller remarks that the best time for writing is: "I generally go to work right after breakfast. I sit right down at the machine. If I cannot write, I quit" (Paris Review 1963: 142). Aldous Huxley also finds the morning time the most productive: "I work regularly. I always work in the mornings, and then again a little bit before dinner" (Paris Review 1963: 164) a sentiment shared by Lawrence Durrell: "In fact I think the best regime is to get up early, insult yourself a bit in the shaving mirror, and then pretend you're cutting wood, which is just all about the hell you are doing – if you see what I mean" (Paris Review 1963: 229). Finally, Ernest Hemingway clearly captures the importance of morning writing: "When I am working on a book or a story, I write every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you; it is cool or cold, and you come to your work and warm as you write" (Paris Review 1963: 186).

Francoise Sagan says about the beginnings of the creative act: "…I started with the idea of a character, the girl, but nothing came of it until my pen was in hand. I have to start to write to have ideas" (Paris Review 1959: 304). This act of creation is echoed by Marianne Moore when explaining how a poem starts for her: "A felicitous phrase springs to mind – a word or two, say – simultaneously with some thought or object of equal attraction" (Paris Review 1963: 64). Henry Green has similar thoughts about the construction

of a longer, narrative work: "As to plotting or thinking ahead, I don't in a novel. I let it come page by page, one a day, and carry it in my head." (Paris Review 1963: 210). Robert Penn Warren explains how this is a process that is hard to pin down: "When you start any book you don't know what, ultimately, your issues are. You try to write to find them. You're fiddling with the stuff, hoping to make sense, whatever kind of sense you can make" (Paris Review 1959: 190).

Rewriting

One of the most essential elements of the writing process that nearly all expert writers seem to share is the act of revision or rewriting. Kellogg terms this process of expert rewriting "knowledge crafting" and says: "Knowledge crafting entails shaping a text so that the reader finds it comprehensible and convincing; it demands that the author see her words from the third-person perspective of the reader" (Ericsson et al. 2018: 1138).

Robert Lowell says that he rewrites "Endlessly" (Paris Review 1963: 277) as does Frank O'Connor ", Endlessly, endlessly, endlessly" (Paris Review 1963: 168). For James Thurber rewriting is essential: "For me it's mostly a question of rewriting. It's part of a constant attempt on my part to make the finished version smooth, to make it seem effortless." (Paris Review 1959: 88) while Thornton Wilder provides a fascinating metaphor for the importance of the act of rewriting: "there are passages in every novel whose first writing is pretty much the last. But it's the joint and cement, between those spontaneous passages, that take a great deal of rewriting" (Paris Review 1959: 105). Alberto Moravia compares the act of rewriting to that of an artist: "Each book is worked over several times. I like to compare my method with that of painters centuries ago, as it were, from layer to layer (Paris Review 1959: 220) and Truman Capote, that of an obsessive stylist: "Essentially I think of myself as a stylist, and stylists can become notoriously obsessed with the placing of a comma, the weight of a semicolon" (Paris Review 1959: 294).

Henry Green shows how the process of rewriting alters the written product: "Yes, because I copy everything out afresh. I make alterations in the manuscript and then copy them out. And in copying out, I make further alterations" (Paris Review 1963: 209). Henry Miller shares this approach: "When I'm revising I use pen and ink to make changes, to cross out, insert. Then I retype, and in the process of retyping I make more changes" (Paris Review 1963: 143) while Lawrence Durrell also emphasises the importance of rewriting: "I do go over a good deal" (Paris Review 1959: 224) as does

Aldous Huxley: "Generally, I write everything many times over. All my thoughts are second thoughts. And I correct each page a great deal, or rewrite it several times as I go along" (Paris Review 1963: 164). Incredibly, Ernest Hemingway, in his Paris interview, gives an even more detailed account of the reason for rewriting, alerting us to the fact that he rewrote one page (the ending to A Farewell to Arms) 39 times (Paris Review 1963: 186). So much can be learned from these expert insights about the value of rewriting. Indeed, in Hemingway's words, rewriting sums up the reason for revising one's work: "Getting the words right." (Paris Review 1963: 187).

Technique

A human writer has their style, stamps their own identity on their writing. As Raymond Carver succinctly expresses, "Every great or even every excellent writer makes the world over according to his specifications" (Carver 1985: 46). This is the fundamental and crucial difference between human writing and machine writing. Carl Hendrick states the machine writing problem clearly "The problem is not simply that machines are generating content. It's that humans are beginning to read, and worse, write, as if they were machines" (Hendrick 2025: 1). Expert writers, when explaining about technique, show us the incredible importance of our human creative process.

E.M. Forster demonstrates the trickiness of human expression "We keep coming back to that. People will not realise how little conscious one is of these things; how one flounders about. They want us to be so much better informed than we are" (Paris Review 1959: 34) and Francois Mauriac reveals the instinctive nature of writing when he says: "I simply resorted to the techniques that my instinct suggested to me" (Paris Review 1959: 41). Thornton Wilder focuses on the inner pleasure that writing brings: "Once you catch the idea for an extended narration – drama or novel - and if the idea is firmly within you, then the writing brings you perhaps not so much pleasure as a deep absorption (Paris Review 1959: 105) while William Faulkner hammers home the hard, personal task a writer faces: "Let the writer take up surgery or bricklaying of he is interested in technique. There is no mechanical way to get the writing done, no shortcut. The young writer would be a fool to follow a theory. Teach yourself by your mistakes; people learn only by error" (Paris Review 1959: 129).

A writer's style is something that many of the experts wrestle with. Nelson Algren explains: "Well, I haven't consciously tried to develop it. The only thing I've consciously tried to do was put myself in a position to hear the people I wanted to hear talk talk" (Paris Review 1959: 244). William Styron

says, “Style comes only after long, hard practice and writing” (Paris Review 1959: 271). For Françoise Sagan, it is more of a search for musicality: “For me, writing is a question of finding a certain rhythm. I compare it to jazz” (Paris Review 1959: 305). Marianne Moore seeks a more analytic approach: “Do the poet and the scientist not work analogously? Both are willing to waste effort. Being hard on oneself is one of the main strengths of each. Each is attentive to clues, each must narrow the choice, must strive for precision…The objective is a fertile procedure. Is it not?” (Paris Review 1963: 75–76).

Truman Capote reveals the importance of the individual personality in the written act: “No, I don’t think that style is consciously arrived at, any more than one arrives at the color of one’s eyes. After all, your style is you.” (Paris Review 1959: 296) which is a view shared by Henry Green: “He can’t do anything else. His style is himself, and we are all of us changing every day – developing, we hope! We leave our marks behind us like a snail” (Paris Review 1963: 211) as well as by Lawrence Durrell: “I don’t think anyone can, you know, develop a style consciously… Do you consciously dream? One doesn’t know very much about these processes at all.” (Paris Review 1963: 230).

Importantly, there is a warning about how writing can, or cannot, be learned or taught. For Hemingway, he learned some essential fundamentals while working as a news reporter: “On the Star (the Kansas City Star newspaper), you were forced to learn to write a simple declarative sentence. This is useful to anyone” (Paris Review 1963: 189). But beyond such essentials, it is difficult for writers to state that style and technique can be easily taught. Robert Lowell says, “I’m sure that writing isn’t a craft, that is, something for which you learn the skills and turn it out. It must come from some deep impulse, deep inspiration. That can’t be taught, it can’t be what you use in teaching” (Paris Review 1963: 268). Another great American poet, Robert Penn Warren, reveals the physical, embodied effort that it takes to write: “At some point, you know, you have to try to get one with God and then take a hard cold look at what you’re doing and work on it once more, trusting in your viscera and nervous system and your previous efforts as far as they’ve gone” (Paris Review 1959: 197).

Purpose

> For me, writing is a tool for thinking, most importantly. (Sam Altman in Perell 2025: 2.05m)

We return to the view of OpenAI’s founder about the purpose of writing, which he states as a “tool for thinking”. Once again, it is an incredible

sentence to reflect upon. Writing as a tool for thinking. Most of the expert writers in this final section would undoubtedly agree.

William Faulkner provides a broad angle perspective of the purpose of writing and how, as new media have arrived (here, picture magazines and comic books – but it is no stretch to see that we could add any of today's digital forms to this comparison) we may be in danger of losing our hard-fought struggle to read (and create) works of literature:

I imagine as long as people will continue to read novels, people will continue to write them, or vice versa; unless, of course, the pictorial magazines and comic strips finally atrophy man's capacity to read, and literature is on its way back to the picture writing in the Neanderthal cave (Paris Review 1959: 137).

Robert Frost makes the point, repeatedly, in his interview that thoughts link to something else, what he calls "a feat of association" or, more simply "Putting this and that together. That click" (Paris Review 1963: 28). For Frank O'Connor the physicality of the creative act, even in a metaphorical sense, is what matters: "The moment you grab somebody by the lapels and you've got something to tell, that's a real story" (Paris Review 1959: 181). Alberto Moravia reveals the personal pleasure that writing brings: "I write simply to amuse myself; I write to entertain others and – and, well, to express myself. One has one's way of expressing oneself, and writing happens to be mine" (Paris Review 1959: 215). This is echoed in the words of Thornton Wilder looking towards the future authors and their purpose: "The future author discovers that language, the exploration and manipulation of the resources of language, will serve him in winning through to his way…Language for him is the instrument for digesting experience, for explaining himself to himself" (Paris Review 1959: 107).

It is this discovery of language, its exploration and manipulation that lies at the very heart of the matter of human written construction. Expert writers seem to understand the real difficulties that writing holds in trying to do something, as George Simenon articulates when trying to explain one of his main problems with writing being: "the problem of communication. I mean communication between two people. The fact that we are I don't know how many millions of people, yet communication, complete communication, is completely impossible between two of these people, is to me one of the biggest tragic themes in the world" (Paris Review 1959: 153). Lawrence Durrell sees the role of a writer as "only someone unrolling and digging out and excavating the areas normally accessible to normal people everywhere, and exhibiting them as a sort of scarecrow to show people what can be done

with themselves" (Paris Review 1963: 231). These active verbs of exploration "unrolling", "digging", "excavating" are both fascinating and extremely helpful in capturing the factual purposes of human writing.

Conclusion

In the article that reported on the library that was built at the heart of OpenAI, the author makes a salient point:

OpenAI's chatbot was not built like the average Internet app: ChatGPT learned its skills by analysing vast amounts of text written, edited and curated by humans, including encyclopaedia articles, news stories, poetry and, yes, books. (*The Old-Fashioned Library at the Heart of the AI Boom | The Star*, n.d.)

Our new relationship with digital tools in this age of AI has a fundamental irony; the tools many are using to communicate their human thoughts have been built on and trained on the words and the books of humans (Arató–Balázs 2024; Farkas et. al. 2024). One way of reclaiming that fundamental perspective may be by revisiting expert writers' words, thoughts, and voices. They can model ways to express ourselves more clearly and thoughtfully, techniques that we could use to improve our ability to communicate to and with others. They may help guide us with the true purpose of human written expression (Szűts 2012). Ted Hughes makes the case for the possibilities of words:

Because it is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find the words that will unlock the doors of all these many mansions inside the head and express something – perhaps not much, just something – of the crush of information that presses in on us from the way a crow flies over and the way a man walks and the look of a street and from what we did one day a dozen years ago (Hughes 1967: 124).

That metaphor of unlocking the doors of the "many mansions inside the head" and then expressing "something" is what all of the writers investigated here have sought to convey. And there is hope for future generations as they discover new ways of expression, using possible new genres and forms, as Kazuo Ishiguro highlighted in his Nobel Prize Lecture: 'The next generation will come with all sorts of new, sometimes bewildering ways to tell important and wonderful stories. We must keep our minds open to them, especially regarding genre and form, so that we can nurture and celebrate the best of them" (Ishiguro 2017: 15) a view shared by Henry Green: "It is simply that the novelist is a communicator and must therefore be interested in any form of communication…Media change. We don't have to paint chapels like Cocteau, but at the same time we must always be on the lookout for the new ways" (Paris Review 1959: 213).

Like Robert Frost, we may no longer write on the sole of our shoes, or, like Capote, lie flat on our backs typing, puffing and sipping Martinis. Still, we may find within the covers of the books, which are so fundamental to the physical and technological ecosystem of AI today, words of true experts to help us navigate and communicate our way better in this new world. Crucially and strangely, at the heart of human written creativity and, at the heart of our new artificial intelligence technologies, are words and as Carver so eloquently explains, it is our attention to words and meaning that is the very heart of the matter:

That's all we have, finally, the words, and they had better be the right ones, with the correct punctuation in the right places so that they can best say what they are meant to say. …if the words are in any way blurred, the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved (Carver 1985: 48).

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