

Great Passages to be Read Out Loud

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To become a better writer, I think it's essential to pay attention to great writing. It's only through reading the writing of others that we get new ideas for ways to play with words. Here are a few of my favorite passages from some of my favorite writers. Additionally, these passages are quite wonderful to listen to when read aloud.

In my *Business Writing Basics* class, we talk about how great writing has the following characteristics: clarity, focus, relevance, precise and accurate word choices, correct grammar, and an engaging style. Great writing is also credible (i.e., believable), organized well, and often thought-provoking.

Each of these passages meets most if not all of these qualifications. I hope you enjoy them! (And, seriously, read some of these out loud. 😊) RP

Anthony Doerr, from *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014)

All the Light We Cannot See is at the very top of my list of books to be read out loud. If you have not read this book, you owe it to yourself to pick up a copy and read it. It's brilliantly written; Doerr is a master storyteller! This passage occurs early in the book and helps us get to know the female protagonist, Marie-Laure. By this point we have learned that Marie-Laure is very young and lives in France in a tiny, seaside village. We have also learned that she is going blind. (When I read this passage, given the vividness of the details, I can't help but wonder Doerr wrote it with a blind person in mind.)

Marie-Laure LeBlanc is a tall and freckled six-year-old in Paris with rapidly deteriorating eyesight when her father sends her on a children's tour of the museum where he works. The guide is a hunchbacked old warder hardly taller than a child himself. He raps the tip of his cane against the floor for attention, then leads his dozen charges across the gardens to the galleries.

The children watch engineers use pulleys to lift a fossilized dinosaur femur. They see a stuffed giraffe in a closet, patches of hide wearing off its back. They peer into taxidermists' drawers full of feathers and talons and glass eyeballs; they flip through two-hundred-year-old herbarium sheets bedecked with orchids and daisies and herbs.

Eventually they climb sixteen steps into the Gallery of Mineralogy. The guide shows them agate from Brazil and violet amethysts and a meteorite on a pedestal that he claims is as ancient as the solar system itself. Then he leads them single file down two twisting staircases and along several corridors and stops outside an iron door with a single keyhole. "End of tour," he says.

A girl says, "But what's through there?"

“Behind this door is another locked door, slightly smaller.”

“And what's behind that?”

“A third locked door, smaller yet.”

“What's behind that?”

“A fourth door, and a fifth, on and on until you reach a thirteenth, a little locked door no bigger than a shoe.”

The children lean forward. “And then?”

“Behind the thirteenth door”—the guide flourishes one of his impossibly wrinkled hands—“is the Sea of Flames.”

Puzzlement. Fidgeting.

“Come now. You've never heard of the Sea of Flames?”

The children shake their heads. Marie-Laure squints up at the naked bulbs strung in three-yard intervals along the ceiling; each sets a rainbow-colored halo rotating in her vision.

The guide hangs his cane on his wrist and rubs his hands together.

“It's a long story. Do you want to hear a long story?”

They nod.

Delia Owens, from *Where The Crawdad's Sing* (2018)

This is the first paragraph in Chapter One of Owens' novel. We already know from the Prologue that Kya, a young girl, lives a very simple life in a marsh (not to be confused with a swamp) in the Southeastern U.S. One of the things I love about this passage is how well, and how in so few words, it explains Kya's life in the South and her relationship (or mostly lack of relationship) with her mother.

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The morning burned so August-hot, the marsh's moist breath hung the oaks and pines with fog. The palmetto patches stood unusually quiet except for the low, slow flap of the heron's wings lifting from the lagoon. And then, Kya, only six at the time, heard the screen door slap. Standing on the stool, she stopped scrubbing grits from the pot and lowered it into the basin of worn-out suds. No sounds now but her own breathing. Who had left the shack? Not Ma. She never let the door slam.

But when Kya ran to the porch, she saw her mother in a long brown skirt, kick pleats nipping at her ankles, as she walked down the sandy lane in high heels. The stubby-nosed shoes were fake alligator skin. Her only going-out pair. Kya wanted to holler out

but knew not to rouse Pa, so opened the door and stood on the brick-'n'-board steps. From there she saw the blue train case Ma carried. Usually, with the confidence of a pup, Kya knew her mother would return with meat wrapped in greasy brown paper or with a chicken, head dangling down. But she never wore the gator heels, never took a case.

Edna Lewis, from *The Taste of Country Cooking* (1976)

In this passage, Lewis does an amazing job of helping us imagine the richness of her mother's cooking—and in particular her preparations for Spring meals. It's a short passage, but it's hard not to be drooling by the end.

One usually thinks of lamb as a spring dish but no one had the heart to kill a lamb. The lambs were sold at the proper time and the sheep would be culled—some sold and a few butchered. My mother would usually buy the head and the forequarter of the mutton, which she cooked by braising or boiling and served with the first asparagus that appeared in along the fence row, grown from seed the birds dropped. There were the unforgettable English peas, first-of-the-season garden crop cooked and served in heavy cream along with sauteed first-of-the-season chicken. As the new calves came, we would have an abundance of milk and butter, as well as buttermilk, rich with flecks of butter. Rich milk was used in the making of gravies, blanc mange, custards, creamed minced ham, buttermilk biscuits, and batter breads, as well as sour-milk pancakes. And we would gather wild honey from the hollow of oak trees to go with the hot biscuits and pick wild strawberries to go with the heavy cream.

William Zinsser, from *On Writing Well* (1976)

In this passage from one of my favorite writers on writing, Zinsser encourages us—or rather pleads with us—to simplify our writing.

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

Who can understand the clotted language of everyday American commerce: the memo, the corporation report, the business letter, the notice from the bank explaining its latest “simplified” statement? What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure explaining his costs and benefits? What father or mother can put together a child's toy from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn't think of saying it may rain. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank.

Charles Bukowski, from *Factotum* (1975)

Bukowski provides here such a great example of what it means to fully commit to something.

If you're going to try, go all the way. Otherwise, don't even start. This could mean losing girlfriends, wives, relatives and maybe even your mind. It could mean not eating for three or four days. It could mean freezing on a park bench. It could mean jail. It could mean derision. It could mean mockery—isolation. Isolation is the gift. All the others are a test of your endurance, of how much you really want to do it. And, you'll do it, despite rejection and the worst odds. And it will be better than anything else you can imagine. If you're going to try, go all the way. There is no other feeling like that. You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame with fire. You will ride life straight to perfect laughter. It's the only good fight there is.

Flannery O'Connor, from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1953)

Flannery O'Connor is one of my favorite Southern writers. One of the things I love about this passage, which serves as the opening to her short story A Good Man is Hard to Find, is how she gives us perfect, brief and humorous descriptions of her strange and yet very real characters—the conniving grandmother, the bald father, the cabbage-faced mother, the insolent kids.

The Grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal*. “Now look here, Bailey,” she said, “see here, read this,” and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. “Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did.”

Bailey didn't look up from his reading so she wheeled around then and faced the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a

cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears. She was sitting on the sofa, feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar. "The children have been to Florida before," the old lady said. "You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee."

The children's mother didn't seem to hear her but the eight-year-old boy, John Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?" He and the little girl, June Star, were reading the funny papers on the floor.

"She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day," June Star said without raising her yellow head.

"Yes and what would you do if this fellow, The Misfit, caught you?" the grandmother asked.

"I'd smack his face," John Wesley said.

"She wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks," June Star said. "Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go."

"All right, Miss," the grandmother said. "Just remember that the next time you want me to curl your hair."

June Star said her hair was naturally curly.

Stephen King, from *Different Seasons* (1982)

Stephen King is known for his horror stories and his prolificacy, and yet he is such a brilliant and compelling writer. What I love about this passage from a short story called The Body is how well he nails the truth about how profoundly important it is for us not just to say difficult things but to have people hear them—to really hear them.

The most important things are the hardest to say. They are the things you get ashamed of because words diminish them—words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear.

Brené Brown, from *Daring Greatly* (2012)

In her confident and engaging style, Brené Brown—an American research professor and lecturer—offers us a glimpse into her first session with a psychotherapist. She’s agreed to go to therapy, but you can tell almost immediately that she doesn’t want to be there. What I like about this passage is that she illustrates vividly thoughts and feelings commonly associated with vulnerability—which also happens to be the subject of the book.

I looked right at her and said, “I frickin' hate vulnerability.” I figured she's a therapist—I'm sure she's had tougher cases. Plus, the sooner she knows what she's dealing with, the faster we can get this whole therapy thing wrapped up. “I hate uncertainty. I hate not knowing. I can't stand opening myself to getting hurt or being disappointed. It's excruciating. Vulnerability is complicated. *And* it's excruciating. Do you know what I mean?”

Diana nods. “Yes, I know vulnerability. I know it well. It's an exquisite emotion.” Then she looks up and kind of smiles, as if she's picturing something really beautiful. I'm sure I look confused because I can't imagine what she's picturing. I'm suddenly concerned for her well-being and my own.

“I said it was *excruciating*, not *exquisite*,” I point out. “And let me say this for the record, if my research didn't link being vulnerable with living a Wholehearted life, I wouldn't be here. I hate how it makes me feel.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Like I'm coming out of my skin. Like I need to fix whatever's happening and make it better.”

“And if you can't?”

“Then I feel like punching someone in the face.”

“And do you?”

“No. Of course not.”

“So what do you do?”

“Clean the house. Eat peanut butter. Blame people. Make everything around me perfect. Control whatever I can—whatever's not nailed down.”

“When do you feel the most vulnerable?”

“When I'm in fear.” I look up as Diana responds with that annoying pause and head-nodding done by therapists to draw us out. “When I'm anxious and unsure about how things are going to go, or if I'm having a difficult conversation, or if I'm trying something new or doing something that makes me uncomfortable or opens me up to criticism or judgment.” Another annoying pause as the empathic nodding continues.

“When I think about how much I love my kids and Steve, and how my life would be

over if something happened to them. When I see the people I care about struggling, and I can't fix it or make it better. All I can do is be with them.”

“I see.”

“I feel it when I'm scared that things are too good. Or too scary. I'd really like for it to be exquisite, but right now it's just excruciating. Can people change that?”

“Yes, I believe they can.”

“Can you give me some homework or something? Should I review the data?”

“No data and no homework. No assignments or gold stars in here. Less thinking. More feeling.”

“Can I get to exquisite without having to feel really vulnerable in the process?”

“No.”

“Well, shit. That's just awesome.”

Anne Lamott, from *Bird by Bird* (1994)

In this delightful read from a chapter called “Shitty First Drafts,” Lamott encourages writers to just dive right in. Don't be afraid to produce that terrible, awful, horrible, no good, very bad first draft.

Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mentioned this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)

Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. One

writer I know tells me that he sits down every morning and says to himself nicely, “It's not like you don't have a choice, because you do—you can either type or kill yourself.” We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time. Now, Muriel Spark is said to have felt that she was taking dictation from God every morning—sitting there, one supposes, plugged into a Dictaphone, typing away, humming. But this is a very hostile and aggressive position. One might hope for bad things to rain down on a person like this.

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, “Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?,” you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

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Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, “Well, *that's* not very interesting, is it?” And there's the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there's William Burroughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a house plant; and so on.

Richard Brautigan, from *Sombrero Fallout* (1976)

One of my favorite things about this passage is Brautigan's description of what it's like to be in recovery from a relationship with a creative narcissist.

I will be very careful the next time I fall in love, she told herself. Also, she had made a promise to herself that she intended on keeping. She was never going to go out with another writer: no matter how charming, sensitive, inventive or fun they could be. They weren't worth it in the long run. They were emotionally too expensive and the upkeep was complicated. They were like having a vacuum cleaner around the house that broke all the time and only Einstein could fix it. She wanted her next lover to be a broom.

Jules Verne, from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) (translation by F. P. Walter, 1993)

Note that this was written in the late 1800's. What I love about this passage is how Jules Verne (and some of this may be due to his translator in this case, F.P. Walter) gives us a remarkably compelling, vivid, alarming, and technical account of a sea monster.

The year 1866 was marked by a bizarre development, an unexplained and downright inexplicable phenomenon that surely no one has forgotten. Without getting into those rumors that upset civilians in the seaports and deranged the public mind even far inland, it must be said that professional seamen were especially alarmed. Traders, shipowners, captains of vessels, skippers, and master mariners from Europe and America, naval officers from every country, and at their heels the various national governments on these two continents, were all extremely disturbed by the business.

In essence, over a period of time several ships had encountered "an enormous thing" at sea, a long spindle-shaped object, sometimes giving off a phosphorescent glow, infinitely bigger and faster than any whale.

The relevant data on this apparition, as recorded in various logbooks, agreed pretty closely as to the structure of the object or creature in question, its unprecedented speed of movement, its startling locomotive power, and the unique vitality with which it seemed to be gifted. If it was a cetacean, it exceeded in bulk any whale previously classified by science. No naturalist, neither Cuvier nor Lacépède, neither Professor Duméril nor Professor de Quatrefages, would have accepted the existence of such a monster sight unseen—specifically, unseen by their own scientific eyes.

Striking an average of observations taken at different times—rejecting those timid estimates that gave the object a length of 200 feet, and ignoring those exaggerated views that saw it as a mile wide and three long—you could still assert that this

phenomenal creature greatly exceeded the dimensions of anything then known to ichthyologists, if it existed at all.

Now then, it *did* exist, this was an undeniable fact; and since the human mind dotes on objects of wonder, you can understand the worldwide excitement caused by this unearthly apparition. As for relegating it to the realm of fiction, that charge had to be dropped.

Mark Twain, from *Roughing It* (1872)

Mark Twain is one of the best. I love his insights and sense of humor. In this passage, written in the 1870s, he describes one of those universal incidents that is both awful and hilarious when a beloved pet gets him/herself into trouble.

Mono Lake lies in a lifeless, treeless, hideous desert, eight thousand feet above the level of the sea, and is guarded by mountains two thousand feet higher, whose summits are always clothed in clouds. This solemn, silent, sailless sea—this lonely tenant of the loneliest spot on earth—is little graced with the picturesque. It is an unpretending expanse of grayish water, about a hundred miles in circumference, with two islands in its center, mere upheavals of rent and scorched and blistered lava, snowed over with gray banks and drifts of pumice stone and ashes, the winding sheet of the dead volcano, whose vast crater the lake has seized upon and occupied.

The lake is two hundred feet deep, and its sluggish waters are so strong with alkali that if you only dip the most hopelessly soiled garment into them once or twice, and wring it out, it will be found as clean as if it had been through the ablest of washerwomen's hands. While we camped there our laundry work was easy. We tied the week's washing astern of our boat, and sailed a quarter of a mile, and the job was complete, all to the wringing out. If we threw the water on our heads and gave them a rub or so, the white lather would pile up three inches high. This water is not good for bruised places and abrasions of the skin. We had a valuable dog. He had raw places on him. He had more raw places on him than sound ones. He was the rawest dog I almost ever saw. He jumped overboard one day to get away from the flies. But it was bad judgment. In his condition, it would have been just as comfortable to jump into the fire. The alkali water nipped him in all the raw places simultaneously, and he struck out for the shore with considerable interest. He yelped and barked and howled as he went—and by the time he got to the shore there was no bark to him—for he had barked the bark all out of his inside, and the alkali water had cleaned the bark all off his outside, and he probably wished he had never embarked in any such enterprise. He ran round and round in a circle, and pawed the earth and clawed the air, and threw double somersaults, sometimes backward and sometimes forward, in the most extraordinary manner. He was not a demonstrative dog, as a general thing, but rather of a grave and serious turn of mind, and I never saw him take so much interest in anything before. He finally

struck out over the mountains, at a gait which we estimated at about two hundred and fifty miles an hour, and he is going yet. This was about nine years ago. We look for what is left of him along here every day.

Lynne Truss, from *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2003)

This story, a brilliant example of why punctuation matters, appears on the back cover of Truss' book Eats, Shoots & Leaves.

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

“Good lord!” exclaims the confused waiter, as the panda makes his way toward the exit. “Why?”

The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder.

“I’m a panda,” he says at the door. “Look it up.”

The waiter turns to the relevant entry in the manual and, sure enough, finds an explanation:

Panda – Large, black-and-white, bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.

Amy Tan, from *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)

One of the things I love about this opening paragraph of Tan's best-selling novel is how well she describes that universal hope for all that is good that parents have for their children.

The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look!—it is too beautiful to eat.

Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan—a creature that became more than what was hoped for.”

But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled her swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather

for a memory. And then she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind.

Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.” And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poem *Pied Beauty* (1877)

This is a religious poem (Hopkins was a Jesuit priest); I include it because it's such a delight to read his work out loud. You can tell he spent a lot of time carefully choosing his words—vibrant, descriptive words that sound great when spoken aloud. If you like this, also check out [God's Grandeur](#).

Glory be to God for dappled things –
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
 And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

Ralph Ellison, from *The Invisible Man* (1947)

This is the opening paragraph to Ellison's book. What I love about this paragraph is how relatable it is. Anyone who's ever been ignored or dismissed when they really wanted to be seen or heard will relate to this.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh

and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.
