

Five tips for aspiring writers

[For BooksLive]

1. Don't have a dog. A dog lies there looking at you reproachfully just when you've settled down to your writing day.
2. Get a dog. A dog keeps your feet warm when the rest of the world's gone to bed.
3. Try to write when the rest of the world's gone to bed or before the rest of the world's got up: there are fewer distractions, and the sense of virtue is good for your ego.
4. Feed your ego all it requires, because it's the part of you that takes the knocks in a writing life.
5. A writing life *is* life, though it doesn't always feel like one. At times it's even better than life.
6. On the relation between literature and life: don't think about it, it comes naturally. Listen to what somebody called the boys in the basement: your subconscious. It's not news that writing draws on your subconscious, as you'll know if you've ever had the experience of your characters acquiring a life of their own. By the same token, said Norman Mailer (I think), writer's block happens when you ask the subconscious to deliver something you haven't primed it with. So live all you can, as Henry James said. It's a mistake not to.
7. But the subconscious can't spell, construct sentences or punctuate. That's the superego's job. Give him plenty of scope. There are a few writers who have managed to persuade the world that their illiteracy is art, but you probably won't get away with it. So respect the rules that you were told would stifle your creativity: they merely make it accessible to others.
8. You will have been told, as a rule, to avoid adjectives or adverbs or both, but nobody will have told you why. That's because there's no real reason. If irresistible adjectives come naturally to you, indulge them; if adverbs run trippingly off your pen, let them be. But then edit.

9. Edit, edit, edit. Yes, first thoughts are often best, but they usually need to be licked into shape. Athena may have sprung fully-formed from Zeus' brow, but you're not Zeus. Yet. Keep at it.

10. Keep at it.