

Hemingway's Five Finger Exercises

By Kimelia Sachs , eHow Contributor

Ernest Hemingway is famous for his brevity in fiction. His stories tell much with few words, and this technique is admired and aspired to by many writers. He sharpened his writing skills through a training exercise that started with writing about what he observed on any given day. The next step was recording these observations and rewriting the sentences until they satisfied him. For Hemingway, the practice of writing and rewriting sentences is like a five-finger exercise on the piano. The strategy for improving your writing skills begins with observation and practice.

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1. Observe and Record

- The skill of observing must be learned. Hemingway told many to observe what happens around them in daily life to obtain good substance for stories. "Remember what the noises were and what was said," Hemingway said, according to scholar Charles Fenton in his book, "The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway." Observation provides the details for stories.

Michael Reynolds, author of several Hemingway biographies, writes that this first step of this five-finger exercise would begin with sentences such as "'I have seen,' 'I have watched,' 'I have stood.'" These sentences can be "passive observations, a reporter's point of view," Reynolds states. Getting the sentences right does not matter as much as the writing of them, says Reynolds. Observing is the initial objective of this exercise. From observations, other ideas flow, but the observation must first be captured and documented.

Practice

- Once the words are down, rewriting must take place. In "Monologue to the Maestro: A High Seas Letter," Hemingway said, "Find what gave you the emotion; what the action was that gave you the excitement. Then write it down making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling that you had. That's a five-finger exercise." Hemingway describes the process of what makes every story unique, which is the writer's voice and perception. All of this begins with paying attention to everything happening.

The very heart of Hemingway's exercise is practice. Peter Griffin, author of "Along with Youth: Hemingway, the Early Years," writes that while Hemingway was working on his fiction, he would tell others, "Nothing to do but practice." This kind of discipline is like practicing on the piano. Gerald Kennedy agrees, adding that Hemingway believed the five-finger exercise is "analogous to the virile pursuits like hunting and deep-sea fishing; as if they emphasize the connection between art and these strenuous, worldly activities" (Kennedy). The idea is to keep writing, even when it doesn't feel creative or even when you don't feel like doing it. Discipline improves writing, just as finger exercises lead to an improved skill.

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References

- "The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years;" Charles Fenton; 1954
- "Hemingway: The Paris Years;" Michael S. Reynolds; 1999
- "Along with Youth: Hemingway, the Early Years;" Peter Griffin and Jack Hemingway; 1987

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