

72 of the Best Quotes About Writing

By: [Zachary Petit](#) | June 22, 2012

A good writing quote can give me goosebumps.

For those days when the well is feeling dry and a tad echo-y, I keep a running list of my favorite quotes—things I've read, things I've edited, things I've found in the WD archives, things people have said to me in interviews.

Such tiny, perfect revelations.

A couple of years ago, I posted a portion of this list on my old WD blog (around the same time we ran a great quote feature on [90 tips from bestselling authors](#) in the magazine). Recently, someone asked if I was still collecting quotes.

Here's the latest iteration of the list. (I'd love to expand it, too—please share some of your favourites in the Comments section of this blog post.)

Happy Friday, and happy writing.

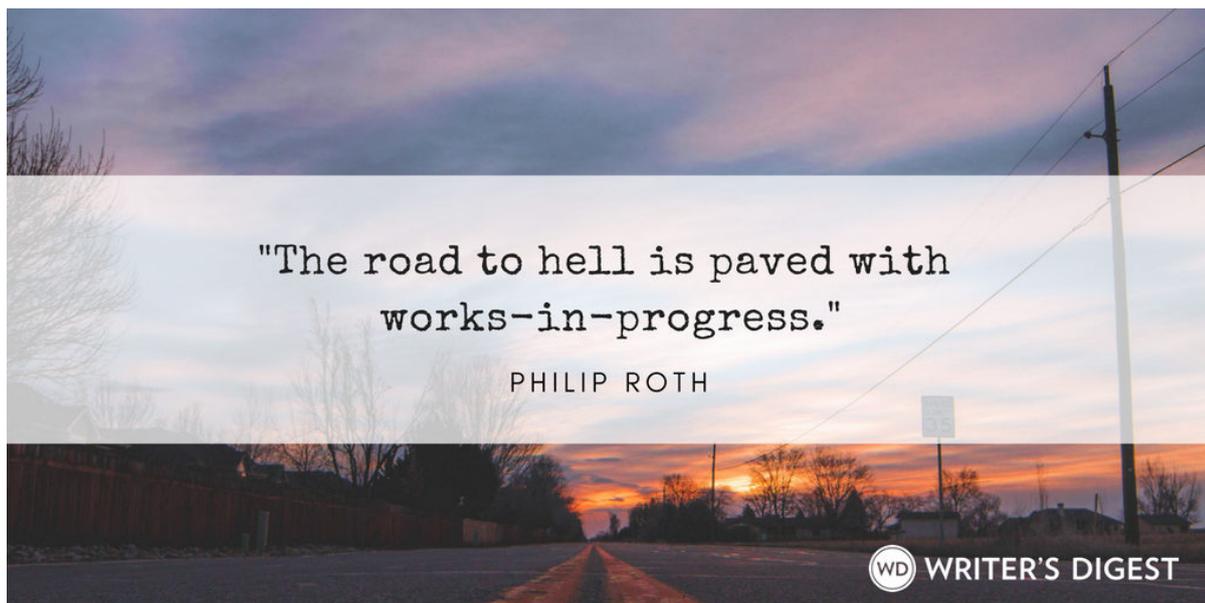
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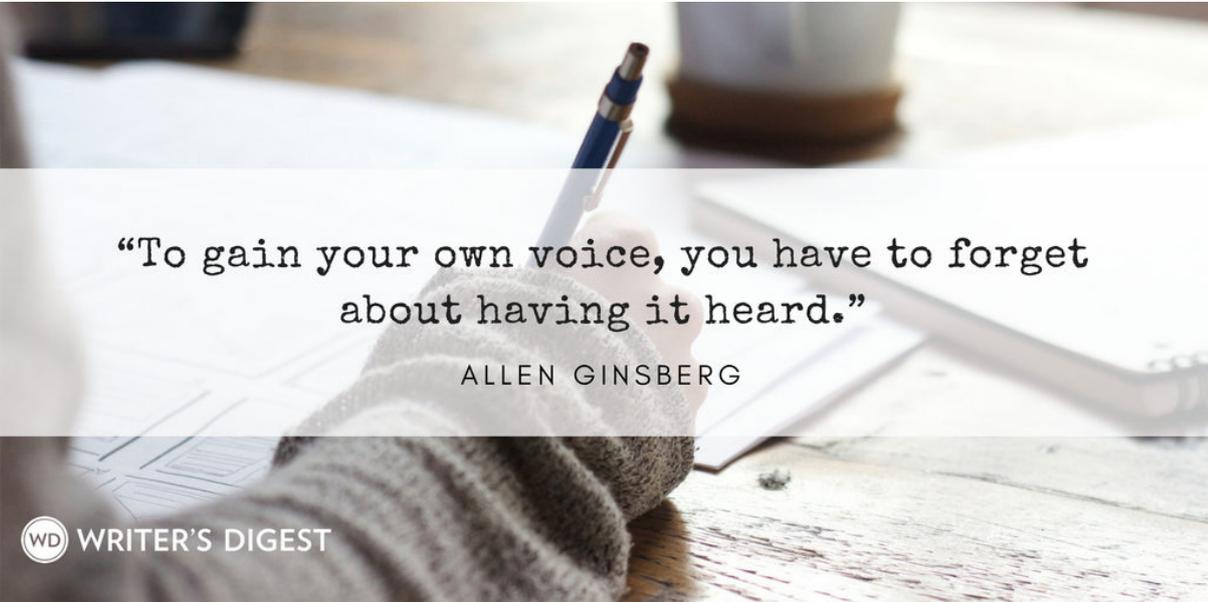
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"The road to hell is paved with adverbs."
—Stephen King

"Who wants to become a writer? And why? Because it's the answer to everything. ... It's the streaming reason for living. To note, to pin down, to build up, to create, to be astonished at nothing, to cherish the oddities, to let nothing go down the drain, to make something, to make a great flower out of life, even if it's a cactus."
—Enid Bagnold



“To gain your own voice, you have to forget about having it heard.”

ALLEN GINSBERG

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

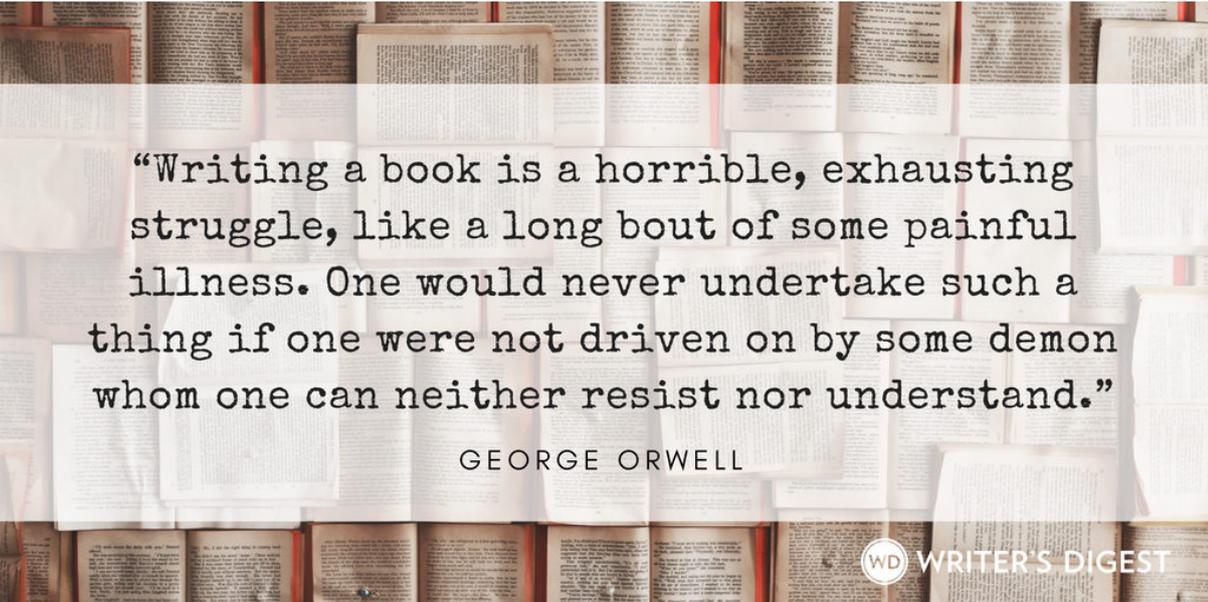
“Cheat your

landlord if you can and must, but do not try to shortchange the Muse. It cannot be done. You can't fake quality any more than you can fake a good meal.”

—William S. Burroughs

“All readers come to fiction as willing accomplices to your lies. Such is the basic goodwill contract made the moment we pick up a work of fiction.”

—Steve Almond, WD



“Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.”

GEORGE ORWELL

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

“It ain't whatcha write, it's the way atcha write it.”

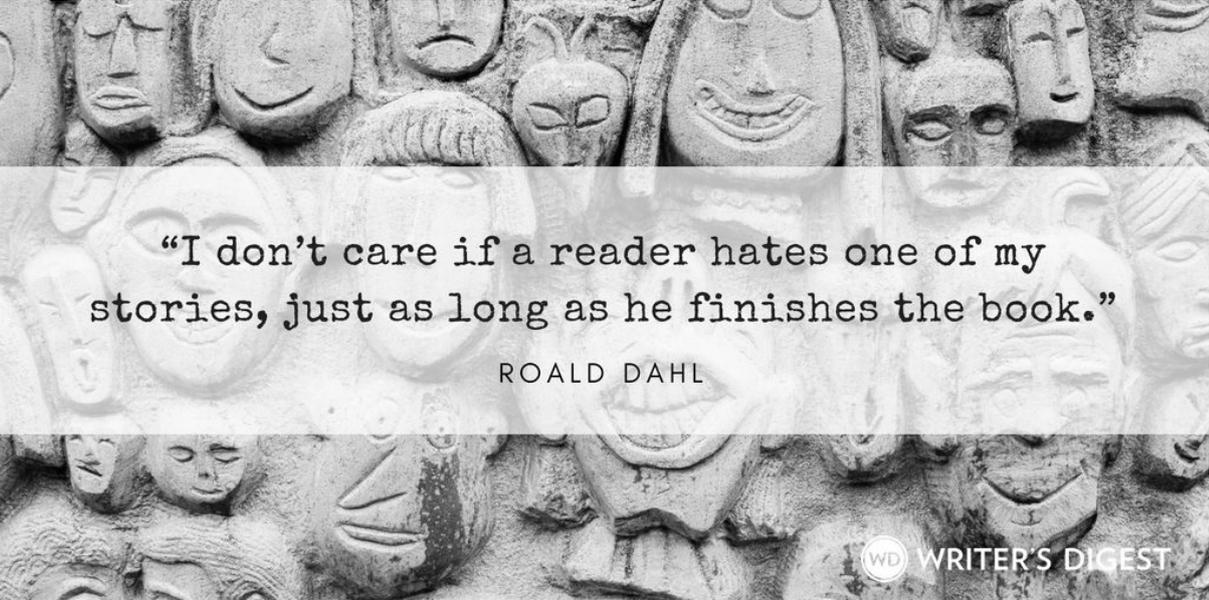
—Jack Kerouac, WD

“Not a wasted word. This has been a main point to my literary thinking all my life.”

—Hunter S. Thompson

“When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art.’ I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”

—George Orwell



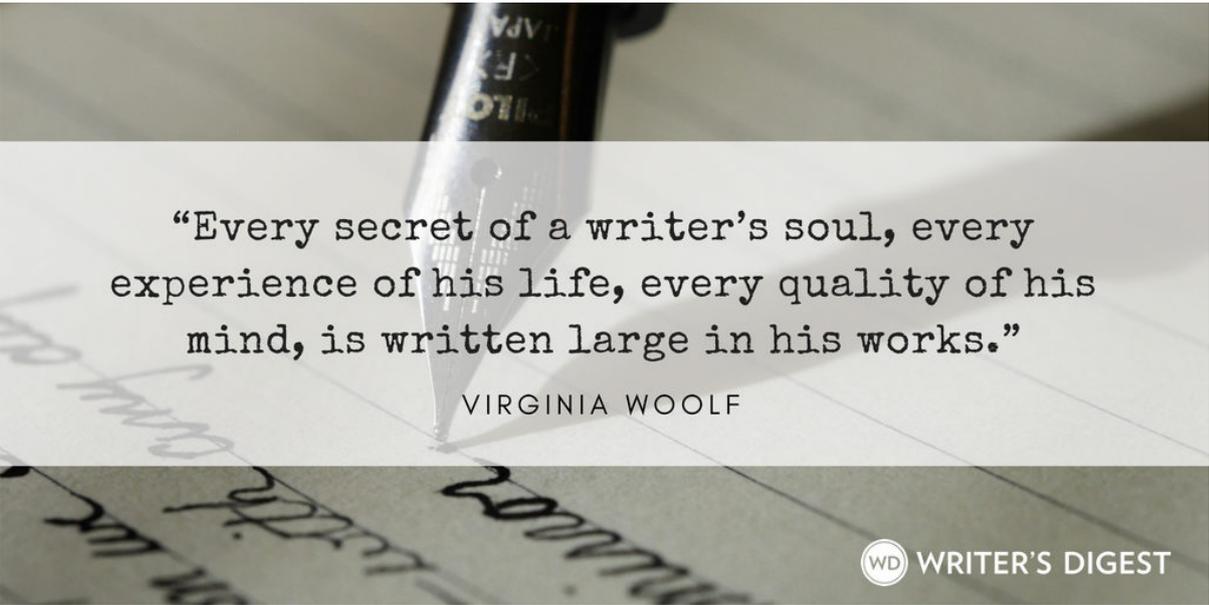
“I don’t care if a reader hates one of my stories, just as long as he finishes the book.”

ROALD DAHL

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

“The freelance writer is a man who is paid per piece or per word or perhaps.”
—Robert Benchley

“We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.”
—Ernest Hemingway



“Every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works.”

VIRGINIA WOOLF

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

“Making people believe the unbelievable is no trick; it’s work. ... Belief and reader absorption come in the details: An overturned tricycle in the gutter of an abandoned neighborhood can stand for everything.”
—Stephen King, WD (this quote is from [an interview with King in our May/June 2009 issue](#))

“If a nation loses its storytellers, it loses its childhood.”
—Peter Handke

“To defend what you’ve written is a sign that you are alive.”
—William Zinsser, WD

“If I had not existed, someone else would have written me, Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, all of us.”
—William Faulkner

“For your born writer, nothing is so healing as the realization that he has come upon the right word.”
—Catherine Drinker Bowen

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“Each writer is born with a repertory company in his head. Shakespeare has perhaps 20 players. ... I have 10 or so, and that’s a lot. As you get older, you become more skillful at casting them.”

—Gore Vidal



[*Bring Your Fiction to Life*](#) By Karen Wiesner

“We’re past the age of heroes and hero kings. ... Most of our lives are basically mundane and dull, and it’s up to the writer to find ways to make them interesting.”

—John Updike, WD

“The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book.”

—Samuel Johnson

“If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it. Or, if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go. I can’t allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative.”

—Elmore Leonard

“Write. Rewrite. When not writing or rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts.”

—Larry L. King, WD

“Know your literary tradition, savor it, steal from it, but when you sit down to write, forget about worshipping greatness and fetishizing masterpieces.”

—Allegra Goodman

“I’m out there to clean the plate. Once they’ve read what I’ve written on a subject, I want them to think, ‘That’s it!’ I think the highest aspiration people in our trade can have is that once they’ve written a story, nobody will ever try it again.”

—Richard Ben Cramer

“There are no laws for the novel. There never have been, nor can there ever be.”

—Doris Lessing

“Style means the right word. The rest matters little.”

—Jules Renard



"Style is to forget all styles."

JULES RENARD

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

"I do not over-intellectualise the production process. I try to keep it simple: Tell the damned story."
—Tom Clancy, WD

"The writing of a novel is taking life as it already exists, not to report it but to make an object, toward the end that the finished work might contain this life inside it and offer it to the reader. The essence will not be, of course, the same thing as the raw material; it is not even of the same family of things. The novel is something that never was before and will not be again."
—Eudora Welty, WD

"One thing that helps is to give myself permission to write badly. I tell myself that I'm going to do my five or 10 pages no matter what, and that I can always tear them up the following morning if I want. I'll have lost nothing—writing and tearing up five pages would leave me no further behind than if I took the day off."
—Lawrence Block, WD

"Don't expect the puppets of your mind to become the people of your story. If they are not realities in your own mind, there is no mysterious alchemy in ink and paper that will turn wooden figures into flesh and blood."
—Leslie Gordon Barnard, WD

"If you tell the reader that Bull Beezley is a brutal-faced, loose-lipped bully, with snake's blood in his veins, the reader's reaction may be, 'Oh, yeah!' But if you show the reader Bull Beezley raking the bloodied flanks of his weary, sweat-encrusted pony, and flogging the tottering, red-eyed animal with a quirt, or have him booting in the protruding ribs of a starved mongrel and, boy, the reader believes!"
—Fred East, WD

"Plot is people. Human emotions and desires founded on the realities of life, working at cross purposes, getting hotter and fiercer as they strike against each other until finally there's an explosion—that's Plot."
—Leigh Brackett, WD

"The first sentence can't be written until the final sentence is written."
—Joyce Carol Oates, WD

"When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be done."
—Stephen King, WD

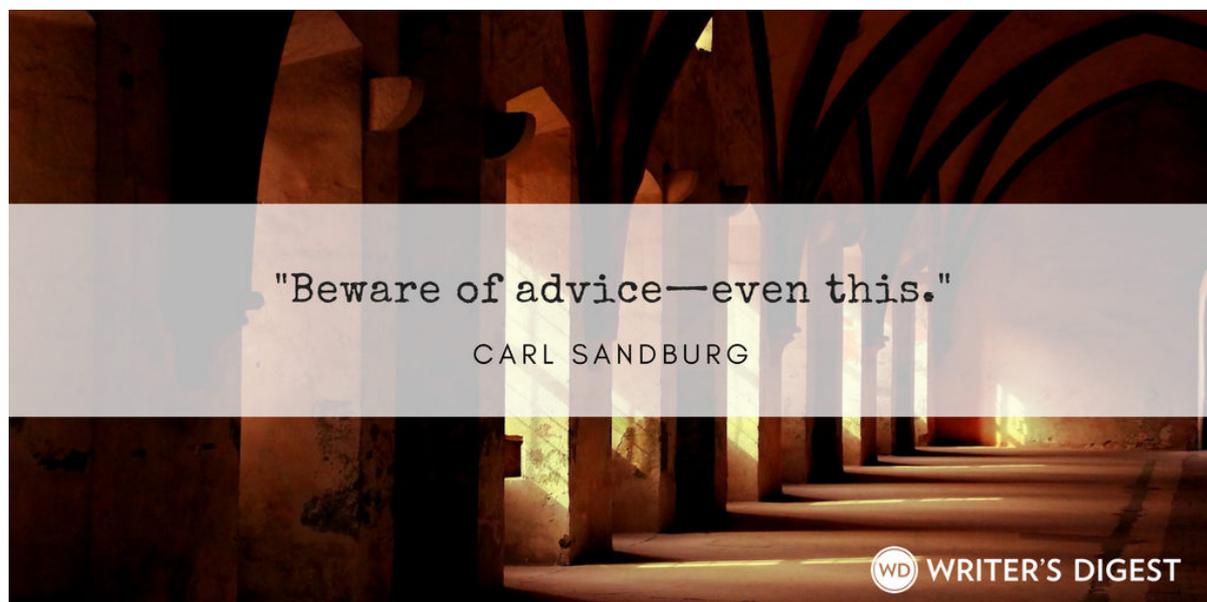
"Genius gives birth, talent delivers. What Rembrandt or Van Gogh saw in the night can never be seen again. Born writers of the future are amazed already at what they're seeing now, what we'll all see in time for the first time, and then see imitated many times by made writers."
—Jack Kerouac, WD

"Long patience and application saturated with your heart's blood—you will either write or you will not—and the only way to find out whether you will or not is to try."

—Jim Tully, WD

"All stories have to at least try to explain some small portion of the meaning of life. You can do that in 20 minutes, and 15 inches. I still remember a piece that the great Barry Bearak did in TheMiami Herald some 30 years ago. It was a nothing story, really: Some high school kid was leading a campaign to ban books he found offensive from the school library. Bearak didn't even have an interview with the kid, who was ducking him. The story was short, mostly about the issue. But Bearak had a fact that he withheld until the kicker. The fact put the whole story, subtly, in complete perspective. The kicker noted the true, wonderful fact that the kid was not in school that day because "his ulcer was acting up." Meaning of life, 15 inches."

—Gene Weingarten, WD



"I would advise anyone who aspires to a writing career that before developing his talent he would be wise to develop a thick hide."

—Harper Lee, WD

"I think the deeper you go into questions, the deeper or more interesting the questions get. And I think that's the job of art."

—Andre Dubus III, WD (this quote is from [an interview with Dubus in our July/August 2012 issue](#))

"Geniuses can be scintillating and geniuses can be somber, but it's that inescapable sorrowful depth that shines through—originality."

—Jack Kerouac, WD

"People say, 'What advice do you have for people who want to be writers?' I say, they don't really need advice, they know they want to be writers, and they're gonna do it. Those people who know that they really want to do this and are cut out for it, they know it."

—R.L. Stine, WD (this quote is from [an interview with Stine that ran in our November/December 2011 issue](#))

"I don't need an alarm clock. My ideas wake me."

—Ray Bradbury, WD

"Just write every day of your life. Read intensely. Then see what happens. Most of my friends who are put on that diet have very pleasant careers."

—Ray Bradbury, WD

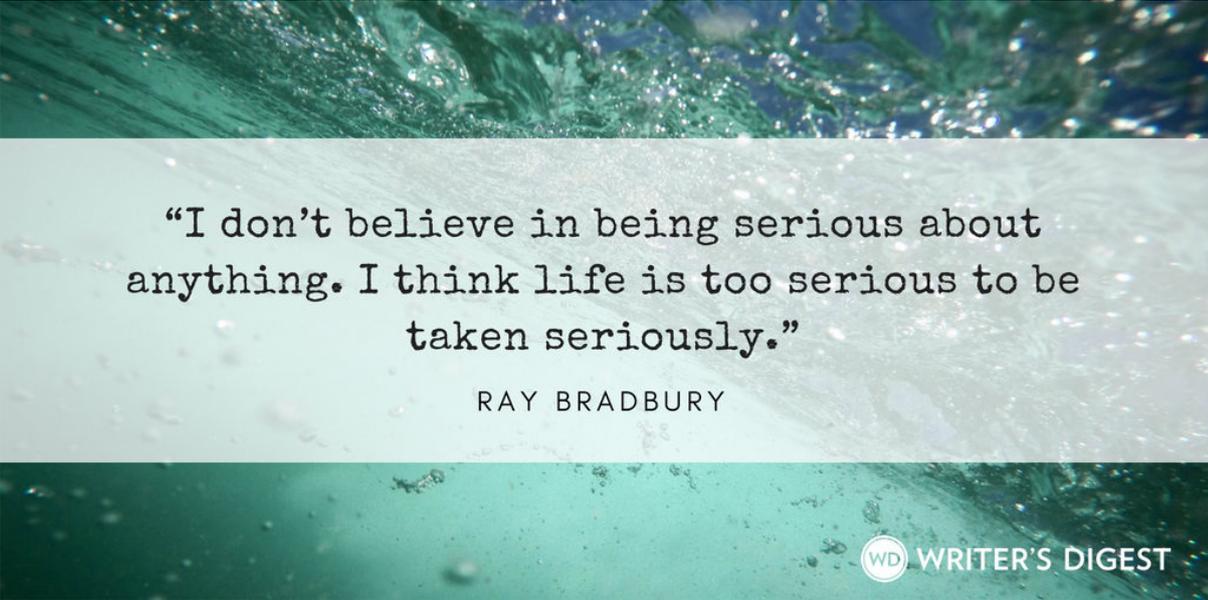
"Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper."

—Ray Bradbury, WD

"Remember: Plot is no more than footprints left in the snow after your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations."

—Ray Bradbury, WD

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“I don’t believe in being serious about anything. I think life is too serious to be taken seriously.”

RAY BRADBURY

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

“It’s none of their business that you have to learn to write. Let them think you were born that way.”
—Ernest Hemingway

“Writers are always selling somebody out.”
—Joan Didion

“Writing is not necessarily something to be ashamed of, but do it in private and wash your hands afterwards.”
—Robert A. Heinlein

“Keep a small can of WD-40 on your desk—away from any open flames—to remind yourself that if you don’t write daily, you will get rusty.”
—George Singleton



“There is only one plot—things are not what they seem.”

JIM THOMPSON

WD WRITER'S DIGEST

“Anyone who is going to be a writer knows enough at 15 to write several novels.”
—May Sarton

“I think all writing is a disease. You can’t stop it.”
—William Carlos Williams

“The most beautiful things are those that madness prompts and reason writes.”
—Andre Gide

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"Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others."
—Virginia Woolf

"If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it."
—Elmore Leonard

"You do not have to explain every single drop of water contained in a rain barrel. You have to explain one drop—H₂O. The reader will get it."
—George Singleton

"When I say work I only mean writing. Everything else is just odd jobs."
—Margaret Laurence

"The difference between the almost right word and the right word is ... the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."
—Mark Twain

"I always start writing with a clean piece of paper and a dirty mind."
—Patrick Dennis

"Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now."
—Annie Dillard

"A book is simply the container of an idea—like a bottle; what is inside the book is what matters."
—Angela Carter

"I almost always urge people to write in the first person. ... Writing is an act of ego and you might as well admit it."
—William Zinsser

"When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people, not characters. A character is a caricature."
—Ernest Hemingway

"Write while the heat is in you. ... The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with."
—Henry David Thoreau

"You don't actually have to write anything until you've thought it out. This is an enormous relief, and you can sit there searching for the point at which the story becomes a toboggan and starts to slide."
—Marie de Nervaud, WD

"Whether a character in your novel is full of choler, bile, phlegm, blood or plain old buffalo chips, the fire of life is in there, too, as long as that character lives."
—James Alexander Thom



"Writers live twice."

NATALIE GOLDBERG

WD WRITER'S DIGEST



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