

Frank's Writing Tips and Bachelor Cookbook:  
Introduction and Caveats

I think maybe every author everywhere has at some point tried his or her hand at a ‘how to write well’ book, or at least kicked around the idea faintly in his or her head. Most of the people who actually go through with it do so because they are competent and well-known, or even famous (the Stephen Kings of the world), and so their publishers or editors or agents or whoever let them know that they heard tell that there’s a huge market for it if they were to write a book telling other aspiring writers how they do their jobs. I’m not one of those people, of course.

So what are my credentials in this regard? I don’t know. Pretty flimsy. As I write this sentence, I’ve had but four short stories published in four different venues that I’m 99% sure no one but the individual magazine editors ever read. I have earned a grand total of \$30.00 (US) from all of these publications together. I’m not prolific, either; I have a novel that I’ve been working on for 10 years that approximately five people so far have seen (including me), I submit stories to magazines roughly 0.5 times a year, and all of my watchers on the various art sites I’m a member of have written me off because I never upload anything new.

Obviously this means that you should just stop reading this right now, because I have nothing worthwhile to say.

But in all seriousness, whether it be through force of personality or speaking authoritatively or simple persistence, I’ve managed to convince some people that I know a thing or two about this craft. So here I am, getting ready to dispense in an organized fashion some of my limited wisdom on this subject.

If you don’t know me, I’m actually a scientist-in-training, working currently on a dissertation about my investigations into the hierarchical accretion model of galaxy formation by studying the morphology, broadband colors, and star formation rates in low surface brightness outer disks and halos of  $z = 0$  galaxies. Or something. You get the drift. Point is, being a scientist, most of my ideas are not my own, and I try very hard to simply write what I know and allow the ideas presented to speak for themselves. No ad hominem logical fallacy here.

Now, in science this is very easy, because you have things like numbers and graphs and images to work with, so all you have to do is to present everything you have at face-value and say what you think it might mean (the people who fudge their data are actually making it way harder for themselves; this is one of the main reasons few scientists do that). Giving fiction-writing advice, though, is a bit of a different story. On the one hand, it’s terribly difficult to find ‘facts’ to present to people; there are no numbers, no graphs, no established scientific consensus based on decades of research. At every turn you feel the need to tack on the phrase ‘depending on your audience’, or ‘in certain circumstances’, or ‘as long as you have a good reason’, and so on. So on the other hand, it leaves open the possibility of just throwing up your hands and saying, “It’s all good! Do whatever you want!” and then walking away. I guess I’m saying it’s either impossible or the easiest thing ever. A lot of folks take the latter route, and honestly, they have good philosophical reasons for doing so.

This document and the ones that will follow aren’t going to be like that, though.

You notice I included a piece of cover artwork, a picture of my lovely furry avatar sitting forlornly at his computer, not writing. If you're new to writing, chances are you haven't yet experienced this yourself, but let me tell you something now: if you continue writing, and if you really want to improve your craft, you will spend a lot of time from then on looking like poor Frank up there.

And if you're serious about this, you must.

Think about every hobby anyone has ever had for a minute. Art, coding, sports, reading, building models, sculpture, wood carving, guns, collecting things, scrapbooking, decorating, playing cards, playing video games, playing board games, theater, making YouTube videos, animation, cars, motorcycles, building circuits, cooking, baking, role playing games. Think about how people get started with those hobbies, and then think about why they continue. Enjoyment, right? Pleasure, fun, a need to occupy the mind, &c.

But that's the basest aspect of it. That's what you stick with if you have the intention of never doing anything more than dissolving away some free time. That's the level you stick with if you live in a small conservative town in the midwestern United States where the barest amount of talent in anything is given a front-row seat and all the praise that anyone can muster, because no one there has ever visited New York City and watched a concert at Carnegie Hall by Yo Yo Ma accompanied by the Cleveland Orchestra.

And that level is easy riding, really. But when you really get into your hobby, really start getting serious about it and cracking down on it and trying to be good at it, 'hobby' is no longer the appropriate term. It becomes something more awful and more wonderful at the same time. It becomes a lot more like exercise and less like play, more like 'no pain, no gain'. You see, no one likes to exercise while they're doing it; it's tiring, it hurts, it makes you breathe hard and feel dirty and sweaty, you get aches from it later. But if you do it, and you do it hard and you do it well, there's this euphoria you get afterwards, a physical and psychological one. It makes you feel like you accomplished something marvelous, that you achieved some goal, made some improvement on yourself.

The point I'm making here with this extended metaphor is that when you get good at a craft, the experience becomes nearly identical to that of hardcore physical exercise: misery followed by euphoria. Those people who can't handle the misery stop trying so hard. They aim for the middle ground, a modest routine that keeps them healthy. But they never improve, and, more importantly, they never end up feeling that euphoria. I don't bother giving advice to those folks. They don't want it, and they don't need it. They are content, and advice is for the malcontent only.

I think I'm getting ahead of myself, so let me stop. I don't mean to imply that by reading what I'm going to tell you, you'll end up getting so good you'll make Alice Munro look like Dan Brown (sincerest apologies to Dan Brown fans). So let me just get to the point.

What this series of submissions is going to be: a collection of pieces of advice on

various aspects of writing, with reasons given for each, based on what I've learned about the craft over my years attempting to do it, for the purpose of helping out aspiring writers and getting them to think harder about their craft. I want to encourage everyone who reads these to comment with feedback, things you want to add, corrections to things I say that you believe are false, and so on. Additionally, if you read these submissions, make sure to read the comments that are already present as well, and see if you don't want to get involved in the discussion. Writing and the arts are full of caveats, full of places where the only recourse is to just agree to disagree. I am not planning on, nor can I possibly, write the Writing Bible here. I'm not *that* great a writer myself.

Rather, if in the following documents you manage to find something you really like, something you want to apply to your own writing, then I'll consider this a success. That's all I really want to do with this. As I said before, these ideas are not my own, but instead are things I've learned from other people over the years that I think you guys should know if you want to try to improve your craft. But do know, if you get started down this road, it does go through a lot of hills and valleys and the occasional mountain and raging river, and while some get farther than others, no one ever really reaches the end of it.

But it can be kind of fun. I'm still having fun on this road. So keep that in mind as we press forward here.

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### *Recipe #1: Frank's Better-Than-Your-Mom's Black Bean Soup*

Preparation time, maybe 10 or 15 minutes.

Ingredients:

- 1 can black beans (unseasoned, unsalted, pre-cooked)
- ~1 tablespoon oil of some kind
- ~1 handful of chopped onion, color doesn't matter (red, white, yellow)
- 3 or 4 large garlic cloves, chopped very thick
- Some chopped green onion or chives or leeks or some other similar thing
- ~1 handful frozen corn, unless you enjoy shucking and want to use fresh corn
- 1 crapload black pepper
- 1 crapload cumin
- 1 crapload chili powder
- A touch of cinammon
- 1 long squirt of lemon and/or lime juice

Cook the onions, chives, and garlic in the oil for a minute or two on medium heat. Add the can of beans (don't drain the liquid first or it won't be a soup), the corn, and the spices. Go completely overboard on the cumin, black pepper, and chili powder, but be cautious with the cinammon. Lemon and/or lime juice should just

be done to taste. Stir it around a lot, let it come to a slow boil, and allow it to cook for maybe five minutes. Then eat it.

Serves 1 or 2. If you want, you can melt cheese into it, add salsa to it, or top it with sour cream. I bet cold avocados would make a fine side dish. Dipping tortillas in it is also nice. Thicken with corn meal or thin with water. Be wary of awful gas following consumption.