

Notes, essays, quotations on writing, writers and the writing life .

The Writing Wright

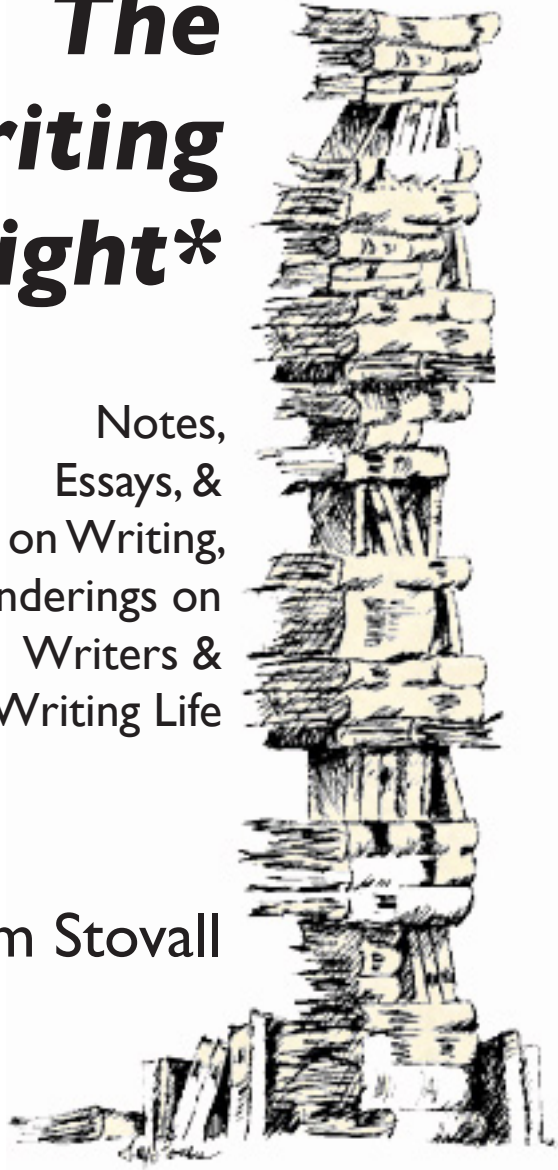
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# **The Writing Wright\***

Notes,  
Essays, &  
Advice on Writing,  
& Ponderings on  
Writers &  
the Writing Life

By Jim Stovall



*with illustrations by the author*

*\*wright (def) a maker, worker, fixer; as in shipwright*

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## **The power of words**

Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.

-- *Rudyard Kipling*



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# Dr. Johnson's dictionary

Many people remember and quote definitions from Samuel Johnson's dictionary that are funny or clever. But the vast majority of Johnson's work was serious and elegant. He had a knack for distilling a definition to as few words as possible, and yet it's meaning was crystal clear. Here are a few examples of the witty and the elegant:

**Anxiety:** n.s. In the medical language, [anxietas, Lat.] 1. Trouble of mind about some future event; suspense with uneasiness; perplexity; solicitude. 2. depression; lowness of spirits.

**Cough:** A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity.

**Dull:** Not exhilarating (sic); not delightful; as, to make dictionaries is dull work.

**Excise:** A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

**Honest:** adj. [honeste, French; honestus, Latin.] 1. Upright; true; sincere. 2. Chaste. 3. Just; righteous; giving to every man his due. 4. It is sometimes used criminally for dishonest; base.

**Network:** Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.

**Politician:** 1. One versed in the arts of government; one skilled in politics. 2. A man of artifice; one of deep contrivance.

**Small:** adj. [small Saxon; smal, Dutch; smaar, Islandick.] 1. Little in quantity; not great. 2. Slender; exile; minute. 3. Little in degree. 4. Little in importance; petty; minute. 5. Little in the principal quality, as small beer.



**Oats:** A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland appears to support the people.



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### **The verb “said”**

In journalistic writing, there is no good substitute for the verb “said.” Still, beginning students are sometimes self-conscious about using “said” so much in their writing, and they try to find substitutes. The problem with a substitute is that they are laden with added meanings that the writer may not want to include.

For instance, a writer might try to use “claimed” instead of “said.” Claimed implies doubt -- as if to say, he “claimed” he did it, but we’re not sure. Be care about using verbs of attribution; they may say more than you want to say.

Stick with the verb “said.” It’s simple and straightforward, and you won’t have to carry any extra baggage by adding to its meaning.

## **Expensive misspelling**

Teachers, tell your students (as you undoubtedly do) that they need to spell correctly and that they should check their spelling. Not doing so can turn out to be an expensive proposition.

That's what the folks in Livermore, Calif., found out in 2004 when they spent \$40,000 for a mosaic for their new library. The artwork contained 175 words, many of them names of writers, scientists and artists. Some 11 of those words were misspelled. They included Shakespeare (Shakespere), Einstein (Eistein), and Gauguin (Gaugan).

The Miami artist who executed the work at first claimed artistic license (maybe some of your students have used the same excuse) but later said she would fix the problem words. Unfortunately, the city of Livermore is having to pay her \$6,000 plus expenses to do that. California law requires that public artwork cannot be changed without the consent of the artist.

Some people are blaming city and library officials as well as the artist, saying they should have checked the spelling before approving the artwork.

You can read more about this in the news stories of the San Francisco Chronicle and the Contra Costa Times.



*(Posted on JPROF Aug. 10, 2005)*

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