

## Dr. Roy Peter Clark | The Poynter Institute

### Quick 5 - Writing Tools

#### NUTS AND BOLTS

1. **Begin sentences with subjects and verbs.** Make meaning early, then let weaker elements branch to the right.
2. **Order words for emphasis.** Place strong words at the beginning and at the end.
3. **Activate your verbs.** Strong verbs create action, save words, and reveal the players.
4. **Be Passive-Aggressive.** Use passive verbs to showcase the "victim" of action.
5. **Watch those adverbs.** Use them to change the meaning of the verb.
6. **Take it easy on the –ings.** Prefer the simple present or past.
7. **Fear not the long sentence.** Take the reader on a journey of language and meaning.
8. **Establish a pattern, then give it a twist.** Build parallel constructions, but cut across the grain.
9. **Let punctuation control pace and space.** Learn the rules but realize you have more options than you think.
10. **Cut big, then small.** Prune the big limbs, then shake out the dead leaves.

#### SPECIAL EFFECTS

11. **Prefer the simple over the technical.** Use shorter words, sentences and paragraphs at points of complexity.
12. **Give keywords their space.** Do not repeat a distinctive word unless you intend a specific effect.
13. **Play with words, even in serious stories.** Choose words the average writer avoids but the average reader understands.
14. **Get the name of the dog.** Dig for the concrete and specific, details that appeal to the senses.
15. **Pay attention to names.** Interesting names attract the writer – and the reader.
16. **Seek original images.** Reject clichés and first-level creativity.
17. **Riff on the creative language of others.** Make word lists, free-associate, be surprised by language.
18. **Set the pace with sentence length.** Vary sentences to influence the reader's speed.
19. **Vary the lengths of paragraphs.** Go short or long – or make a "turn" – to match your intent.
20. **Choose the number of elements with a purpose in mind.** One, two, three, or four: Each sends a secret message to the reader.
21. **Know when to back off and when to show off.** When the topic is most serious, understate; when least serious, exaggerate.
22. **Climb up and down the ladder of abstraction.** Learn when to show, when to tell, and when to do both.
23. **Tune your voice.** Read drafts aloud.

## BLUEPRINTS

24. **Work from a plan.** Index the big parts of your work.
25. **Learn the difference between reports and stories.** Use one to render information, the other to render experience.
26. **Use dialogue as a form of action.** Dialogue advances narrative; quotes delay it.
27. **Reveal traits of character.** Show characteristics through scenes, details, and dialogue.
28. **Put odd and interesting things next to each other.** Help the reader learn from contrast.
29. **Foreshadow dramatic events of powerful conclusions.** Plant important clues early.
30. **To generate suspense, use internal cliffhangers.** To propel readers, make them wait.
31. **Build your work around a key question.** Good stories need an engine, a question the action answers for the reader.
32. **Place gold coins along the path.** Reward the reader with high points, especially in the middle.
33. **Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Purposeful repetition links the parts.
34. **Write from different cinematic angles.** Turn your notebook into a "camera."
35. **Report and write for scenes.** Then align them in a meaningful sequence.
36. **Mix narrative modes.** Combine story forms using the "broken line."
37. **In short pieces of writing, don't waste a syllable.** Shape shorter works with wit and polish.
38. **Prefer archetypes to stereotypes.** Use subtle symbols, not crashing cymbals.
39. **Write toward an ending.** Help readers close the circle of meaning.

## USEFUL HABITS

40. **Draft a mission statement for your work.** To sharpen your learning, write about your writing.
41. **Turn procrastination into rehearsal.** Plan and write it first in your head.
42. **Do your homework well in advance.** Prepare for the expected – and unexpected.
43. **Read for both form and content.** Examine the machinery beneath the text.
44. **Save string.** For big projects, save scraps others would toss.
45. **Break long projects into parts.** Then assemble the pieces into something whole.
46. **Take interest in all crafts that support your work.** To do your best, help others do their best.
47. **Recruit your own support group.** Create a corps of helpers for feedback.
48. **Limit self-criticism in early drafts.** Turn it loose during revision.
49. **Learn from your critics.** Tolerate even unreasonable criticism.
50. **Own the tools of your draft.** Build a writing workbench to store your tools.

Dr. Roy Peter Clark is vice president and senior scholar at The Poynter Institute.