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How to learn english writing skills for beginners

It's not easy to write well, and writing well can sometimes seem unimportant. After all, we live in an era of smartphones, and voicemail, and Instagram. If you don't enjoy writing, there are many other ways to communicate, ways that don't even require words. Videos, photos, and emojis can express quite a lot. However, if your goal is to graduate university, become a successful entrepreneur, or get a better job, writing is still an essential skill to learn. It shows your ability to think clearly, and can persuade people—to buy your product, to fund your research, to consider you for a position in their company. Learning to write well is not easy, but the good news is that there are many ways to improve your writing skills online, from home, and for free. Below are five methods I typically recommend to my English students.

1. Read and analyze high-quality writing. This is the oldest method, and still the best, to improve your writing. It's how Shakespeare and all other great writers of the past learned how to write. When I say 'good writing' though, I mean simply writing that has been reviewed and cleaned up by professional editors. You can find this kind of writing in newspapers, magazines, and books – these are the best materials to read. By contrast, a lot of writing online (blogs, message boards, Facebook posts) is poorly edited, and often includes misused words, grammar mistakes, and non-standard punctuation. Learning how to write in English with these sources is risky, because you may learn a lot of bad habits. That said, there is also a lot of excellent writing on the web, available for free. Websites with Good Writing There are millions of websites out there, about all types of topics. This is just a short list of interesting English-language sites that are suitable for intermediate and advanced English learners: The Guardian: This British website is one of the most famous news sites in the English-speaking world. Every day, it publishes dozens of new articles, essays, and letters—about every topic you can imagine. If you're interested (like me) in the history of cities, they have 50+ articles just about cities. Take a few minutes to explore the site, and you will probably find a topic that interests you. Longform: Longform is a curation website, which means they create lists of the best content around the Internet—often about very specific topics. You can find, for example, a list of the best essays about road trips or movies adapted from books. They even have a list of the best writing about snow. As their name suggests, they focus on 'longform' writing—texts that are longer than articles but shorter than books—so you can learn a lot about a specific topic (and discover a lot of useful vocabulary) but finish it more quickly than a book. The Book of Life: Of all the blogs offering 'life advice', this one is my favorite. It covers typical topics, like how to build a career or improve your relationships, as well as skills you didn't know you needed—like How to Narrate Your Life Story or How to Write an Effective Thank You Letter. The writing style is clear without being childishly simplistic, and you can learn a lot of interesting and sophisticated vocabulary from it. Speaking of vocabulary: Learn New Vocabulary with Google Dictionary Part of becoming a better writer is learning new words. Lots of new words. So, while reading, you should be looking for words and phrases that could be useful when writing about the topics that interest you. A great free tool for this purpose is Google Dictionary, which allows you to quickly check the translation of any word. You can also listen to pronunciation, and add the word to your own personal phrasebook for later study. WikiHow offers detailed instructions on how to install Google Dictionary in the Chrome web browser.
2. Find a writing partner (or join a community). To become a better writer, it's not enough to simply learn a lot of words. You need to practice using them. Along with to reading a lot, you need to write a lot. Obviously, there are many ways to do this: Write every day in a diary. Create your own blog. Share your thoughts on Facebook. Et cetera. You'll improve your writing faster, however, if you share your writing in places that are designed to give you feedback, either from native English speakers or from fellow student-writers. Here are three options to consider: Virtual Language Exchanges (HelloTalk) I'm sure you already know about the concept of a language exchange. It's typically a way to practice your speaking skills, but it can also be a good way to practice your writing skills (especially because, in my experience, it's difficult to arrange a time and place to meet and chat; in a text-based language exchange, time and place don't matter). A great app for this purpose is HelloTalk, which offers several different ways to practice your speaking and writing skills, with language learners all around the world. One of the best features of their app is the ability to edit your language partner's messages, as shown in the video below: SMS language exchanges can be a great way to practice using the words you want to learn, or to ask native speakers about difficult phrases you've come across while reading. Online Message Boards (Reddit) If you want feedback about something you are writing longer than a few sentences (e.g. an email, an IELTS essay, a blog post, a story), online message boards are a good place to share your draft. On big message boards like Reddit, you can usually find hundreds of native speakers who are willing to read your writing and give you free advice. Three groups to check out are: r/EnglishLearning (40,000+ members): At any time of day, this group usually has hundreds of people asking and answering questions about English grammar, sentence structure, and word usage. If you need help writing an email or blog post, this is a good place to share it. r/IELTS (8,000+ members): This group has few members and is less active than the one above, but it's still a good place to visit if you want advice about preparing for the IELTS Writing Test. The members here are knowledgeable about the test requirements, and can give you tips on how to get a higher score. r/KeepWriting (43,000+ members): For creative writers (of essays, poems, or stories), this is a friendly place to get feedback about your descriptions, characters, or plot points—as well as give your reactions to other writers' drafts. Local Writing Groups (Meetup) Last but not least, you should consider joining a writing group in your city or near your home. Meetup is a great website for this purpose, because you can search your area by topic and by date. Photo by Dylan GillisIn contrast to phone apps or message boards, the advantage of an in-person writing group is that you can (1) practice your English speaking as well as writing skills and (2) make friends with other writers—which is the best way to stay motivated toward your goal of becoming a better writer. If you can't find a writing group in your area that fits your specific writing interests, the solution is simple: create your own group on Meetup.
3. Take a free writing course online. There's a lot to think about when writing—things like Spelling, Punctuation, Organization, Logic, and Style. These aspects of language are not so important when speaking (especially in conversational speech), but they become very important when writing (especially if you want to make a good impression). So, one of the best ways to improve your writing fast is to take an online course. A lot of universities offer writing lessons for new students, and they have made these lessons available online to anyone, for free. Below is a list of the most helpful, and best quality, courses I've found: Writing in English for University Study (FutureLearn). This free 15-hour course from the University of Reading (in Great Britain) teaches you how to develop and organize your ideas, use academic vocabulary and impersonal style, and build essays using reason and examples (important for any type of university or business writing, and especially helpful for the IELTS Writing Test). FutureLearn also offers an Intermediate version of the course you can try, and a shorter (9 hour) course that focused on IELTS Academic Writing from British Council (one of the co-creators of the IELTS). Better Business Writing in English (Coursera): For career-minded learners, this free 20-hour course can teach you how to craft well-written reports, proposals, and business presentations. The course was developed by Georgia Tech, one of the top English-speaking universities in the world, which also offers a course in how to write professional emails and a 4-month program on English Communication Skills (with lessons on how to speak by phone or at a business event, and how to create an English CV or website). Rhetoric: The Art of Persuasive Writing (edX): Developed by Harvard University, this 8-week course focuses on rhetoric, which is a set of communication strategies for writing and speaking clearly, logically, and persuasively. If you've ever watched a TED Talk or read a "viral" article, you already have a sense of what rhetoric is, and how powerful it can be. It's the type of writing that people love to read, share, and talk about. Writing that gets people excited, angry, or inspired. Writing in the Sciences (Coursera): This course from Stanford University (located near Silicon Valley, and the place where many tech entrepreneurs have studied) offers a more-technical introduction to writing topics like how to write clearly, build paragraphs, and support your claims with logic and data. What's more, you learn the correct way to write review papers, grant requests, and letters of recommendation. Creative Writing (Coursera): Lastly, if your goal is to improve your skills in storytelling and fiction writing, I recommend this free course from Wesleyan University, one of the best liberal arts colleges in the United States. Over a span of 14 months, you learn how to write fictional stories and novels, as well as non-fiction essays and memoirs. Wesleyan is famous for educating highly creative people—like Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote a famous rap song about the self-taught writer Alexander Hamilton: Our man saw his future drip, dripping down the drainPut a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brainAnd he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain.— from 'Alexander Hamilton' by Lin-Manuel Miranda
4. Learn how to identify bad writing. Nowadays, when most writing applications offer Autocorrect and Grammar Check features, you might expect 'bad writing' to have gone extinct. Yet plenty of bad writing still exists, because there are a lot of ways to write badly—even if your spelling and punctuation are perfectly correct. For example: The northern United States and Canada are places where herons live and breed. Spending the winter here has its advantages. Great Blue Herons live and breed in most of the United States. It's an advantage for herons to avoid the dangers of migration. Herons head south when the cold weather arrives. The earliest herons to arrive on the breeding grounds have an advantage. The winters are relatively mild in Cape Cod. Harvard professor Steven Pinker offers this example of bad writing in his book *The Sense of Style*. Can you identify the problems in it? The grammar, spelling, and punctuation are all correct, so what's wrong? (Read it again and try to identify the problems, then see Professor Pinker's explanation.) Concerning the problem of bad writing more generally, Prof. Pinker writes: So many things can go wrong in a passage of prose. The writing can be bloated, self-conscious, academic... The passage can be cryptic, abstruse, arcane... The syntax can be defective, convoluted, ambiguous... Even if every sentence in a text is crisp, lucid, and well formed, a succession of them can feel choppy, disjointed, unfocused—in a word, incoherent... We don't know why one clause follows another... To better understand all of the writing problems he mentions above, I highly recommend reading Pinker's book. In 300 pages, he carefully explains each way that writers (even highly educated ones) can make mistakes. I've read his book three times, and I notice improvements in my writing after each time I do. It's like an entire Harvard writing course, packed into a book. However, if you can't afford to buy the book, you can still practice this simple exercise: When you come to something that is confusing to read, stop and try to identify what the problem is. Ask yourself these questions about each sentence: Questions to Ask of Confusing Writing Is it clear what the sentence is about? (e.g. Is the topic 'Great Blue Herons' specifically, or 'herons' in general?) Is it clear why the writer wants to explore this topic? (i.e. What is the point the writer is trying to make here?) Is it clear how each sentence relates to the others? (i.e. Does this sentence provide a clarification, a counterpoint, a reason, an example?) Is it clear how each word relates to the others? (Look especially at words like 'it' and 'they'.) You can do this exercise with any text you read, but you should also do it with your own writing. Put yourself in the shoes of your target Readers, and try to read your text from their perspective. Your ability to identify bad writing also makes you a more valuable writing partner. If your feedback isn't more helpful than a Grammar Checker program, your text-based language exchange won't much benefit your partner.
5. Analyze writing that you enjoy reading. While reading, you should look for useful words and phrases (and collect them for your writing). You should also be attentive to bad writing (and try to identify what the problems are). But you should also pay attention to really good writing, the sort of writing you wish you could write. For instance: Certainly for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery' — the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea. This paragraph comes from an essay by Rebecca Solnit, which I've written about in another blogpost about techniques you can't learn from writing courses, techniques you can only learn by reading slowly and carefully. Let's analyze this paragraph—but instead of looking for problems that create confusion, I'll try to figure out why I liked reading this paragraph, what made these four sentences so interesting to me. Some things that I find interesting: The writing in this paragraph is a lot clearer than the paragraph about Great Blue Herons, even though the sentences in this paragraph are longer and have more complex grammar. The basic message of the first sentence (the unknown is what must be found) is abstract and academic, and while the extra words in the sentence don't add specificity, they create a poetic rhythm that urges you to keep reading. By contrast, the last sentence in the paragraph offers a vivid picture in your mind. Instead of vague words like idea and form, we have fishermen and a dark sea. Unlike the text about herons, this writer avoids using different words to describe the same thing. She repeats the words artists and the unknown several times, and this repetition helps the reader to follow her thoughts, despite all the abstract words and pronouns in the paragraph. These are just a few ideas, after a few minutes of analysis, that I can try to use in my own writing. These are not Universal Rules, but little tricks and techniques that can make my writing more interesting and unique from writers who read all the same books. Professor Pinker's Explanation: "The individual sentences are clear enough, and they obviously pertain to a single topic. But the passage is incomprehensible. By the second sentence we're wondering about where here is. The third has us puzzling over whether great blue herons differ from herons in general, and if they do, whether these herons live only in the northern United States, unlike the other herons, who live in Canada as well. The fourth sentence seems to come out of the blue, and the fifth seems to contradict the fourth. The paragraph is then rounded out with two non sequiturs." Return to example. Photo by Steve Johnson

