

**STORYTELLING**  
tips from  
**KURT VONNEGUT**



“Why should you examine your writing style with the idea of improving it? Do so as a mark of respect for your readers, whatever you’re writing. If you scribble your thoughts any which way, your reader will surely feel that you care nothing about them. They will mark you down as an ego maniac or a chowderhead — or, worse, they will stop reading you.

The most damning revelation you can make about yourself is that you do not know what is interesting and what is not. Don’t you yourself like or dislike writers mainly for what they choose to show or make you think about? Did you ever admire an empty-headed writer for his or her mastery of the language? No.

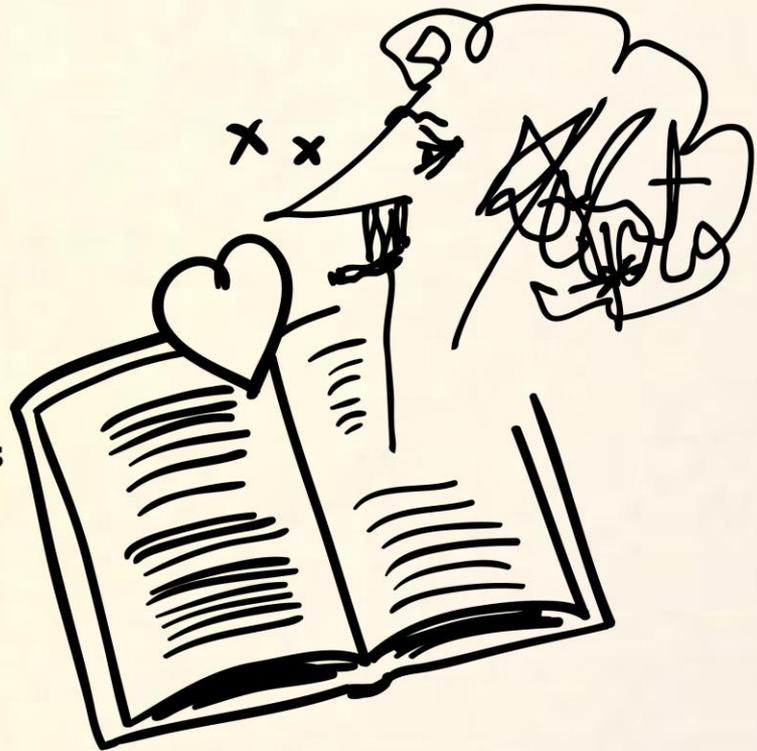
So your own winning style must begin with ideas in your head.”

Kurt Vonnegut, 1985.

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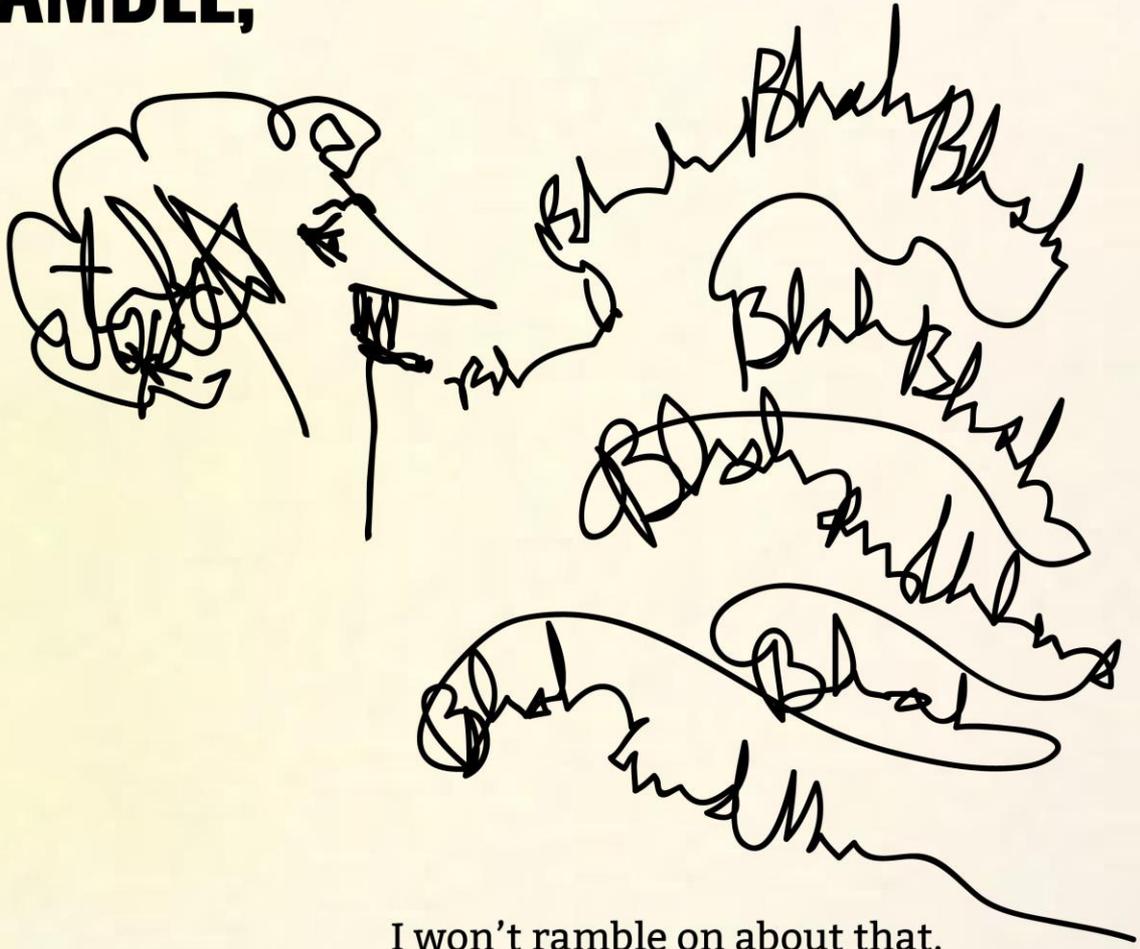
# FIND A SUBJECT YOU CARE ABOUT.

... and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive elements in your style.



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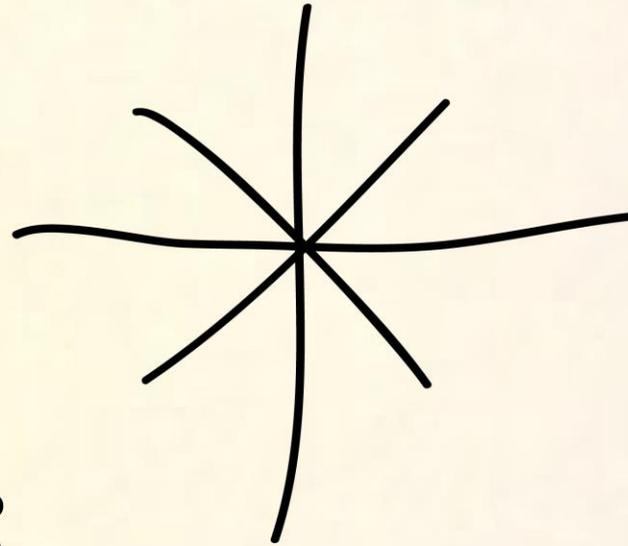
**DO NOT RAMBLE,  
THOUGH.**



I won't ramble on about that.

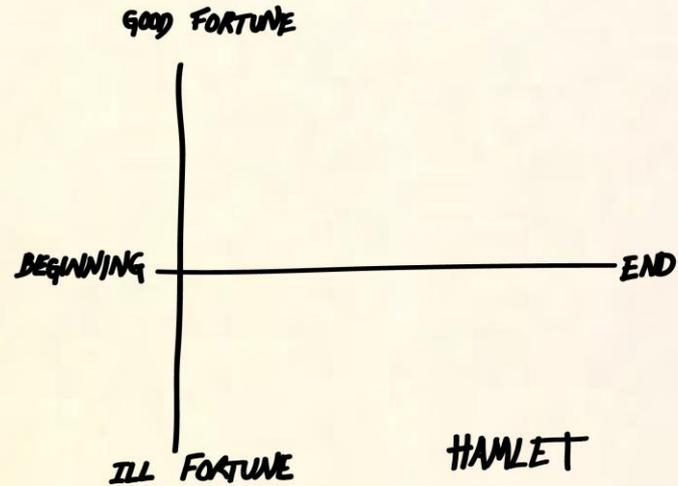
# 3/ **KEEP IT SIMPLE.**

Two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. "To be or not to be?" asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long.



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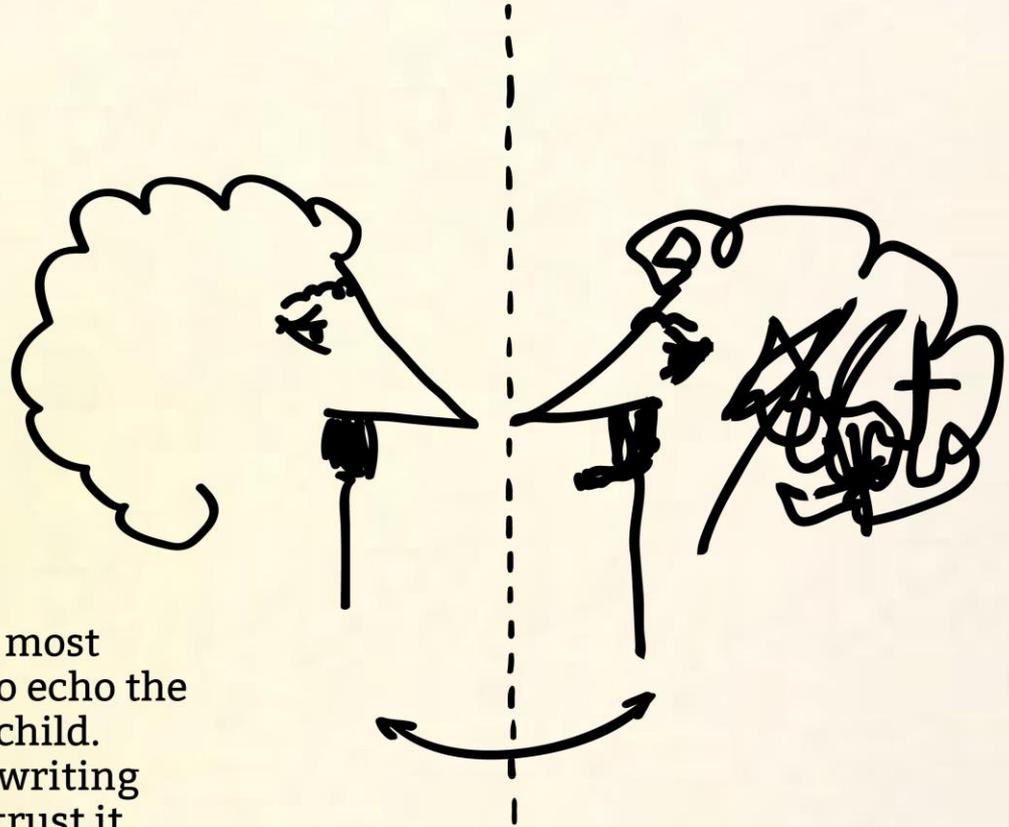
# HAVE THE GUTS TO CUT.



Your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this: if a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

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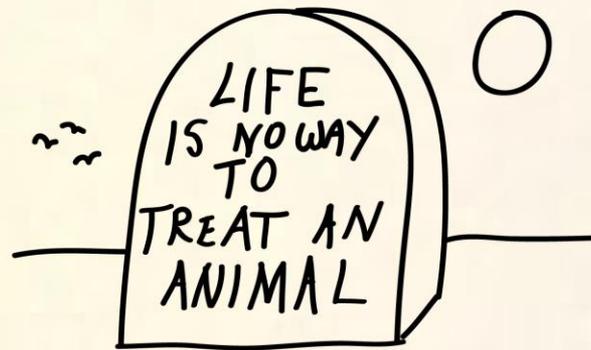
# SOUND LIKE YOURSELF.



The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. I find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, when I sound like what I am.

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# SAY WHAT YOU MEAN TO SAY.

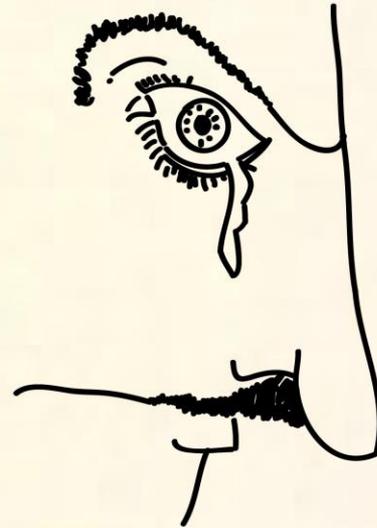


If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledy-piggledy, I would simply not be understood.

7,

# PITY THE READERS.

They have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and make sense of them immediately, they have to read, an art so difficult most don't really master it after having studied it all through grade school and high school --- twelve long years.



Abridged from Vonnegut's 1985 essay,  
"How to Write with Style," published in  
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Gavin McMahon, based on Vonnegut's  
own doodles.

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