

How About Writing?

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ADVENTIST publishing work is older than the denomination. It has always played an outsize role in the growth and development of new ideas, methods, and initiatives within the church, and there's no reason to expect that to change now. In some ways, though, it may be harder now; the proliferation of all forms of media tends to "flood the market" in a way that makes it difficult for works of real value to rise to the top. So... what to do?

At least part of the answer is to write more effectively. With that basic goal in mind, let me offer a few pieces of eclectic advice—some a bit quirky, perhaps, but helpful.

Basics Are Still Basics

It's easier than many might imagine to learn the basics of decent grammar, mechanics, and composition. Do this first. You probably don't need to attain "literary perfection," whatever that may be (don't overlook the value of a good copy editor in this regard), but demonstrating a command of the basics is the place to start.

To a degree, it's standard psychology. Admit it, you were unconsciously impressed with my writing skills when you ran into that semi-colon in the fourth sentence. You either recognized that I had used it correctly, or you assumed so because you didn't really know one way or the other. Either way, it gave you a sense of confidence that I knew something about all this writing stuff. And that happened before the non-standard use of the ellipsis at the end of the paragraph. That's what you want: competence first and foremost, with a limited allowance for idiosyncratic rule-breaking if it actually serves a purpose.

Content Matters

Please do everyone a favor and make sure what you write has some redeeming virtue. As Ellen White put it, "The little storybooks written are not a great tax on the writers, neither are books of this character of vital consequence to the world." (Letter 43, 1899)

Tax yourself ("greatly," if necessary) to produce something of value. And, no, this isn't an effort to condemn appropriate children's literature, but the trend toward "little storybooks" for all ages is nothing to encourage.

Ellen White's words "vital consequence" deserve some thought. Applied full strength, they call for that which makes the difference between life and death. Evangelism, and spiritual growth of church members are obvious qualifiers. But beyond that are matters affecting the completion of the plan of salvation itself. Nothing is responsible for as many deaths, murders, and general human mayhem as that which delays the church from completing her allotted task.

This consideration points to issues of incredible significance. An Ellen White article in the *Review and Herald* of September 29, 1891, highlights the kind of content that is truly of vital consequence. Notice her thought here:

"Every eye in the unfallen universe is bent upon those who profess to be Christ's followers."

As a sidebar, with 100 billion galaxies in the universe, and 2.2 billion Christians, your share of attention comes to a bit more than forty-five galaxies. So—in case you've ever wondered—yes, someone is watching you. But let's go on:

"Here, in this atom of a world, an earnest warfare is going on—a battle in which Christ, our substitute and surety, has engaged in our behalf, and conquered."

Interrupting once again. This is odd. Jesus is the One who fought the battle... and yet the universe is watching us. Why watch us? The statement continues:

"Now we, Christ's purchased possession, must become soldiers of his cross, and conquer in our own behalf, on our own account, through the power and wisdom given us from above. The influence of the cross of Calvary is to vanquish every earthly and spiritual evil power; and we need to know the plan of the battle, that we may work in harmony with Christ."

"Working in harmony with Christ" is of "vital consequence." Knowing "the plan of the battle" is of "vital consequence." It might be worth giving thought to these matters before putting fingertips to keyboard.

Get Organized

Knowing the plan of the battle is also a great approach to writing a book. It may be fun to try the "spontaneous creativity" approach, but planning out your content and presentation before writing it is a huge time saver.

One simple technique that I find tremendously helpful is a topic map. Check out Google Images for the usual thousands of visual representations of the method.

I find it easiest to take a large piece of paper, write the general topic or title in an oval in the center of the page, and then just begin jotting down every detail that comes to mind that is in any way related to that topic. These items can be scattered about the page in any way that seems workable at the moment. Putting an oval around individual items helps keep some little sense of order. The key idea is to get every such item on the page, with a pencil line or two tying it to other items.

Precision is not the focus just now; capturing the full scope of related topic matter is what counts. You can enter multiple items as hierarchical lists, or jot down individual entries with their connections indicated by placement on the page. Pretty much anything goes at this stage.

When you can't think of anything more pertaining to your topic, look it all over, keeping an eye out for relationships between entries. Draw connecting lines if warranted. Erase the stuff that's too wild to consider. Then, when all that's straight in your mind, turn it into a classic linear outline of the I, IA, IA1, variety. That will be your road map; the scribbled version is just a tool to capture ideas and give them their first good sorting out.

Write for the Ear

If your primary goal is to affect your readers' thinking, you will do well to address them as naturally as your mate-

rial will allow. Up to a point, that means mimicking the most basic form of communication, the spoken word. A table of numerical data will never come across like a simple comment from a trusted authority, but much of the rest of your writing should. You aren't simply presenting data; you're telling a story, or sharing wisdom, or offering an important warning. Make it sound that way. And a word on that "trusted authority" concept: if you can't do the work to become an authority on what you have to say, please don't write it. Conversely, if you know enough to be an authority, write and speak with an appropriate tone of confidence. If you sound like you don't trust your own opinion, why should I? Try not to confuse uncertainty with humility.

Write for Clarity

Transferring your idea into someone else's mind is no small task. Your reader probably comes to the topic with different presuppositions, different personal experiences, and maybe even a few heretical beliefs. That's what you're up against, so take your task seriously.

What you want to get across to the reader is not just *an* idea; it's *your* idea. And your biggest enemy in this task is confusion. Sadly, there are more confusing ways to say something than there are clear ways. Face it, it's an up-hill battle, but if your topic is of "vital consequence," it's worth the effort to write clearly. And to re-write with even greater clarity... over, and over, and over.

Perhaps the most common source of confusion in prose writing is what I call "mortarless construction." Picture your article, tract, or book as a series of brick-shaped facts or details that you are going to build into a wall. The most basic facts go at the bottom, and you just build on up toward the ceiling. The problem comes when writers try to arrange all these bricks in place without the mortar that is supposed to tie them together. A simple stack of bricks is a pretty tippy proposition. You (or your reader) could easily get killed if it falls over.

What you need to do is write the mortar along with the bricks. Fact A doesn't simply coexist with Fact B. There is some relationship between the two, and you'd best be to pains to make that clear to your reader. Ellen White put it like this:

"Some minds are more like an old curiosity shop than anything else. Many odd bits and ends of truth have been picked up and stored away there; but they know not how to present them in a clear, connected manner. It is the relation that these ideas have to one another that gives them value. Every idea and statement should be as closely united as the links in a chain. When a minister [or author] throws out a mass of matter before the people for them to pick up and arrange in order, his labors are lost; for there are few who will do it." (*Review and Herald*, April 6, 1886)

Getting to Market

Growing a huge field of corn is great, but finding a way to sell it all is a pretty good thing as well. Same with a book. Many authors would tell you that their own personal growth and increased understanding of an important topic were reason enough to justify all the effort of researching and writing. That's great... but if there's any further value to your work, getting it to the target audience is the next big step.

The conventional wisdom used to be that "freedom of the press belongs to those who have one." But with today's tech advances, almost everyone has access to some sort of platform. Which means you'll need to be making decisions as to how best to present your literary masterpiece.

Facebook posts and Twitter tweets don't require (or provide opportunity for) anything much in the way of design. But a Scribd post or a PDF document have nearly the same level of possibility as a traditional printed piece. You should take some time to read up on at least the essentials of typesetting and graphic design, but for now, here are four of the most basic points: 1.) for body text, use a serif font, usually in the 10–12 point range, 2.) two or three different fonts is generally enough, 3.) don't crowd your page too much—"white space" is a design element, 4.) consider a multi-column approach if the lines of text get too long.

Those four points all address the bottom line aspect of readability. Making things hard on the reader is a good way to end up without one, and that's pretty much the ultimate definition of literary failure.

If you want to go to actual paper, design in reference to the press it's going to be printed on. Final trim size, minimum margin size, total number of pages, and the binding method all need to be considered in this regard, so talk to your printer to avoid later frustration. More than likely, you will be able to submit your work in the form of a PDF file, so make sure you have a workable means to get from your word processor to a PDF. My favorite office suite (LibreOffice) has included this as a native ability for years now, and—since "Libre" means "free"—it's an affordable option.

Finally, you'll need to work through the choice of self-publication or printing house. They each have pros and cons. To self-publish, you simply hire a printer. You have total control and total ownership of the final product, but you'll have to invest the money up front to get it printed, and you'll likely be on your own in regard to marketing. Self-marketing is a significant challenge, but you do get the entire purchase price for yourself.

With a publisher, they invest the money, and help to market your work, but will generally own the copyright, which will limit your control to some extent. In addition, you'll receive a royalty—a specific percentage of the sales income—on all copies sold. Of course, publishers can only invest their time and money in projects that hold some promise of selling. It turns out they have to stay in business, too. What that means to the author is that any given manuscript may not "meet the needs of the publishing house at this time." Take heart; a rejection slip isn't the end of the world.

Finally, take up the task because of a love for your subject. If it's important, and you can say it well, perhaps you're the one to do it. There are important topics and truths out there waiting to be developed. Search them out, understand them, write them up, and share them with others. It's a rewarding process, unlike any other, and it makes it all worthwhile. Which is good, since the monetary rewards probably won't amount to much. But do it anyway! ☺