

8 RULES FOR WRITING

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of

what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

— Kurt Vonnegut: [Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction](#) (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1999), 9-10.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Write what you're writing as simply as possible. Don't write fancy sentences using SAT vocal words. Kurt Vonnegut called this "making necklaces for Cleopatra," and his whole point was: don't do it. Never use a big word when a simpler word will do.

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. "To be or not to be?" asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story "Eveline" is this one: "She was tired." At that point in the story, no other words could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: "In the beginning

God created the heaven and the earth.”

— **Palm Sunday** (New York: Dial Press, 1999), 65-72.