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6 Writing Tips From John Steinbeck

By Maria Popova

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The legendary author explains why you should abandon all hope of finishing your novel.



If this is indeed the year of [reading more and writing better](#), we've been right on course with [David Ogilvy's 10 no-bullshit tips](#), Henry Miller's [11 commandments](#), and various invaluable advice from [other great writers](#). Now comes John Steinbeck — Pulitzer Prize-winner, Nobel laureate, [love guru](#) — with six tips on writing, culled from his altogether excellent interview in the Fall 1975 issue of [The Paris Review](#).

1. Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.
2. Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down.

Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material.

3. Forget your generalized audience. In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the theater, it doesn't exist. In writing, your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person and write to that one.

4. If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it—bypass it and go on. When you have finished the whole you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is because it didn't belong there.

5. Beware of a scene that becomes too dear to you, dearer than the rest. It will usually be found that it is out of drawing.

6. If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it. Only then will it have the sound of speech.

But perhaps most paradoxically yet poetically, 12 years prior—in 1963, immediately after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception"—Steinbeck [issued](#) a thoughtful disclaimer to all such advice:

"If there is a magic in story writing, and I am convinced there is, no one has ever been able to reduce it to a recipe that can be passed from one person to another. The formula seems to lie solely in the aching urge of the writer to convey something he feels important to the reader. If the writer has that urge, he may sometimes, but by no means always, find the way to do it. You must perceive the excellence that makes a good story good or the errors that makes a bad story. For a bad story is only an ineffective story."

If you feel bold enough to discount Steinbeck's anti-advice advice, you can do so with these [9 essential books on more and writing](#). Find more such gems in this [collection of priceless interviews](#) with literary icons from half a century of The Paris Review archives.

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