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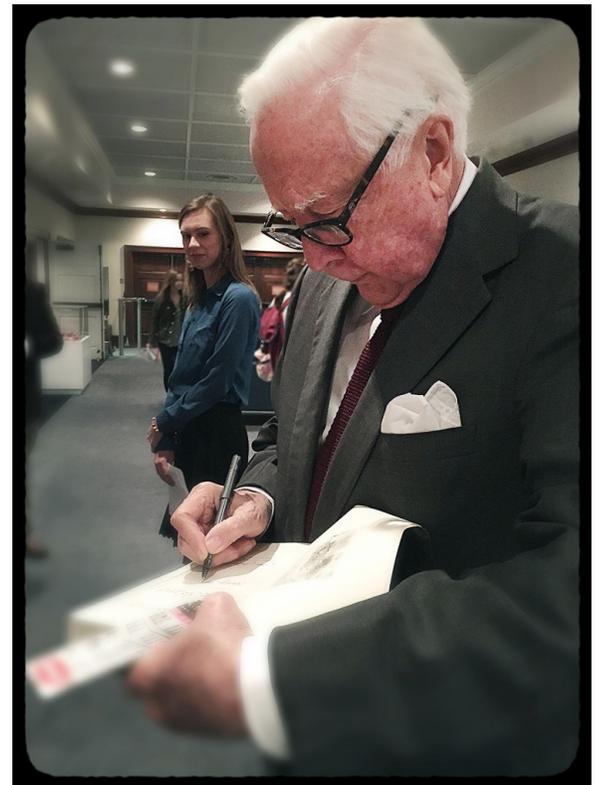
David McCullough: On Writing Well

Posted on [November 20, 2015](#) by [Denise Gee](#)

Often called “America’s greatest living historian,” [David McCullough](#) visited SMU Nov. 18 not only to speak with a crowd of students, faculty and staff, but also to accept this year’s [Medal of Freedom](#) presented by the John Goodwin Tower Center for Political Studies.

During an afternoon Q&A-style forum, McCullough shared numerous nuggets of wisdom, but his writing advice (geared to novices and professionals) was particularly inspiring:

- “Write for the ear as well as the eye. Read it out loud and you’ll immediately ‘hear’ what’s wrong with it. My wife, Rosalee — my editor-in-chief for 50 years — is my partner for that technique.”
- “The ultimate aid to navigation for writers is William Strunk & E.B. White’s book, [The Elements of Style](#). First published in 1920, “It’s as good today as it ever was. It’s a must-read for writers, who should refer to it time and again.”
- “Writing doesn’t get easier as you get older. It gets more difficult. Your standards get higher.”
- “Challenge yourself by reading ‘up.’ Harry Truman, for example, read Latin for pleasure.”
- “I think all writers should take a drawing or painting class to learn how to paint with words. As Charles Dickens said, ‘Make me see.’ I try to make you see what’s happening and smell it and hear it. I want you to know what they had for dinner. I want you to know how long it took to walk from where to where.”
- McCullough is looking forward to the [American Writers Museum](#) opening in Chicago in 2017. “Up to now, Dublin, Ireland, has been the only other place with something similar. But you’d think that with all of America’s great writers, we wouldn’t still be waiting for something like that.”
- McCullough still uses a 1960s-era typewriter. Why? “Because I can’t push a button and erase a month’s worth of work.”



Esteemed historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer David McCullough captivated an SMU crowd Nov. 18, 2015.