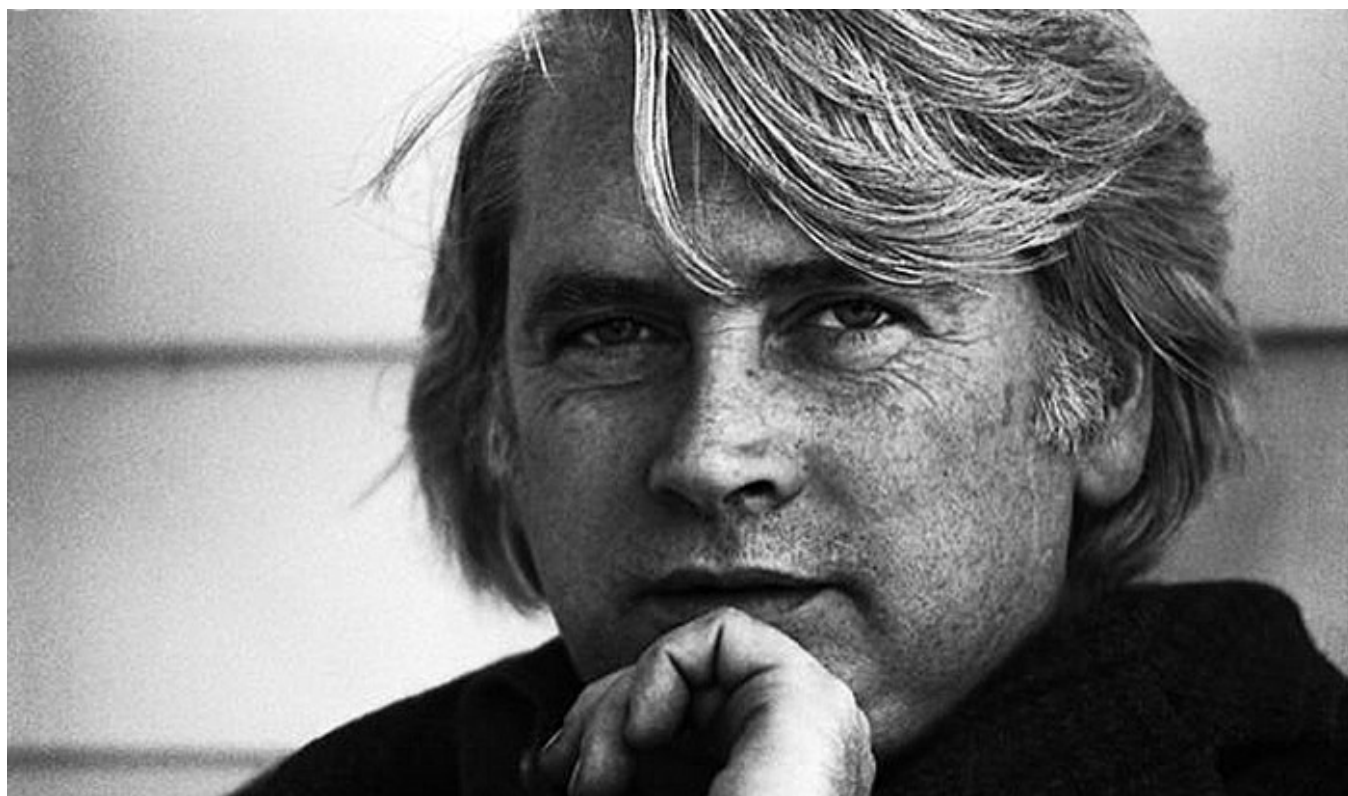


# How To Become a Masterful Writer, With John Gardner

[Rob Marchant](#)



John Gardner — [Image from Writer's Write](#)

It's difficult to find someone more refreshingly forthright, and with such clarity of expression, than American writing teacher John Gardner. After a long and successful teaching career, Gardner penned a book on how to write great stories — [The Art of Fiction](#) — which is held in high acclaim for its precision and effectiveness as a writing guide. As the title suggests, the book's primary goal is to offer advice on how to write great fiction, though many of its lessons extend to writing in general, making the book a goldmine of knowledge for writers. Though often loftily arrogant and overly critical, in *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner attempts to improve our writing abilities, with resounding success.

For Gardner, a key component of quality, captivating writing is the author's

ability to produce clear images in the reader's imagination, by using vivid and tangible real-world language.

*"A scene will not be vivid if the writer gives too few details to stir and guide the reader's imagination; neither will it be vivid if the language the writer uses is abstract instead of concrete. If the writer says 'creatures' instead of 'snakes,' if in an attempt to impress with with fancy talk he uses Latinate terms like 'hostile maneuvers' instead of sharp Anglo-Saxon words like 'thrash,' 'coil,' 'spit,' 'hiss,' and 'writhe,' if instead of the desert's sand and rocks he speaks of the snakes' 'inhospitable abode,' the reader will hardly know what picture of conjure up on his mental screen. These two faults, insufficient detail and abstraction where what is needed is concrete detail, are common — in fact all but universal — in amateur writing." — John Gardner, [The Art of Fiction](#)*

Where possible, writing should evoke discernible imagery in the mind of the reader, who is being led on a curious journey, sentence-by-sentence. Writing that lacks concrete imagery can be dreadfully dull, like reading a scientific thesis concerned only with the driest and most serious of matters. One of the joys of experiencing great writing is the process of having your head filled with colourful, vibrant imagery, constantly twisting and warping anew, a compelling, elemental topic threaded through the entire process. Expository writing — the style used to explain concepts — becomes alluring when vivid language is used. This doesn't mean that every sentence must be packed with dramatic, intense imagery, as though narrating an edge-of-seat thriller, but should rather be peppered with the occasional rich example to keep things interesting. This also makes writing itself more pleasurable, urging us to return to our desks to gleefully bash out another thousand-word masterpiece.

Colourful detail is important because it transports us to a place of ethereal wonder — a dream within our own minds, that we happily traverse in the

hope of discovering something treasured.

*"If we carefully inspect our physical experience as we read, we discover that the importance of physical detail is that it creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind." — John Gardner*

We cannot expect to create an enchanting dream for our reader with a limited vocabulary, or by repeating the same words over and over. A dazzling piece of work will be infused with a great variety of words, chosen not just for their precise meaning, but also for their sing-song rhythm and visual vividness. Stunted vocabulary only gets us so far.

*"Limited vocabulary, like short legs on a pole-vaulter, builds in a natural barrier to progress beyond a certain point." — John Gardner*

Another aspect to be toyed and experimented with is sentence length, which can affect the rhythm and emotion of your writing, depending on the desired effect.

*"Short sentences give other effects. Also sentence fragments. They can be trenchant, punchy. They can suggest weariness. They can increase the drabness of a drab scene. Used for an unworthy reason, as here, they can be boring. Between these extremes, the endless sentence and the very short sentence, lies a world of variation, a world every writer must eventually explore." — John Gardner*

*"By keeping out a careful ear for rhythm, the writer can control the emotion of his sentences with considerable subtlety." — John Gardner*

Though it's difficult for us to explain why, sometimes we write a sentence that just *feels right*, sitting snugly within our work, with a level of comfort so elevated as to make us envious. If we're dissatisfied with a sentence, for the sake of becoming better writers, we must commit the time to ruthless splitting and reworking, until we've created something with greater clarity

and appeal. With steady practice comes mastery.

*“Turning sentences around, trying various combinations of the fundamental elements, will prove invaluable in the end, not just because it leads to better sentences but also because over the years it teaches certain basic ways of fixing rhythm that will work again on other, superficially quite dissimilar sentences. I don’t know myself — and I suspect most writers would say the same — what it is that I do, what formulas I use for switching bad sentences around to make better ones; but I do it all the time, less laboriously every year, trying to creep up on the best ways of getting things said.” — John Gardner*

Technical skill isn’t the only thing required to become a masterful writer. We must take the time to satiate our heads with the insightful musings of others, sparking neurological connections and creating something new. As with the process of writing itself, if we have any desire to become experts, this requires relentless practice.

*“In order to achieve mastery he must read widely and deeply and must write not just carefully but continually, thoughtfully assessing and reassessing what he writes, because practice, for the writer as for the concert pianist, is the heart of the matter.” — John Gardner*

A curious disposition is advantageous to the writer, as it causes her to seek out valuable sources of information, drink them in fully, and become a more rounded, knowledgeable human, with better worldly awareness and emotional intelligence. Interesting people are *interested* people — an essential trait of the writer who wants to create compelling work.

*“Part of our interest as we read is in learning how the world works; how the conflicts we share with the writer and all other human beings can be resolved, if at all; what values can we affirm and, in general, what the moral risks are.” — John Gardner*

*"Anything we read for pleasure we read because it interests us. One would think, since this is so, that the first question any young writer would ask himself, when he's trying to decide what to write, what be 'What can I think of that's interesting?'" — John Gardner*

Throwing ourselves into the world with courageous zeal, tasting every experience, and committing fully to our lives (the good and the bad), helps to develop an intricate, multi-faceted character, filled with wisdom, lending an unmistakable magic to our writing. We're able to understand the world, offering insightful, original, and resonant frames of reference for our readers.

*"On reflection we see that the great writer's authority consists of two elements. The first we may call, loosely, his sane humanness; that is, his trustworthiness as a judge of things, a stability rooted in the sum of those complex qualities of his character and personality (wisdom, generosity, compassion, strength of will) to which we respond, as we respond to what is best in our friends, with instant recognition and admiration, saying, "Yes, you're right, that's how it is!" The second element, or perhaps I should say force, is the writer's absolute trust (not blind faith) in his own aesthetic judgments and instincts, a trust grounded partly in his intelligence and sensitivity — his ability to perceive and understand the world around him — and partly in his experience as a craftsman; that is (by his own harsh standards), his knowledge, drawn from long practice, of what will work and what will not." — John Gardner*

John Gardner's [\*The Art of Fiction\*](#) is filled with gems, which the studious writer can use to become a more skilled and engaging artist. With the right knowledge, a ton of effort, and a little help from Gardner, we can gradually ascend to mastery within our field.