

# WORDSMITHY

HOT TIPS FOR THE WRITING LIFE



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Published by Canon Press  
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843  
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *Wordsmithy: Hot Tips for the Writing Life*  
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Cover design by David Dalbey.  
Interior design by Laura Storm.  
Printed in the United States of America.

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Wilson, Douglas, 1953-  
Wordsmithy : hot tips for the writing life / by Douglas Wilson.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59128-099-6

1. Authorship. I. Title.

PN145.W54 2011

808.02--dc23

2011028091

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Toby Sumpter,  
a good friend with good words.



## CONTENTS

	<i>Introduction</i>	9
ONE	A Veritable Russian Doll of Writing Tips	13
TWO	Read Until Your Brain Creaks	29
THREE	Word Fussers and Who-whomers	49
FOUR	Born for the Clerihew	65
FIVE	The Memoirs of Old Walnut Heart	81
SIX	Ancient Roman Toddlers	95
SEVEN	Uncommon Commonplaces	107
	<i>Conclusion</i>	117



## A VERITABLE RUSSIAN DOLL

### *of Writing Tips*

The first tip was to get out more.

Know something about the world, and by this I mean the world outside of books. This might require joining the Marines, or working on an oil rig or as a hashslinger at a truck stop in Kentucky. Know what things smell like out there. If everything you write smells like a library, then your prospective audience will be limited to those who like the smell of libraries.

A writer should have some kind of real life ballast. Here are seven tips that will help explain that first tip. And, weather permitting, we may do the same thing with the other six as well. Each of our first seven tips is a Russian doll, lined up on a mantelpiece for you, and when we take each one apart, we should find seven additional points inside each one. At least you should find them if we did this right.

# 1

## **Real life *duties* should be preferred over real life tourism.**

Taking care of your preschoolers or being deployed with the Seventh Fleet is far to be preferred over purchasing a backpack and heading off to find America, or even worse, yourself.

Look at the world, and try not to look at yourself looking at the world. Your readers may well be interested in your description of the world—and they will learn plenty about you in the process—but they will not be all that interested in your descriptions of yourself directly, even though you may be using the outside world as the scenic backdrop for your junior high melodrama of a tortured and misunderstood soul.

When you discharge your duties in the real world you are learning the concept, and this helps you understand how to discharge your duties to your readers. In the task of writing and reading, the initiative in doing one's duty lies with you, the writer. You are the one who started the whole thing by writing whatever it was you wrote, and so the responsibility is yours. You started it. Your duty as a writer is the same as the respective duties of the plumber, the knee surgeon, the computer repairman, and the architect, which is to *make it work*. Moreover, your duty is to make it work for the customer, which in this case is the reader. Readers have responsibilities too, and that would be a fine topic for another book, but in the meantime your job is not to make them do *their* duty raw as they read your writing. Your job is to make it as pleasant as you can for them.

So when you are out and about during your stint in the Marine Corps, or wherever you are, you are learning two

things. You are learning about the world and the people in it, about whom you will write, and you are learning how to do your job in the service of others, which is what you need to continue to do as you undertake the writing life. Knowledge of how to do your duty in one area transfers readily to another area.

The right kind of ambition is impatient to get on with it, which means that the aspiring writer would like to graduate from college at twenty-two, marry at twenty-three, and land a major book deal at twenty-four. While the right kind of ambition is good, it rarely works like that. And even if you *did* have a major book deal at twenty-four, you would hardly have a vast reservoir of experiences to draw from. There was that time when you went sledding with your college buddies and broke your finger. Anything else? Maybe a little autobiographical note might illustrate this. I have wanted to “make books” since around the sixth grade, and I published my first book when I was in my late thirties. My point is that the time in between was not wasted—submarine service, marriage, college, bringing up three kids, starting a school for them, and so forth. This kind of life experience is not distracting you from your appointed task of writing. It is, rather, the roundabout blessing of giving you something to say.

#### TAKEAWAY POINT

Get some life experience, the kind of experience that a responsible human being gets.

#### RECOMMENDED READING

Gene Veith, *God at Work* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

**Authenticity in writing will only arise from authenticity in living.** Ideas that occur to you in the course of your life should be jotted down in your notebook, which we will discuss later, but only so long as you remember that the world does not exist to provide raw material for your notebook. The world you are observing has every right to continue on just as it was even if you never get published.

One of our great problems today is that we have gotten caught up in our culture-wide quest for authenticity. We want our jeans authentic (pre-ripped at the factory), we want our apples authentic (grown locally instead of somewhere else), we want our music authentic (underground bands nobody ever heard of), we want our lettuce authentic (organically manured), we want our literature authentic (full of angst), we want our movies authentic (subtitles), and we want our coffee tables authentic (purchased from a genuine peasant while we were on some eco-tour). In short, we are a bunch of phonies. We are superficial all the way down.

We are not going to get out of this snare until we see the quest for authenticity for what it is—a hypocrisy factory, cranking out tight-weave superficiality by the yard.

Now of course, there is a sense in which the word *authentic* should not be a problem. If a manuscript expert said that a recently discovered eighth-century manuscript was authentic, he means that it is not a forgery. Great, and no problems. The same thing goes for paintings, and so on. But somewhere between that and a crusty old farmer who has an authentic soul because he grows tiny peas for the local farmers' market,