

Tools of the trade: A writer's necessities

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

Avoid haphazard writing materials. A pedantic adherence to certain papers, pens, inks is beneficial. No luxury, but an abundance of these utensils is indispensable.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Writer’s Technique in Thirteen Theses”

Whatever one’s trade, who does not love the tools employed in it? Included in the pastor’s trade is surely the craft of writing—authoring sermons, newsletter communiqués, talks to civic clubs and more. Mention tools for writing in the 21st century and most people are apt to think first of the computer, with its function as what used to be barbarically called a word processor. The writer’s needs in this regard are basic and homely.

I prefer a laptop to a desktop computer. The laptop’s smallness makes it, of course, portable. That means you can write with it in hotel rooms, the backyard or various chairs throughout the house. It also leaves more space to keep relevant books and notes ready to hand on your work surface (your actual desktop, that is). The capability of enlarging typeface on the screen—I like enlargement to at least 120 percent—eliminates the need for a large screen and makes using a laptop easy on the eyes.

Writers need something easy on the eyes, and not necessarily because they are growing older and blinder. Easy on the eyes means you can stay at work for hours on end. After all, among the most salient differences between the real writer and the wannabe writer is a sore butt—a willingness to make yourself sit in the same place for hours. That is the only way novels—or sermons—get written.

The craft (and your neck) also benefits when the computer screen is positioned near eye level. You can accomplish this elevation by placing the laptop on a couple of encyclopedias. A more appealing alternative is using a laptop stand that raises your computer four or five inches above the desk surface. Belkin’s CushTop is ideal and neck-friendly, whether used on your lap or on your desk. And being much lighter

than encyclopedias, it can go with your laptop out to the backyard.

I hesitate to say more about pampering the neck, lest I indicate that I really am decrepit. But one of my favorite writing tools is the Necksaver II, a bookstand the likes of which I searched for far and wide until I finally hunted one down in the bookstore of a chiropractic college. It is as ugly as a hognosed snake run over by a truck, but is the only bookstand I have found that has a bottom shelf wide enough and arms long enough to keep open even large books (like one of those encyclopedias you can set under your laptop).

What of more mundane tools, such as pens and pencils? Here I am with Benjamin: “no luxury, but an abundance of these utensils.” A Montblanc pen is nice; I won’t refuse one if someone wants to give one to me for Christmas. But what the writer really needs is a ready and generous supply of inexpensive, retractable ballpoint pens that flow evenly and do not glob. Then, when a pen inevitably gets misplaced, the occasion provides no excuse to stop writing and form a search party. Dedicated writers, like the desert fathers at prayer, must remove themselves from all temptations and distractions.

For pencils, I have a specific recommendation. The Mirado Black Warrior (HB #2) is handsome—black with gold lettering and a red band around the eraser cap—and writes with reliable smoothness. Not to mention the stirring name, which brings a dash of romance to the writer’s task. And these pencils are cheap enough that they provide no distraction when lost. Keep five or six sharpened in the pencil cup nearest you.

The final tool that must be mentioned is an excellent dictionary. I can’t imagine one more excellent than *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. A visit to its pages rarely ends in disappointment. Almost all English (and quite a few non-English) words worth employing can be found in these two hefty volumes. And the *Shorter’s* definitions are directly to the point. No need to dally over excessive nuances here—this dictionary provides consultations of a brevity and effectiveness that would be the envy of any health-care system the world over.

I feel compelled to add (I don’t want to think what Benjamin would say about this) that if you own an iPhone, you can get *The Shorter OED* as an app. The cost is under \$50, and it includes some audible pronunciations in thrillingly precise British accents. One more reason not to leave your desk, even to cross the room to your

bookshelves.

I apologize for the many brand names strewn tackily throughout this piece. My humiliation is eased only by the reminder that at times every writer is a hack. And maybe the Mirado people will give me a lifetime supply of pencils.