

If you think writing is hard, then you must be doing it wrong  
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People ask me how many books, stories, poems, and essays I've written. I reply that I don't know! It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is writing the next one.

Most writers already know almost everything in this paper. Maybe all that is needed is a conscious acknowledgement.

Anyway, let's get started.

I all too often hear the lament that writing is hard.

Why is it hard?

It's the RULES. Worst of all, They're someone else's rules!

Remember how much fun you had as a kid? You could run with scissors, play in a creek, squish mud between your toes, come home with grass stains or rips in your jeans, and melt crayons on the sidewalk. Then Mom laid down the law!

Suddenly there were rules. and the fun was gone.

It's the same with writing. It's not the writing that's hard. It's the rules.

In truth, there are no rules; there is only convention as swept along by the tide of popularity. Rules imposed by the self-important include limiting manuscripts to less than 100,000 words, balancing dialogue with narrative, including conflict in the first paragraph, eliminating paragraphs that don't advance the story, not using filtering words, maintaining the same POV, "Show, don't Tell," and a wide variety of other junk. Classics such as *Two Years Before the Mast*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Pride and Prejudice* would never have been published under these rules.

I especially hate the one about eliminating paragraphs that don't advance the story. Personally, I find those useless paragraphs to be the very best place for character development.

One story, here. While in one writers' group where these rules were being bandied about in the form of constructive criticism, I decided that I would write an entire short story using nothing but dialogue. When it was finished, I realized that I had just written a one-act play.

And so, let us begin. The first thing to do is to lay out some rules so that we can better interpret the rules. I know that sounds odd, but I used to write for the government. What I meant was that we need to have *our* rules so that we can deal with the rules set out by others.

Rule One. Acknowledge that there are different types of writing: from commercial (copy or magazine) to creative art.

Journalism is somewhere in there, but it's hard to say where. And there are different levels of writing ranging from children's stories to what I call fifty shades of bad grammar. With different types and levels of writing, there are different rules.

Let's look.

At the far artistic end of the spectrum, there are no rules. You can squish all the literary muck between your toes that you can find. But not every reader will like what you write. According to your agent or your publisher, your literary baby might not be 'marketable.'

I don't care.

And that's why writing is easy.

I don't care about other people's rules or what other people think of my art.

But that's me and that's because I work at the art end of the spectrum. And so. the first question to ask yourself is, "Who do you write for?" – or more properly, "For whom do you write?" Your answer will define both your self-imposed rules and the rules imposed upon you by others.

Rule Two. Maintain control over your work. You might need to follow someone else's rules. but you can still be in control. At the far commercial end of the spectrum, this may seem impossible, but it's not. It's only a bit harder. How you stay in control will be up to you and will reflect the relationship that you may or may not have with the person who is imposing rules on your work. Each situation is different.

None of us are perfect and it is often easier to find fault with the work of others than in our own work. As a result, we need to learn how to take criticisms.

The most important sub-rule is to "never take advice from a writer who is not as good a writer as you are."

The keyword in that sentence is *take*. Listen to everyone, but don't blindly take advice from anyone. Consider the comments of others as a *tell* (as a poker tell), not as advice. Let the comment reveal the real problem, not the one perceived by the reviewer.

I often find that the value of a criticism is learning that I failed to take the reader where I wanted to take him in accordance with the flow of my story. The criticism will usually be in the form of "You should ..." and will often serve to change the direction of the flow of the story. Listen – then change the text to more elegantly take the reader where you wanted to go in the first place.

Another critically important sub-rule is that comments from readers are more valuable than comments from other writers. Other writers, and editors, usually have a strong tendency to rewrite your story while a reader most often will either enjoy it or not enjoy it.

Rule Three. Every piece of writing shares one common element. At each end of the spectrum and everywhere in between, each story must accomplish what I call the flow or the “here to there.”

Here to there: In every story it is the author’s job to take the reader and, using nothing but words, put the reader into a particular place from which to begin his tale. The place might be a situation, an emotion, a thought, an issue, or any of a dozen other ‘places.’ From that place, the writer takes the reader on a trip through paragraphs and sentences to another place. Sometimes that other place is an opinion, another emotion, a deeper understanding of something, or just a smile.

This is what English Literature professors will want to refer to as the arc of a story. I like to call it the “flow” because of the connotations of pace, liquidity, smoothness or choppiness, clarity or cloudiness, and even changes from one to another.

In each segment of the story, the reader is carried along by the stream created by the writer.

Consider that writing comes in all shapes and sizes: poetry, essays, book reports, term papers, scientific papers, magazine articles, exposés, short stories, plays, novellas, novels, serials, and even letters. That’s right. Even in a letter, the journey outlined above is an appropriate and practical structure.

Rule Four. Media matters. We, as writers, are often asked to read our work aloud at some critique group. One day, a fellow writer introduced his work with the complaint that he was having a hard time with his opening sentence. I was fortunate enough to sit next to him and was able to read the copy as he was reading aloud. At the end of the reading, no one in the room had a problem with his first sentence – no one except me and him. I was reading, not listening, and the problem was obvious. His first sentence had no verb - and he couldn’t see it.

The spoken word impacts us as readers or listeners differently than the words on paper. Oddly, words on a screen have a similar dissimilar effect on the reader. An editor will often change the structure of a sentence in print, and then want to change it back when viewed on the screen, as in a nook book.

As a result, if I am writing for print or for an audible book, the text will be different. If my audible book is to be read by one person or by two or three character-actors, the text will once again be different. The truth is that audible books are more closely aligned with theatre than with literature.

The Value of a Pen Name. I include this under the category of media because a pen name also changes the perceptions of the reader. I don’t need to dwell on this. Just imagine how you would react if you learned that Sean Hannity has written a novel in the Romance-Mystery genre.

Rule Five. Use proper grammar.

Referring back to my friend without a verb, his opening sentence was, in fact, a sentence fragment.

I recently conducted an unofficial poll on four different facebook pages which cater to writers. I posted a question about the use of incomplete sentences. I also posed it in person to four different writers' groups.

The vast majority of the 'less-than-famous' writers assured me that it was perfectly alright to use incomplete sentences as long as the meaning was understood.

That sort of logic disturbs me.

My personal position, and that held by the other dissenting literary artists was that sentence fragments are perfectly acceptable in dialogue, and almost totally unacceptable in the narrative. The exception that leads to my use of the word *almost* in the prior sentence is when the story is being narrated in the first person [fourth wall] by the main character or the character holding the POV.

English is a living language. I must concede that point, but let's not allow it to outlive its usefulness. Without proper grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so forth, we would have a difficult time comprehending the works of Socrates. And it is the most marvelous advantage of the human species that we can communicate not only amongst each other and over distance, using such vehicles as the telephone and email, but we can communicate through time itself.

Also in this segment of the rulebook is the need to understand the difference between a synonym and a word properly used. All synonyms have nuanced differences in meaning. Find the correct word and use it. Doing so shall expand the vocabulary of the writer and the reader. Of course, the level of the intended consumer will serve to mollify this admonition to some degree.

My most recent observation on the erosion of the language is the apparent loss of the WHO (Dr. Seuss would be sad, indeed). Listen to radio announcers and you will hear my point better than I could ever make it. Many announcers substitute a 'that' for a 'who.'

Similarly, there's lots of times when ... Did you catch that? *There's* instead of *There're* or *There are*?

Oh, wait. I need to rewrite that incomplete sentence as, "I wrote *There's* instead of *There're* or *There are*?"

Most irritating.

Dadgum it. I did it again.

Rule Six. Challenge yourself.

One way to improve your writing is to step outside your comfort zone. Set out challenges and goals that frighten you or that challenge your skill-set. One of these is

an old game that my mother used to play with us back in the day before color television.

In the game, *Three Minutes*, each player is given a slip of paper and asked to write a topic on it. Some which I recall were “The sewer system in Moscow,” and “The manufacture of thumb tacks.” The point is that they can be anything. These papers are collected and put in a jar. In turn, each player selects a piece of paper and has 30 seconds to gather his thoughts. At that time, the clock and the story begin. The player must tell a story about the topic which he drew. It must last at least three minutes. Make up your own prizes and penalties.

The second game,

Progressive Story-telling, can be verbal or it can be a written game. In either instance, the rules are the same. The players are arranged in some sort of a sequence. The sequence can be alphabetical by name, around the room in a particular direction, or alternating between boy and girl, or by height, weight, or eye color. It doesn't matter. As long as the next person knows that he will be the next person to speak. The first person begins a story. Make it up. “Sam, the poor dog, was in love with the poodle down the street.....” That story-teller speaks for three minutes (or two or four, as you wish) and when the timer goes off, he must stop, even in mid sentence. The next story-teller picks up the story and continues. If written, the rules are the same, passing a pad of paper around the room instead of telling the story orally. Of course, at the end of this variety, someone ought to read the entire story at the end.

The next one I offer is often rather enlightening. We often find that we will write from the perspective of a gender not our own.

Take a story and write it twice: once from the male perspective and once from the female perspective. We've probably all done that. Now, here's the challenge. As a man, I once wrote a story from the POV of a woman. It was educational. The critique was, “You told the story from a woman's POV – now tell the story as a woman would tell it.”

Those are two unbelievably different challenges. Make a note about the missing quotation mark and how hard it is to edit your own work.

You can do the same with tenses. Write the same story in a variety of different tenses. Doing so may not alter the POV or tense of the next story you write, but it will broaden your skill-set.

These exercises will also help you find that special place when no more editing is needed. In the previous two exercises, you will have written the same story in several different ways. At some point, it will dawn on you that there is no perfect presentation of your story – there are only different ones.

I have one friend who has edited her story, by her own admission, more than thirty times. For her, writing is indeed quite hard.

Some tools you may find useful.

Define Your Players: Before I begin writing, I always take the time to create a full biographical sketch of my players. Each character has a birthday, is described physically (height, weight, fitness, hair color, eye color), emotionally (character, personality, tender spots, strong points), and intellectually (level of education, degree received, work experience, and so on). I find a spreadsheet to be the most effective organizer. Almost never are all of these traits mentioned in the story I write. Defining the character *for me*, however, makes that character more real *to me*, and thence allows me to relate the actions, thoughts, feelings, and deductions in a more complete and integrated manner.

Outlines: Everyone has heard about the benefits of using an outline. When writing a mystery, however, I recommend making two outlines. I use a spreadsheet for this to help me keep track. In a mystery, there are really two stories. When the killer is a serial killer, there are more. Each murder has a timeline and therefore has an outline. There is also the outline of what happens in the book. The two are separate because the timeline of how the crime is solved is not the same as the timeline of how the crime was committed. In one book that I wrote, I ended up with six outlines. By using a spreadsheet and multiple outlines, evidence can be plucked from the commission of the crime and made known to the solver of said crime without losing track and without giving away the identity of the criminal.

The Multiple Outline can easily be then merged into the chapter-by-chapter synopsis requested by upper-tier publishers.

Location: Put yourself in a place where you can eliminate or avoid distractions – especially when editing. I compose at home and edit in the early afternoon down at the VFW.

The change in location helps me see mistakes that I wouldn't see if I were in the same place.

Interrupted Creativity: Not many of us can write an entire novel in one sitting. I find it very productive to read my last chapter before I start writing the next one. Doing so puts my head back into the story. When composing, especially when unable to complete the first draft during any particular session, I make a habit of adding notes about future events. I usually type these at the end of the page to be erased as I get to them. I do that because the outline I have is not cast in stone. It, as well as the notes I make, change frequently - because my character often takes control of the story. I can't tell a story in which a well-developed character suddenly becomes someone else! Well, I could. But that's not the point.

Let The Character Tell You The Story: If I have well defined characters, sometimes it can be rather fun to put one or two of them into a situation and let them run the story line. No outline is needed, but I do often find myself guiding them to an ending. The reality is that a well-defined character won't want to do something that the author wants him to do, if doing so is out of character. If you, the writer, force it, you screw up the story.

Thinking: I like for my characters to think in italics. Once the style is established, I can abandon the tiresome use of the tagline: "she thought."

That's it. Those are my rules.

Remember when I wrote that you shouldn't take advice from anyone who's not a better writer than you are? Here's the test.

Don't do anything I said until you go buy one of my books, read it, and decide for yourself whether or not my advice is worth a hill of beans.

Oh, and don't use clichés - except when called for.

Oh, yeah. I've attached an appendix.

Appendix: A smattering of what appears to be what are called "filtering words" – Or, what a crock of taboo-scat.

As noted earlier, each of these words are thought to have specific meanings, and I assume that each could be believed by some to be quite useful within the proper context. At least, that's how it seems to me.

Assumed

Heard

Saw

Believed

Looked

Seemed

Could

Noted

Sounded

Decided

Noticed

Thought

Felt

Realized

Watched

Wondered