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# Power Writing

**Super fast tips to punch up your prose**

**Aug. 26, 2008**

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This weekly Power Writing tip goes every Tuesday to people around the world who want to write better, faster. You're receiving it because you subscribed. If you like it, please consider forwarding it to a friend. If you wish to unsubscribe, you can do so easily via the link at the end.

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PW # 135 - The Michael Phelps secret to writing

I'm the opposite of a sports junkie -- I'd rather read a book than see a hockey game and I'd prefer a root canal to watching American football. But, still, I can't resist the Olympics.

Where else will television relentlessly chronicle not just the very worst but also the very best of the human spirit? From the magnificent Simon Whitfield (Go Canada!) with his final-moment push to take silver in the triathlon, to the photo-finish between Germany's Britta Steffen and Australia's Lis Trickett in the 100-metre freestyle swim, to the aptly named Usain Bolt's run in the 100-metre sprint, the 29th Olympiad offered plenty to captivate. Still, there's little question that these games belonged to Michael Phelps.

As you're probably tired of hearing by now, the Baltimore Bullet's six-foot-seven-inch wingspan, extra long torso and size 14 feet make him one of the best physical specimens for swimming in the last century. But more than that, Phelps had the psychology nailed.

So, on the theory that the Olympics are a metaphor for life let's head to the shower room to learn more about how the Michael Phelps secret can be adapted to writing.

****Coaching tip 1: Talent alone is never enough.** Michael Phelps may have the body of a swimming god, but he knew that wouldn't be nearly enough to get him to the podium. Despite his genetic riches, he was prepared to practice -- starting *immediately* after the last Olympics in Athens (where he hauled in six golds) -- by logging 50 pool miles a week. This program accelerated as competition drew nearer, of course.

Gifted writers also understand that the secret to getting in top shape, and staying there, is practice. Regardless of talent, you have to work it. That means hitting the computer decks every day. An hour a day is a minimum for many but for the less ambitious even a short burst of 15 minutes per day -- ideally done as soon as you wake up -- will help. And, in fact, this is far better than 70 minutes done in one long stretch once a week. Writing is like exercise. Don't ever let those muscles atrophy.

****Coaching tip 2: You can't control all the variables.** In the 200-metre butterfly, Phelps had a wardrobe malfunction and his goggles failed, filling up with water. Still he did not let this stop him from beating Laszlo Cseh by seven-tenths of a second. That was skill, hard work and luck. Never discount luck. But don't count on it either.

As a writer you may be lucky enough to work with dream clients or bosses. These are people who are clear in their instructions, confident enough to leave you room for creativity, cheerful about eschewing jargon and generous in their praise when you've done a good job. **On the other hand, you may work for pompous twits.** In either case, you need to be a professional and do the best work you can. But if you work for a pompous twit, do try to find a new job as soon as possible.

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****Coaching tip 3: Disappointment is a fact of life.** Michael Phelps didn't win everything when he started swimming. He lost his share of races, too. And think of the disappointment facing his talented teammates. As the Aug 25 *New Yorker* described the problem facing US swimming star Ryan Lochte: "It's the old Ben Jonson problem: you're a fine playwright, and at any other time you'd be the best, but by lousy luck you happen to overlap with Shakespeare, who takes gold in every medley in town."

For writers, external indicators -- whether they be Pulitzer Prizes, Clio Awards or simply the delight of a satisfied client -- don't truly validate your work, even though they seem to.

Writing is like running or meditating or swimming. Sometimes you'll do it well and feel good about yourself. Sometime's you'll do it badly and feel disappointed.

But the secret is to keep doing it, regardless.

DETAILS, DETAILS...

Want more tips for improving your writing? My super self-help manual, *8 1/2 Steps to Writing Faster, Better* is a great resource for copywriters, corporate writers and *you*. The book is available in a basic version (e-book) or premium (e-book and printed copy -- plus additional goodies, including my handy booklet, *72 Ways to Beat Writer's Block*.) Here's how you can [learn more](#).

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