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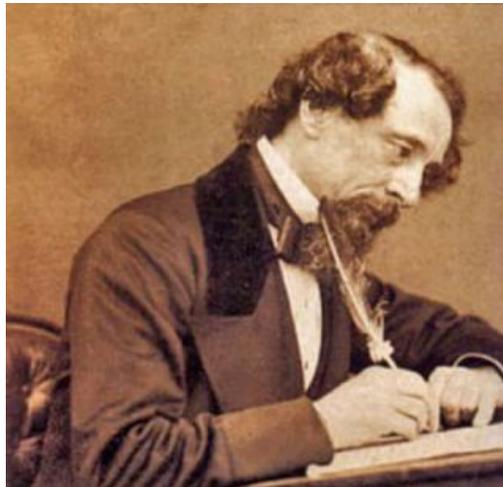
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The Storytelling Animal

# Crappy First Drafts of Great Books

Good books begin as bad drafts.

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Charles Dickens at work

When I teach freshman writing, my first job is to destroy my students' illusions. TV shows and films give them the dangerous idea that great authors just wait to get inspired, and then genius pours out of their pens in an

unstoppable flood. The reality is different. Writers—especially the great ones—mostly sit at desks feeling rotten, struggling to write crumpled sentences that they can smooth into something acceptable. (This may be part of the reason that writers have higher rates of substance abuse, depression, and suicide). The science fiction writer Kurt Vonnegut wrote hilarious, poignant novels like *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Galapagos*. But most days he didn't feel like a poignant genius. "When I write," Vonnegut said, "I feel like an armless, legless man with a crayon in his mouth."

So the next time you are struggling with your own writing—if only in an important email or Facebook post—recall this selection of pages from the drafts of great novels. Take solace in the fact that almost all the stories you love began as bad first drafts. And ask yourself, "If writing is a struggle for immortals like Proust and Dickens, why should it be different for me?"

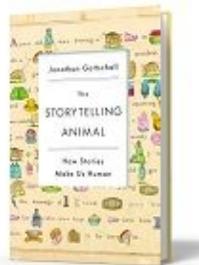




From draft of Shirley Hazzard's "The Great Fire"

Marston Leith was sitting in a train, always with old clothes - like faded  
~~XXXXXX~~ From the finality of sounds - the metallic ~~XXXXXX~~ the ~~XXXXXX~~  
~~XXXXXX~~ cries, the boots and hisses - ~~XXXXXX~~ it was clear they were starting.  
 He had a seat, comfortable ~~XXXXXX~~ by a window from which presently he would  
 see that the rain had stopped ~~XXXXXX~~ suburbs of Tokyo. ~~XXXXXX~~  
 Meanwhile he was looking at a book, not reading but looking at the  
 photograph of his father on the back of the jacket.  
 It was ~~XXXXXX~~ at his desk: ~~XXXXXX~~  
 left, on the blotter, his right hand ~~XXXXXX~~ on his knee. Lean ~~XXXXXX~~  
 face, impatient eyes, and unrevealing mouth. Blond hair, ~~XXXXXX~~  
 striped shirt, a loosely knotted dark tie, a ribbed cardigan.  
 Marston was looking, however, at the desk, of which the photograph gave a  
 detailed view and which ~~XXXXXX~~ clues than he the ~~XXXXXX~~ resistant man.  
 It was a ~~XXXXXX~~ top section of small  
 shelves and drawers. Of teak, as Marston knew; and bought at Bristol  
 in the 1890s by Oliver Leith's father. The desk from Bristol.  
 Individually ~~XXXXXX~~ from his father's moods and  
 Saxon part of fittings ~~XXXXXX~~ and of family life/ ~~XXXXXX~~  
 even seeming, to the child Marston, to  
 create them so much so that he had  
 never examined the desk before as a revelation. It had ~~XXXXXX~~  
 a removal to Japan, a ~~XXXXXX~~ dripping morning ~~XXXXXX~~ in, ~~XXXXXX~~  
 all the sounds, human and otherwise, of a language not his own,  
 to bring the desk ~~XXXXXX~~  
 a bowl of blown roses was suspiciously prominent, as if seized  
 by the photographer from a nearby table and placed inconveniently near  
 the writer's hand; Marston had never ~~XXXXXX~~ before  
 There was no telephone, no clock, ~~XXXXXX~~  
 desk from Bristol. ~~XXXXXX~~ Three or four typed pages ~~XXXXXX~~ on the  
 blotter, and a ~~XXXXXX~~ couple ~~XXXXXX~~ to one side, a small pile of  
 books, whose titles ~~XXXXXX~~ barely he distinguished, ~~XXXXXX~~  
 it was ~~XXXXXX~~ those of ~~XXXXXX~~ Leith's books in ~~XXXXXX~~ translations:  
 "Même en Grand Bretagne", "Anche in Bratagna", "Aun en Bratagna".  
 Above, ~~XXXXXX~~ on the shelves, a ~~XXXXXX~~ moderate ~~XXXXXX~~ and objects;  
 Marston Leith recognised an old edition of Newton's OPTICS, a set of  
 Chapman, ~~XXXXXX~~ Hardy's WINTER WORDS, Doughty's

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 Stories Make Us Human.**



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