

Letters to a Young Writer

DAVE MORICE

LETTERS FROM THE ALPHABET

A is the alpha but not the omega of the alphabet. It leads the arrangement of words in the dictionary. It announces the absolute arrival of alphabetic order, which is also alphabetic ardor to those whose art is a literary apple in the arbor of knowledge. In the beginning was the letter, the actual letter, and the letter was A, the first letter of all.

B is the bad luck letter. It was born in second place between A and C. Its best moment was in the line, "To be, or not to be." Its shape can betray its luck: Cutting off B's vertical line and moving it slightly to the left of the two curved lines changes B to 13, the unlucky number. B is the first letter of *baker's dozen*, which also signifies 13. So B it.

C is the copyright letter. Writers, artists, musicians, playwrights, filmmakers, and other creative people protect their work with the letter C in a circle (©). If a work isn't copyrighted, it could be copied wrongly by someone else claiming to be the creator, and the copycat could cop the creation, cash in on it, check the cash, cash the check, and cop out. C copies right.

D is the dead letter. Most verbs in the past tense end in D, which also ends the word *end*. This may seem like a dirty deed, but it enables the present to dissipate so the future can develop its destiny. If it weren't for D, dozens of doors would never open, and decades of doorknobs would never turn. The world would dream darkly of delight, as the light of dreaming darkly died.

E is the everywhere letter. It's in the eyes and the ears of every writer, every reader, every speaker, and every listener. It eases its way into printed text more than every other letter. It is even spoken or written in most of the letter names. Pronounced alone, six letters have a short E sound (F, L, M, N, S, X); and eight have a long E sound (B, C, D, E, G, P, T, V, Z). E, which is used in the spelling of *even*, exists in three letter names that don't even have an E sound (*cue, double-U, wye*). Eighteen letters use E, and eight exclude it. E is excellent!

F is the forbidden fruit in language's Garden of Eden. Although it is frequently found at the front of favorable words, there is one four-letter word that few can forget, a few find filthy, and a few find funny. Its four letters are filled with a fortune of meanings, fair or foul, featured in its own full dictionary. This friend or foe is, of course, the famous F-word.

G is the going letter. It appears at the ending of verbs that are continuing doing what they are doing. G is always finishing *-ing*, which is seeming to be making the beginning unending. G completes the spelling of writing and drawing and dreaming and waking and working and playing and seeing and saying and walking and running and talking and being. G is going with the flowing.

H is the Houdini of the alphabet. In England, the H is not always uttered, but in the U.S. it's spoken without hesitation. Its name is Aitch. Even with its first four letters removed, the H keeps its shape and sound. No hero can hear the howl of H, when H is hurled from heaven to hell. It's the magician's hat with a hare in its hair, for the H is quicker than the I.

I is the identity letter, the first-person singular pronoun. Ironically, I is inevitably considered the shortest word in English because I imitates a fine thin line. I's initial modesty is impeded by capital egotism: English is the only language whose first-person singular pronoun is in upper case. If this implies that "I" is number one, that's exactly what it is—the Roman numeral equal to 1.

J is the jester of the alphabet. It looks just like an I trying to be a U or vice versa, but it juts out somewhere between them—I to J to U. As justice would have it, J is 1 step in the alphabet to the right of I and 11 steps to the left of U. A joker? Perhaps. But J is a jewel, too: In lower case, J is the only consonant with a dot above it. It's neighbor, I, is the only vowel with a dot. From upper case to lower case, J tosses a gem of a dot to j. From jester to justice, from joker to jewel, J is a joyful, jolly juggler.

K is the kiloletter, the letter most frequently used in the field of computer technology to represent a number—1000. It is also used in science, commerce, etc. K stands for *kilo*, but most people simply say K. When it comes before N in a word, it's as silent as the night. Yet K is the key that turns *night* into *knight*, the keep-sake that keeps for the sake of the key.

L is the good luck letter. If it is viewed upside-down, it turns into the good luck number 7. Its luck makes it a letter to love, a love letter, too. In lower case, it is a single, lonely line that looks like the upper-case I or the number 1. In upper case, the two lines of L link in a love that only lines know. Their love is limitless, leading to their linear offspring, the lower-case I.

M is the master letter. It stands majestically like a mountain among the more mundane letters. It meditates like a maharishi at a meal, making an *mmmmmm* sound at the marvelous meat. It is the highest Roman numeral letter, meaning one thousand. M times M multiplies to a million. It is more. It is most. It is more than most. Yet it makes more of less, too, by beginning all minus numbers.

N is the neophyte negative letter. It is the first letter of the last half of the alphabet. Rotating it 90° in either direction gives Z, which ends the entire alphabet. N nests nebulously in the nexus of M, nodding like a needle needing a haystack. N begins more negative words than any other letter—*naught, nill, nix, no, none, nope, never, nothingness*.

O is the oldest printed letter still in use today. O, like the wheel it resembles, has traversed the ages. O, out of the all the letters in early alphabets, left other, less durable letters by the wayside. O is the letter of poetry: O! the romantic passion that it suggests. O is also the letter of mathematics: the oldest letter, O represents zero, the newest Arabic numeral. O is also the only letter that looks like the mouth that opens to speak its name. We owe it a standing ovation.

P is the philosopher's stone of the alphabet. It begins all poetry, prose, and painting. It is the point of all pens, pencils, and paintbrushes. It praises the process of creativity and prizes the progress of the imagination. It puts the pi in pie and the Poe in Poetry. It permutes the poorest lead of the soul into the purest gold of art. It perches between the two circular letters, O and Q.

Q is the quirky letter. It's an O with a tail, a Q-tip obsessed with the letter U. It almost always requires that U come right after it. Quite ironically, and quaintly, Q and U are separated from each other in the alphabet by three other letters—R, S, and T. Question: What quakes, quivers, and quits without U in a queue behind it? (N.B.: Dropping the last four letters of *queue* leaves Q, so different to view, so similar to *quote*).

R is the ruler of the alphabet. It begins every race or ride, but placed at the end it's a racer or a rider. It races through a particular route, but placed at the start it reroutes the race or reraces the route. When it sees a vision, it makes a revision. When it has a view, it's a viewer; and when it reviews what it's viewed, it's a reviewer. R rules.

S is the snake's letter. It's shaped like a snake rising up to strike, and it sounds like a snake suddenly spitting. Slyly it slithers at the end of most plural nouns and most singular present tense verbs. Softly it hisses with a soft series of S's or sharply buzzes with a zipping of Z's. And then it slinks secretly into slippery silence.

T is the truth letter. T sits at the table of logic and tastes the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. T takes time to touch the truisms whose thoughts are timeless. Full of fakeries, fantasies, and fooleries, F is free to feel the fantasies of falsehood, but T is never tempted to tell tall tales. T was taught to totally trust the truth.

U is the utilitarian letter. It satisfies Q's urgent need to be followed by U. Unlike Q, however, U is utterly utopian, useful to use with most other letters. Sometimes U sheds its decorative letters Y and O and becomes U, the real U, as in I LUV U, appearing in everything from advertising to poetry. Although U has never been defined as YOU in any dictionary, it has been used as YOU to unite with I, the ideal pronoun. Together, U and I uniquely unify each other's universes.

V is the vanishing vowel. In modern usage, it represents a consonant most of the time. It used to be a vowel, too, viewed as a valuable, venerable variable to U. It still replaces U in certain contexts in order to suggest olden times—for instance, on monuments and medals. Award medals from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair have "ST. LOUIS VNIVERSAL EXPOSITION" on them. But V is no longer the U it was.

W is the weird letter. It's the only letter whose name is pronounced with three syllables; every other letter name is pronounced with only one syllable. Its printed name, "double-U," has more than twice as many letters as any other number name has, but it doesn't have W, the very letter it names! W doesn't look like a double U; it looks like a double V. W is a letter that raises questions about its own identity. It begins five basic question words (*who, what, when, where, and why*), and ends a sixth (*how*).

X is the X-ed out letter. It begins fewer words and names than any other letter. Ironically, people who are unable to write are told to "make an X" for their names. In that respect, every name can be spelled "X." Equally ironic is the fact that X has more meanings than any other letter: it can be a kiss, a Roman numeral, a cross, a tic-tac-toe mark, a movie rating, an unknown quantity, a multiplication sign, a strike in bowling, a mysterious person, or a type of radiation. Once in vogue as a vowel, it's vague now.

Y is the yin letter; Y is the yang letter. It can be a consonant or vowel. It looks like a fork, and speaks with a forked tongue. Y appears in more all-vowel words than any other—*aye, ay-ay, eye, oy, you, yea, yoyo*. It's the only letter that has a homophone that questions its own duplicity (*why*). In the plural it has a homophone that answers its own question (*wise*).

Z is the zenith of the alphabet. It comes last in the established order of letters, and yet it has more names than any other—*ezed, ezod, izzard, zed, zee*. Only *zed* (in British English) and *zee* (in American English) are in general use today. As the 26th letter, Z brings closure: Nothing comes after it. Zero. Zip. Zilch. Zot.

ERIKA DREIFUS

You asked me why I write. I never learned your name, but you did hint at the necessity behind the question: that you must choose between two courses, one of which is “Beginning Fiction,” the class that I teach. Something compelled you to ask why, when this world offers us the cellphone and the internet, do I bother to write? But then a colleague of mine approached, and you disappeared.

Your question, however, did not.

The question is neither a new nor a simple one. More than a century ago, the novelist Kate Chopin, responding to a similar inquiry, acknowledged that the why-question is one “which I have often asked myself and never very satisfactorily answered.”¹ “Why I write” is, in fact, so essential, so recurrent, that I have “stolen” it—not only from you, but from the authors we study in Beginning Fiction: the American writer Joan Didion, who stole it from the British writer George Orwell.

Didion approaches the answer acoustically, revelling in “the mere sound of the words: why I write.” She continues:

There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I
I
I.

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It’s an aggressive, even hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there’s no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space.²

For his part, Orwell, too, seems to have lived with the question. He articulated “four great motives for writing, at any rate for writing prose.” They exist, he writes, “in different degrees in every writer, and in any one writer the proportions will vary from time to time, according to the atmosphere in which he is living.” They are, in sum:

1. sheer egoism (*perhaps the Orwellian take on the I, I, I?*)
2. aesthetic enthusiasm (*why else would one labor over one sentence for days?*)
3. historical impulse (*the generations!*)
4. political purpose

In terms of Orwell's fourth rationale, he claimed to be employing "political" in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after."³

If you pursue the why-question, you may in time become acquainted with a volume called *Letters to a Young Poet*, a set of communications from the poet Rainer Maria Rilke to a young poet, who must have conveyed to Rilke the very concerns you shared with me. Rilke advised the young poet to:

Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write.... This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: Must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "I must," then build your life according to this necessity....⁴

Building one's life in such a manner, with so little guaranteed, is difficult to imagine. Most writers aren't rich and famous. Their pages don't just drop between the covers of the best-sellers; their pages may go unread for weeks, months, years.

I can almost hear you now, repeating the question, with even more doubt and incredulity: "So, then, why write?"

I may refer you to other sources. To the catalogue of reasons so ably chronicled by Margaret Atwood, a list of infinitives that begins:

To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past because it has been forgotten. To satisfy my desire for revenge. Because I knew I had to keep writing or else I would die. Because to write is to take risks, and it is only by taking risks that we know we are alive. To produce order out of chaos. To delight and instruct (not often found after the early twentieth century, or not in that form). To please myself. To express myself. To express myself beautifully. To create a perfect work of art. To reward the virtuous and punish the guilty; or—the Marquis de Sade defense, used by ironists—vice versa. To hold a mirror up to Nature. To hold a mirror up to the reader. To paint a portrait of society and its ills. To express the unexpressed life of the masses. To name the hitherto unnamed. To defend the human spirit, and human integrity and honor. To thumb my nose at Death. To make money so my children could have shoes.⁵

Or I might direct you to Terry Tempest Williams's lyrical essay, called—yes—"Why I Write," which is itself a gift another writer has shared with me, and I now share with you.⁶

This statement may make you uneasy. Isn't *passion* a word that is meant to stay far, far from the classroom?

Though perhaps at times “hostile” and connected with “revenge,” writing can also be a wonderfully generous act. Because at its base, it is an act of communication. Of sharing. The gift, the talent of the writer, is (as Virginia Woolf once wrote) in the giving.

I'm almost afraid to cite yet another writer, but I cannot refrain from mentioning at this point Mary Gaitskill's piece in a collection titled—you got it—*Why I Write*. Gaitskill divides her essay into six basic answers to the question. In some way, all six seem to connect with the motivation, the process, the act of communication. (“To communicate,” by the way, is Gaitskill's fifth response in the piece.⁷)

Yes, writing can be a selfish act (I, I, I). As a writer, you choose your own subjects and themes. You apply the tools and techniques of fiction to achieve an effect that you seek to create. The time you spend on your writing is intensely personal and focused. If you asked me to identify one reason among the many I've considered, I'd likely return to Gaitskill's piece, and to the first of her six responses: “To satisfy a basic fundamental need.”

Now I also said, earlier in this note, that I write “because I have to.” Passion does, indeed, matter. This statement may make you uneasy. Isn't *passion* a word that is meant to stay far, far from the classroom? Should you now hold this letter by its edges and drop it on the desk of the nearest dean?

You're smarter than that. You know what I mean. Think of the many meanings of passion. Think, in particular, of the commitment it can bring forth. The energy it requires but also gives back. How it sustains and fuels while it engages, tests, exhausts.

1. Kate Chopin, “On Certain Brisk, Bright Days,” in Ann Charters, ed., *The American Short Story and Its Writer* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 1334.
2. Joan Didion, “Why I Write,” in Carl Klaus, et al., *In Depth: Essayists for Our Time* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 172.
3. George Orwell, “Why I Write,” in Klaus, et al., *In Depth*, 554.
4. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1993), 18–19.
5. Margaret Atwood, “Introduction: Into the Labyrinth,” *Negotiating with the Dead* (Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xix–xxii.
6. Terry Tempest Williams, “Why I Write,” in Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard, eds., *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, 2001), 6–7.
7. Mary Gaitskill, “The Wolf in Tall Grass,” in Will Blythe, ed., *Why I Write: Thoughts on the Craft of Fiction* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 155–63.