

# How to Write Like... Mark Twain

If you want to write like a particular person it is good to study their work, but it is even better to study the people that influenced them. Mark Twain is one of America's most famous writers and has been given credit for being the first world class writer who was distinctly American. Much of his inspiration was drawn from his childhood on the frontier of Missouri. He has cited Cervantes as an important author to him and was helped along in his writing career by contemporaries such as William Dean Howells. Learn to write like Twain by studying excerpts from writers and sources he drew inspiration from:

**William Dean Howells:** Howells was a contemporary of Mark Twain and the occasional editor of his work. The majority of Howells' writing was in criticism where he rejected romanticism in fiction and advocated simple truth and sincerity. Below he criticizes the British literature of his time.

"Doubtless the ideal of those poor islanders will be finally changed. If the truth could become a fad it would be accepted by all their 'smart people,' but truth is something rather too large for that; and we must await the gradual advance of civilization among them. Then they will see that their criticism has misled them; and that it is to this false guide they owe, not precisely the decline of fiction among them, but its continued debasement as an art."

-*Criticism and Fiction* (1891)

**New Orleans Times-Democrat:** Below is an article from 1882 written about a rescue mission through the Mississippi Valley after a massive flood. Mark Twain had been a reporter in San Francisco and Nevada before writing novels.

"One does not appreciate the sight of earth until he has travelled through a flood. At sea one does not expect or look for it, but here, with fluttering leaves, shadowy forest aisles, house-tops barely visible, it is expected. In fact a grave-yard, if the mounds were visible, would be appreciated. The river here is known only because there is an opening in the trees, and that is all."

**Miguel De Cervantes:** *Don Quixote* is the most famous and only successful book Cervantes wrote. In it he aimed to mock the outdated and unrealistic ideas of chivalry that were common in the literature of his time. The same romantic ideas that Cervantes criticized became popular again in the literature of Mark Twain's time and he attacked them in a similar fashion.

"'Take care, your worship' Said Sancho; 'Those things over there are not giants but windmills. and what seem to be their arms are the sails, which are whirled round in the wind and make the millstone turn.'"

'It is quite clear,' replied Don Quixote, 'that you are not experienced in this matter of adventures. They are giants, and if you are afraid, go away and say your prayers, whilst I advance and engage them in fierce and unequal battle.'

As he spoke, he dug his spurs into his steed Rocinante, paying no attention to his squire's shouted warning that beyond all doubt they were windmills and no giants he was advancing to attack."

-*Don Quixote* (1615)

★ On the next sheet of paper, make a "collage passage" by rearranging pieces of each excerpt above into a new paragraph. Add a few words of your own to link phrases together and you'll find you have a new passage that resembles Twain's work.

collage passage: