

# Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life

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## Recommended Citation

Morgan, Virginia (2006) "Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 90: Iss. 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1283>

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# Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life

## **Abstract**

Book review of *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott.

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Journal of Applied Communications, Vol. 90, No. 2, 2006, 47-48 ©ACE

## ***Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life***

Anne Lamott

(Anchor Books, New York, 1995. 238 pages.

\$13.95, paperback, ISBN 0-385-48001-6)

On the advice of a friend, I decided to read Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*. The bookstore didn't have it on hand, but did have a copy of another book of hers, *Bird by Bird*, in the reference section. I bought it—and am glad I did.

I enjoyed Lamott's sense of humor and the storytelling style she used to instruct the reader. I laughed out loud, teared up in more than a few places, and felt slightly embarrassed in others. But throughout the book, I felt the truth of what she writes—both respect and compassion are necessary for genuineness in life and in writing. This is definitely not your typical reference book.

While the book is directed to would-be writers of fiction, and most of us don't typically write fiction for a living, Lamott offers useful tips all writers can use. One of her key lessons is to pay attention to your intuition. As she says, "Writing is about hypnotizing yourself into believing yourself, getting some work done, then unhypnotizing yourself and going over the material coldly" (p. 114).

Another point she makes is that you should observe everything and everyone around you and take notes on those observations. She describes the writer as "a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in 'The Farmer in the Dell' standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes" (p. 97). Apparently, some writers don't have to take notes on their world observations. But those of us whose memories were never that good can relate to her reaction to a writer friend's comment that a thought can't be important if you can't remember it until you get home.

And I felt about eight years old again, with something important to say that had suddenly hopped down one of the rabbit holes in my mind, while an adult nearby was saying priggishly, "Well! It must not have been very important then." (p. 137)

The lesson? Don't feel self-conscious about taking notes on what you see and hear as you go about your daily walk in the world. Excellent fodder for your stories can be found in those notes.

It is also quite necessary to develop some discipline about the act of writing so that something actually gets written. That's the hard part. The

author says her father urged her to “do it as you would do scales on the piano. . . . Do it as a debt of honor. And make a commitment to finishing things.” This book describes what it takes to get that done.

Part one focuses on writing: getting started, creating the first draft, completing short assignments, and developing the plot. While our writing may not need a plot, it does need a storyline. One of my favorite lines is from the chapter on dialogue: “You listen to how people really talk, and then learn little by little to take someone’s five-minute speech and make it one sentence, without losing anything” (p. 66). Just imagine a news story written that way.

Part two of this book describes how you can get into “The Writing Frame of Mind.” It isn’t easy, but Lamott provides some advice about how to prime the pump. Focus on things outside yourself. Find the core—ethical concepts about which you care passionately—and write about that.

Part three, “Help Along the Way,” addresses ways to remember ideas and inspirations that come to you in the oddest places (reserve space on those observation notes for your ideas and inspirations), talks about what to do if you don’t have details you need (ask someone who does have the details), and offers advice on letting others read your work (find someone who will read your finished drafts and give you honest critiques).

Part four is “Publication—and Other Reasons to Write.” Fame and instant success are nice dreams, but seldom happen, so Lamott strongly suggests that you consider other reasons for writing. For instance, you can write something as a present to another person. If you think about it, you can see that the writing we do can indeed be a present—a present to those people who need that information to improve their lives.

So, what in the world does the title of this book have to do with its content? The title comes from an episode Lamott shares from her childhood. Her 10-year-old brother had been assigned a book report on birds. He was given three months to complete the report, but he had procrastinated until the night before it was due. Overwhelmed at the huge task before him, he sat at the table staring at the pile of books he had accumulated. His sympathetic father put his arm around him and offered this advice: “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.”

With this book in hand, I might be tempted to start a writing habit, one short assignment at a time.

### **About the Reviewer**

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