



Mark My Words

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Occasionally there appears a book so simple and brilliant that one can only wonder why someone else didn't think of it earlier. MARK MY WORDS: MARK TWAIN ON WRITING is such a book. At once savagely witty and eminently practical, it collects extracts from Mark Twain's thoughts on writing and publishing.

Although Mark Twain has been dead since 1910, his books are as popular as they have ever been and they will probably never fade. Of the many reasons why this is true, one of the strongest is the fact that the man knew how to write, making it a joy simply to read his words. Possessing a deep love for English, he made a life-long study of the language's proper use. In contrast to many humorists of his time, he shunned the easy trick of getting laughs by deliberately distorting language. Instead he found humor in realism and gave his narrators and characters language that was authentic enough to ensure their immortality.

Like most great writers, Mark Twain made writing look easy; however, he worked hard at it and regarded it as a craft demanding constant effort. He was gifted with an exceptional ear for dialect and had an equally sharp eye for grammar and syntax and especially for words themselves. "The difference between the ALMOST-right word and the RIGHT word," he once wrote, "is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." His own eccentric punctuation he valued so much that when he learned that a proofreader was "improving" it on a manuscript, he telegraphed orders to have the man shot "without giving him time to pray." So, at least, he claimed.

Few writers can hope to emulate genius of the caliber of a Mark Twain, but every writer can learn a great deal about technique from him. Mark Twain himself never wrote a book on writing, but he said enough on the subject to enable the brilliant journalist Mark Dawidziak to put such a book together for him. The result is the delightful collection of tips and quips in MARK MY WORDS. It will not teach anyone about word-processing or contract negotiating, but does offer solid and witty advice on constructing powerful prose, finding ones own voice, dealing (in nonlethal ways) with proofreaders, and a dozen other practical matters.

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