



## The Secret to Great Writing

I prepare dinner for my family almost every day. But I hardly consider myself a cook. On spaghetti night, I boil a package of store-bought pasta. Then I pop open a jar of Prego and dump it in a pot. Once the sauce is sufficiently warm and the noodles suitably sticky, I drain the hot water and combine the two. For extra pizzazz, I remove a frozen loaf of pre-buttered garlic bread from a cardboard box and lay it on a cookie sheet.

The oven does its thing, and within minutes, dinner is ready.

You can ask anyone who knows me. I'm not a cook. An assembler of premade ingredients, maybe. But a cook? No. People who can cook are clever and creative with tastes and textures. They can take raw food, like the stuff that comes off a tree or out of the ground, and mix it with seasonings to prepare a mouthwatering feast.

It's an art. It must be. Because whenever I ask a cooking friend for a recipe, my version of the same meal seldom comes out right. It's frustrating. I *can* read, after all, and I'm plenty capable of following directions. How hard can it be?

I explained my dilemma once to a friend who had recently given me a recipe.

She said, "It didn't work? Oh, um, well, that's the recipe I use, but I like to change it up a bit, adding different spices and trying new things. I just throw stuff in there, and it usually comes out okay."

I found her disclosure grating. What's the point of having a recipe when good cooks rarely follow them? But then I realized: This is the secret of great cooks. It's the secret of great musicians too. And comedians. It's the secret of any great artist. Improvisation.

Artists practice their craft. They learn the basic rules of the game, then they experiment. Eventually, their discipline yields the fruit of artistry. The cook can create a dining experience beyond the prescribed recipe. The musician can play a song that's never been notated on a page. The comedian can be funny off-script.

The secret to great writing is the ability to improvise.

Yes, writers are wise to become proficient with certain writing practices. Writers who follow writing tips are like musicians who practice scales. Musicians must become proficient with scales before they can play more complicated pieces. The same is true for writers too.

But it's important to remember: Writing tips are tools, not rules.

True artistry is achieved, not when we process our words through a predetermined matrix of dos and don'ts, but when we improvise. That's the secret to great writing.