

# Benjamin Franklin Writing Method

by Cheri Blomquist

## Week 1: Introduction

Focus concepts: Who was Ben Franklin? Why is his writing admired? What was his method, and how did it serve to transform him from a poor writer to a brilliant one?

Everyone has heard of him—the famous early American, Benjamin Franklin. He is so famous, in fact, that he has become part of our cultural consciousness. Not only was a discount store chain and a stove named after him, but also his picture is even on our hundred-dollar bill! He is also the only person to sign *all three* of our country’s founding documents. As important as he is to our history, however, you may not know anything about him beyond a few random facts like these. Who was he? And why spend six months learning how to write from a dead guy? Well, let me introduce you . . .

### A Very Short History of a Really Cool Dead Guy

Born in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1706, Benjamin Franklin was the 15<sup>th</sup> of 17 children—seven of whom were half-siblings by his father’s first wife. His family lived in humble circumstances, his father being a soap-maker and candlemaker. This meant that Ben had to learn a trade early in life, even though he did well in school. At age 10 he left the Boston Latin School to work in his father’s shop. Since he found it dull, however, his father decided to apprentice him to his brother James in his printshop. Ben liked this, but eventually, due to differences with his brother, he left his apprenticeship and eventually settled in Philadelphia, which he called home for the rest of his life.

It was here that he not only made a name for himself, but also made history. He began to publish his writing, especially the famed *Poor Richard’s Almanack* in 1732, and he soon became successful in various ventures, such as starting businesses, creating a lending library, inventing new products (such as the Franklin stove), taking leadership by election of the Pennsylvania Masons, and becoming a soldier—among other things! He even found his way into political leadership, which led him to sign all three of our country’s founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Treaty of Paris. He is the only American with this distinction.

Amazingly, these are only a few things that Franklin achieved; there are just too many to list here! He was a true “renaissance man” in every sense. He was even a romantic, married once and enamored with a number of other women after his wife’s death. Today, he is still honored with

his nickname “the First American” and with his image on our \$100 bill. And all this from a man who hardly had any formal education!

## How an Uneducated Trade Boy Became an American Literary Light

For all Benjamin Franklin’s extraordinary accomplishments, only one concerns us in this course: the fact that he had so little education yet became a celebrated writer. Not only did he help draft our country’s founding documents, he also published one of the first monthly American magazines: *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle for all the British Plantations in America*. Other publications included pamphlets and articles, a book called *Father Abraham’s Sermons* (now called *The Way to Wealth*), and *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, an annual trove of lore, entertainment, practical information, and wisdom that he published (but didn’t write all the content for) from 1732–1758. But his famous autobiography, the one for which he became famous? Believe it or not, that was a collection of various writings of his that was not put together into the book we can read today until the 1800s, long after he died!

The story behind his rise to literary fame is simple, yet inspiring. It is an example of how hard work and focus can help virtually anyone to become skillful, stylish writers. Listen to him explain his growth as a writer in his own words.

...I was put to the grammar-school at eight years of age, my father intending to devote me, as the tithe of his sons, to the service of the Church. My early readiness in learning to read (which must have been very early, as I do not remember when I could not read), and the opinion of all his friends, that I should certainly make a good scholar, encouraged him in this purpose of his...I continued, however, at the grammar-school not quite one year, though in that time I had risen gradually from the middle of the class of that year to be the head of it, and farther was removed into the next class above it, in order to go with that into the third at the end of the year. But my father, in the meantime, from a view of the expense of a college education, which having so large a family he could not well afford, and the mean living many so educated were afterwards able to obtain—reasons that he gave to his friends in my hearing—altered his first intention, took me from the grammar-school, and sent me to a school for writing and arithmetic, kept by a then famous man, Mr. George Brownell, very successful in his profession generally, and that by mild, encouraging methods. Under him I acquired fair writing pretty soon, but I failed in the arithmetic, and made no progress in it. At ten years old I was taken home to assist my father in his business, which was that of a tallow-chandler and sope-boiler...

And after some time an ingenious tradesman, Mr. Matthew Adams, who had a pretty collection of books, and who frequented our printing-house, took notice of me, invited me to his library, and very kindly lent me such books as I chose to read. I now took a fancy to poetry, and made some little pieces; my brother, thinking it might turn to account, encouraged me, and put me on

composing occasional ballads. One was called “The Lighthouse Tragedy,” and contained an account of the drowning of Captain Worthilake, with his two daughters: the other was a sailor's song, on the taking of Teach (or Blackbeard) the pirate. They were wretched stuff, in the Grubstreet-ballad style; and when they were printed he sent me about the town to sell them. The first sold wonderfully, the event being recent, having made a great noise. This flattered my vanity; but my father discouraged me by ridiculing my performances, and telling me verse-makers were generally beggars. So I escaped being a poet, most probably a very bad one; but as prose writing had been of great use to me in the course of my life, and was a principal means of my advancement, I shall tell you how, in such a situation, I acquired what little ability I have in that way.

There was another bookish lad in the town, John Collins by name, with whom I was intimately acquainted. We sometimes disputed, and very fond we were of argument, and very desirous of confuting one another, which disputatious turn, by the way, is apt to become a very bad habit, making people often extremely disagreeable in company...A question was once, somehow or other, started between Collins and me, of the propriety of educating the female sex in learning, and their abilities for study. He was of opinion that it was improper, and that they were naturally unequal to it. I took the contrary side, perhaps a little for dispute's sake. He was naturally more eloquent, had a ready plenty of words; and sometimes, as I thought, bore me down more by his fluency than by the strength of his reasons. As we parted without settling the point, and were not to see one another again for some time, I sat down to put my arguments in writing, which I copied fair and sent to him. He answered, and I replied. Three or four letters of a side had passed, when my father happened to find my papers and read them. Without entering into the discussion, he took occasion to talk to me about the manner of my writing; observed that, though I had the advantage of my antagonist in correct spelling and pointing (which I ow'd to the printing-house), I fell far short in elegance of expression, in method and in perspicuity, of which he convinced me by several instances. I saw the justice of his remark, and thence grew more attentive to the manner in writing, and determined to endeavor at improvement.

About this time I met with an odd volume of the Spectator. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it...

## **The First (and Most Important) Lesson of Benjamin Franklin**

If you asked ten different authors to describe how they learned to write, you might get ten different answers. But if you asked the same ten writers to agree on the most important things a beginner must do to achieve excellence, I'll bet they would all agree that reading a lot of good books is one of them. Benjamin Franklin understood this, too. Books, of course, weren't nearly as easy to come by in the 1700s. Franklin, however, had enough access to literature that he read as much as he could. Soon, he realized their value for aspiring writers. If he wanted to improve his writing, he needed to follow in the footsteps of writers he admired. By studying their work to understand why it was so good, he could then apply what he learned to his own writing.

Even if a student never analyzed writing the way Franklin did, though, good literature would still be an essential element of the student's development as a writer. Why? What difference does it make *what* a person reads? Many teachers today push their students to students, asking them to read 20–30 minutes a night, requiring that they keep reading logs or plying them with rewards. There is good reason for this, because only through practice do we become skillful at something. I believe, however, that it also matters *what* students read.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “What goes in must come out”? What about, “We are what we eat”? These sayings apply not only to food but also to words. The ideas and information that enter your mind often influence and affect you. They can help form the way you think, the values you hold, the knowledge you build. They can help form your character, your worldview, and the way you relate to others. And they even—without your even realizing it—influence your vocabulary, writing skills, and writing style. Thus, literature of all kinds can be not only meaningful and entertaining, but also powerful and instructive.

So read a lot, especially if you want to become a good writer. Like Franklin, be selective and learn to distinguish the difference between writing that is excellent and writing that is, well, not so much. Pay attention to what works well in a piece of writing and what does not. This doesn't mean you always have to read classics or award winners, though they are generally trustworthy as far as quality goes, but be open to advice and recommendations. And if you find yourself reading a book or story that seems to be of poor quality, consider using it as a learning opportunity. Analyze it to understand *why* it is poor quality. By paying close attention to the literature you read, as Franklin did, you will be able to apply what you learn to your own writing.

## **The Ben Franklin Study Method for Aspiring Writers**

Of course, Ben Franklin did more than just read to become a good writer. If he had become a luminous literary light by just reading a lot, I would have nothing more to say about how he learned to write. Ben Franklin took his avid reading a few steps further, though, and in doing so, he learned much more than he ever would have by simply reading a lot.

Although he didn't have much education, Franklin was a smart man. He was also raised to be a hard worker, and he learned trades that required order and care. When he decided that he wanted to improve his writing, then, he developed a method by which he could climb the ladder towards excellence in a manner that seemed to him most likely to get him from point A (as he says, “short in elegance of expression, in method and in perspicuity”) to point B (much “improvement”). In his autobiography, he describes his method this way. I have numbered and bolded each step of his method but take the time to read the entire selection in order to fully understand his approach.

...With this view **(1) I took some of the papers, and, making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, (2) and then, without looking at the book, try'd to compleat the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length, and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words that should come to hand. (3) Then I compared my Spectator with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them.** But I found I wanted a stock of words, or a readiness in recollecting and using them, which I thought I should have acquired before that time if I had gone on making verses; since the continual occasion for words of the same import, but of different length, to suit the measure, or of different sound for the rhyme, would have laid me under a constant necessity of searching for variety, and also have tended to fix that variety in my mind, and make me master of it. **(4) Therefore I took some of the tales and turned them into verse; and, after a time, when I had pretty well forgotten the prose, turned them back again. (5) I also sometimes jumbled my collections of hints into confusion, and after some weeks endeavored to reduce them into the best order, before I began to form the full sentences and compleat the paper.** This was to teach me method in the arrangement of thoughts. **(6) By comparing my work afterwards with the original, I discovered many faults and amended them;** but I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that, in certain particulars of small import, I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious...

Notice that Franklin didn't make studying the literature's *content* part of his method. In other words, he didn't focus on *what* was said in the sense that he analyzed the author's ideas like we might do in a literature class. He focused on the way the way the ideas and information were presented. Thus, even though literature is essential to learning how to write the way Franklin learned to write and even though you will read a number of models, this is not a literature study. Although it will be important to reach a basic understanding of the models, our focus will be on arrangement and presentation of ideas. In the lessons to come, we will look more closely at each step of Franklin's method and put them into practice. By the end of the course, you will not only have a better understanding of what makes writing excellent, you will also be able to apply what you learn to your own writing.

### Assignment

Write a sample essay of 1–3 pages—as complete and polished as you can. It should be original to this assignment (not borrowed from another assignment for another course), and it can be on any topic. Don't choose a topic that requires research. Find a topic that is based on your own experience or opinions, instead, so that you are more focused on expressing your own style and voice than on getting your facts straight. The purpose of this assignment is to give you a baseline from which to measure your progress at the end of the course, and it will also give you a draft that you can later revise and polish after you've learned some new things about writing.