ON WRITING

The Dream Space

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Writing in English is, at its core, arranging 26 letters and a handful of symbols on a page. And yet, when those symbols are arranged in the right order and placed in front of another human being, they can induce something very close to a dream state.

A sentence can make someone furious. A paragraph can leave them grieving for a person who never existed. A few pages can make a room disappear completely.

That is the trick. The writer creates a space in which the reader agrees, for a little while, to dream with them. And once that dream begins, the writer has a responsibility to keep it alive.

An open book on a desk leads from a lamplit reading room into a moonlit landscape.

Put Their Head on the Pillow

I started thinking about this differently after watching the English-language rakugo performer Katsura Sunshine. Rakugo is an old Japanese storytelling form performed by a single storyteller, seated onstage, using little more than a fan, a cloth, their voice, and the audience's imagination.

Before the story begins, the performer delivers a conversational opening called the makura. The word literally means "pillow." Sunshine explains the idea beautifully: before you invite the audience into the dream world of the story, you first put their head on the pillow.

@youtube

That idea lodged itself permanently in my brain. The opening is not merely exposition. It is not throat-clearing. It is the moment when the storyteller and the audience negotiate reality. The performer says, in effect: come with me. And the audience decides whether to go.

Writers do exactly the same thing; we just do it with letters and a handful of symbols. But putting someone's head on the pillow does not mean promising them a pleasant dream. It means earning enough trust that they will follow you somewhere they might otherwise refuse to go.

Stay in the Room

I fell in love with James Baldwin in college, when I was introduced to "The Rockpile." What still gets me about that story is the moment after Roy gets hurt. Gabriel comes home looking for someone to blame, and it is not Roy, his own son, who takes the fall. It is Elizabeth first, then John, the stepson he has never claimed as his own. Baldwin never spells out the favoritism. He shows you who gets protected and who gets sacrificed, and lets the reader do the arithmetic. That refusal to flinch runs through everything of his I have read since: race, family, sexuality, religion, shame, violence, love, and belonging, all handled without sanding off the edges that made those subjects dangerous.

An empty chair beside a set table in a quiet kitchen at night.

The courage to say the hurtful or upsetting parts out loud is craft. It changes what you allow yourself to notice. It changes which details survive the draft. It changes how long you are willing to remain in an uncomfortable moment before escaping into abstraction.

I want that quality in my own writing. I want to write about what it means to exist beside other people. What it means to coexist. What it means to build a life in a world that routinely turns upside down.

I have never really lived in a world that felt permanently secure. There has always been some invisible trapdoor nearby: a job loss, a financial disaster, a social rupture, some event capable of changing the shape of everything.

And yet people survive, often because of other people. Family. Chosen family. Queer family. Friends. Communities assembled out of coincidence and stubbornness. Those are subjects worth staying in the room for. Those are the subjects worth remembering.

But writing about those relationships honestly means admitting that the people who hold us together can also hurt us, and that sometimes we are the ones who do the hurting. I cannot make everyone respectable and still expect them to feel alive.

A poetry professor of mine, Marc Hudson, once gave a lecture about the shadow. He explained it as the part of yourself you would prefer other people not see: the embarrassing thought, the ugly impulse, the desire that does not match the version of yourself you present to the world.

For a writer, the shadow is dangerous because writing has a nasty habit of revealing it. You sit down intending to write something safe and respectable, and suddenly a sentence appears that is much more honest than you intended. Then the internal censor arrives.

> *People will judge you for that. You cannot say that. What will they think you meant? What will they think of you?*

Learning to write means learning, at least temporarily, to shut that voice up. That's the voice that gives me slop: a respectable sentence where an honest one should have been.

You Either Write or You Edit

That censor does not clock out once the shadow work is done. It just changes jobs and starts calling itself an editor.

One of the most useful rules I learned for my own practice is simple: you either write or you edit. I need those to be different mental activities. Otherwise, I can spend an entire writing session making the first sentence increasingly defensible.

Drafting requires momentum; editing requires judgment. When I invite judgment into the room too early, the dream never has time to form.

There are all kinds of ways writers learn to disable the censor. Write without looking at the screen. Remove the backspace key. Write longhand. Set a timer and forbid yourself from revising anything until it rings. The technique almost does not matter. The point is to create a temporary environment in which the sentence is allowed to exist before it is evaluated.

Later, the editor can come back. They're useful. Necessary, even! Their job is not to make every dangerous sentence harmless, but to help me decide whether it is true, whether it belongs, and whether I have said it well. But the editor should not be standing over the writer's shoulder while the writer is trying to dream.

That does not mean every private thought belongs in public. It means letting the thought reach the draft before deciding what to do with it. Permission to write something is not an obligation to publish it.

I know my shadow pretty well now.

We are friends. He's earned me a fair amount of money.

That is not because everything hidden inside us is profound. Most of it is probably mundane, embarrassing, petty, or strange. But the shadow is where honesty lives before it has been domesticated.

Once you become comfortable going there, writing changes. You stop asking "Am I allowed to say this?" and turn to something more dangerous: Is this true?

Writing begins to feel less like manufacturing language and more like uncovering something that was already there. And when it works, when the rhythm catches and the reader enters that dream state with you, the rush is difficult to explain. You have taken marks on a page and temporarily altered another person's consciousness.

Say What You Actually Wanted to Say

So how do you establish the dream space in your own writing? There is no particular turn of phrase that will do it for you, and adding more description is not the same as giving a reader something to care about.

Make them care, and set a rhythm that keeps the pages turning. Pacing matters. Paragraph length matters. Give a thought enough room to develop. A short sentence needs longer ones around it if it is going to land. So does an uncomfortable truth: give the reader time to recognize what you have said before rushing past it.

Let the silence that follows matter.

This applies to fiction, essays, technical writing, speeches, emails, presentations, and almost every other form of written communication. It does not require the same intimacy in all of them.

An email does not need your most private confession. It may need a sentence as plain as "We are two weeks late because we underestimated the migration," rather than "Delivery timelines continue to evolve." The first gives the reader something they can understand and respond to. The second leaves them trying to work out what you are avoiding.

Good professional writing creates a dream space too. It establishes a shared reality: Here is the problem. Here is what is happening. Here is why it matters. Now come with me. We've got work to do.

The difficult part is learning to hear when the spell breaks. Sometimes the sentence is technically correct but emotionally false. Your censor interfered and wrote the safe version. Maybe you circled around the thing you actually wanted to say because the truth hurts.

When that happens, there is an exercise I like. I learned it from my professor, the novelist Joy Castro.

Write the scene. Then read it aloud. Listen to where the rhythm catches. Listen to where your voice becomes stiff. Listen for the sentences that feel like they were written by someone trying to sound like a writer.

Then rewrite it from scratch, but this time, say what you actually wanted to say.

That is the whole exercise. Write it. Read it aloud. Then tell the truth.

Put their head on the pillow.

And invite them into the dream.

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