

## *Unlearn to Write*

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Those mornings when I sit at my desk and no words come, when the draft staggers and stumbles to a halt, or I read what I have written with shame and disgust and punch "Delete," I often find I have been following the rules drilled into my skull by Miss Leavitt, the high school teacher I had in the eleventh and twelfth grade.

They were the rules I had first been taught in elementary school, retaught in junior high school, and the first two years in high school. They were absolute, unquestioned, always followed by the writers we studied. When I wrote outside of class, I often broke the rules or simply ignored them, but they sounded so certain, so logical, so authoritative—pun intended—that years later, like a forest fire that travels underground and suddenly bursts out unexpectedly, I find I am following one or more of them. I have to stop and once more unlearn the rules guaranteed to produce ineffective and graceless writing.

My teachers were well intentioned but they were readers who did not write themselves.

Later in this chapter you will be introduced to a process that published writers use to write and that you will be able to adjust to your way of thinking, your experience with writing, and to the writing task itself. But first you—and I—have to unlearn to write.

It might be fun for you to stop right now and write down the absolute rules you have been taught about writing to see if they match what I was taught and had to unlearn.

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### **Writing Assignment**

Stop reading here and do some writing—freewriting, so don't worry about grammar or spelling. It's more important that you get some ideas down on the page and less important that those ideas look or sound pretty. Strive for about 1/2 page per question, although many of you will likely have much more to say about these topics. It's to your benefit to keep writing if you have the urge to. Go with the flow.

1. Make a list of all of the things you know about good writing and/or all of the things that good writers do to create good writing. What have you learned over the years about good writing?
2. Make another list about bad writing. What is bad writing? What qualities does bad writing have? What is it that writers do (or don't do) to create bad writing?

## What I Had to Unlearn

### I. KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY BEFORE YOU SAY IT

When I wrote in school, the teacher would march up and down the aisles repeating, "Know what you want to say before you say it." Most of the time she would require that we write a thesis statement at the top of the page, telling what the writing we hadn't yet done would say.

Writers are writers, however, because the act of writing is a voyage into the unknown; it's an adventure in discovering what you know, but didn't know you knew; in connecting in ways you haven't connected what you know before; in discovering what you need to know.

Once in a while I do know what I am going to say or have an assignment that limits discovery. In those cases I have to *unknow* to find my own way to the predicted meaning. The best writing is traitor to intent. It grows, line by line, from a terrifying emptiness when there is no purpose, no topic, no clear meaning.

Writers write and discover what they have to say as drafts. It is the writing, not the writer that speaks. Novelist and short story writer Donald Barthelme explains:

Writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how.

We have all heard novelists testify to the fact that, beginning a new book, they are utterly baffled as to how to proceed, what should be written and how it might be written, even though they've done a dozen. At best there's a slender intuition, not much greater than an itch. Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, rather because it wishes to be art. However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas we are looking for the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken.

People ask, "Where do you get your ideas?" I answer, "I don't have ideas." I am terrified of ideas. I may have a shard of ancient Indian pottery, a fragment of bone that may be dog or dinosaur, a burr under the saddle, an answer that has not yet met its question, a contradiction to a certain belief, a fragment of language that contains a tension, a hint that there is an as-yet unseen world around the next turn in the road that I must explore. As Graham Greene said, "The novel is an unknown man and I have to find him."

When I am lucky, I don't even have that. I have a panic nothingness and I start to describe something that I caught in the corner of my eye, not knowing I saw it, and as I write the barely remembered scene becomes clearer—draft by draft—the way blank photographic paper slowly reveals its image in a tray of developer.

I have the world—memory and vision—and words. That is enough. I write and what I find myself saying reveals what I have to say.

## 2. FORM COMES BEFORE CONTENT

My teacher would assign the form—a literary essay, a personal essay, an argument before the topic. Now I know the form should grow organically as the writer writes to discover what to say and how to say it. The blueprint for an argument may come from a textbook as a blueprint for a bridge comes from a textbook on building bridges, but it must be adapted to the width of the river, the current, the makeup of the banks and the river bottom, the traffic it will bear. The form of the argument should grow according to the facts on both sides, the proponent and opposition, the place the case is being argued and the audience. The argument evolves as the writer gathers the facts and anticipates the reader's doubts and questions.

Writers should not build a form and then pour concrete into it, but write and then see what develops. In school we build walls between fiction and nonfiction, narrative and exposition, poetry and argument, but the writer breaks down those walls using dialogue and scene in nonfiction, argument and logic in fiction.

## 3. CORRECT SPELLING, GRAMMAR, MECHANICS ARE ESSENTIAL IN THE FIRST DRAFT

Ernest Hemingway said, "Prose is architecture not interior decoration." It is important for the accurate communication of meaning to follow the traditions of language on the final draft. They are the conventions reader and writer share. Most of the time, in fact, we will follow these conventions, but if we concentrate on them while writing, our language becomes stiff and meaningless.

I am a terrible speller. I use a bad speller's dictionary, a word list book, my computer spell check, and my wife to correct my spelling before I submit a draft to an editor, but if I stop to spell well as I write, I may lose the river of thought that is carrying me towards meaning.

The same is true of grammar and punctuation. In fact, if I am writing what I have not written before, my language often becomes awkward as I struggle to find what I want to say and then how to make it clear to me and then my reader. In fact, the breakthrough into a new meaning often comes when the syntax collapses and I find myself saying badly what I will later make clear.

## 4. LONG IS BETTER THAN SHORT

My teachers had good reason to teach us vocabulary through the grades, introducing us to longer and more complex words. They had to help us escape the limitation of brief subject-verb-object sentences, introducing clauses and complex

sentence structures. The same thing was true of paragraphs and beyond. The unintended message was that longer is better and, in fact, those students who used big multisyllabic words, long mountain trails of sentences, huge overpacked paragraphs, page upon page saying what could have been said in a few words were rewarded with praise and A's.

When these students, partly because they have gotten such good grades, try to become writers, they discover that short is better than long. Writers use the shortest words, shortest sentences, and shortest paragraphs they can. Since the ideas they have to communicate are often complicated, the shortest words that contain the appropriate meaning may be long ones and the shortest sentences may be full of clauses.

#### 5. DON'T WRITE AS YOU SPEAK

I was taught NOT to write as I spoke. I was instructed to follow the writing style of the previous century and write in a formal manner. Speech and writing were taught to me as separate subjects by different teachers. We live, however, in an informal, dress-down age. We appreciate writing that gives the illusion of speech, good writing as conversation. Of course it isn't realistic—uh—it isn't like—you know—uh—what I sorta, you know—uh—mean.

Graceful and effective writing today sounds like idealized speech, flowing naturally toward meaning. Readers want to hear the individual voice of the writer, the writer's way of speaking tuned to the meaning of what is being said and the audience to which it is aimed.

I write aloud as most writers do, hearing what I am writing before I see it. I can write with the screen turned off. Try it yourself. You should be able to write as well or better than when it is turned on.

#### 6. ALWAYS OUTLINE FIRST

Not always. You can't draw a map of a country you have never visited. If you are using writing to explore a new territory, you probably can't write an outline until after the first draft, when it may be very helpful.

It depends, of course, on the form you are writing as well as your familiarity with the subject. In writing this edition of *Write to Learn*, my editor and I had to agree on an outline. But even then the outline is not the rigid plan I was taught in high school, but a sketch. Later, I will introduce ways to outline, but it does not have to come before the first draft.

#### 7. THE FIRST DRAFT SHOULD BE THE LAST DRAFT

Sometimes that does happen. I have been writing a weekly newspaper column for sixteen years. I know the form, the length, the audience, my persona, and

voice. Most of the time I revise and edit as I go along and when I finish, but last week the editor—who was right—demanded three major revisions. For years when I wrote magazine articles I wrote three drafts of each one and revised each draft ten times. I went through the article thirty times.

Most of the time I have to write a *discovery draft* to find out what I have to say, a *development draft* to fill out and document what I have discovered, and a *clarifying draft* to make it clear to myself and the reader.

In school, I was only required to rewrite when I wrote a bad paper. If I was singled out to rewrite it was because the teacher felt I had failed. The same was true when I started working on a newspaper, but when I graduated to magazines and books, the first thing I had to learn was to rewrite. Not just because my first drafts failed—and they did—but because it took many drafts to discover and communicate my subject. For writers, writing is rewriting and I learned to enjoy the craft of cutting, adding, and moving around so the subject became clear to me and, eventually, to my readers.

#### B. THERE IS ONE RIGHT WAY

I believed longer than I like to admit what my teachers seemed to believe: There is one right way. If I could find the one right word, the single right sentence, the only right paragraph, I would become a writer. What I have learned as a writer is that there are many wrong ways and many right ways. The way of the writer is selection and choice; the method, trial and error. Writing is an experimental science.

There are no rights and wrongs in writing. You can be absolutely correct and write badly, or you can write well, but not be correct according to the "rules."

The writer confronts—word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph—the demanding questions: Does it work? Does it advance the meaning? Does it fit within the context? Is it accurate? Is it graceful? Is it clear? These questions are principles of effective writing. They must be asked draft after draft.

James Thurber commanded, "Don't get it right, get it written."

When I fail, I go right back to first grade. Miss Kelly jams me in the wastebasket, my feet sticking out by my head like rabbit ears. I am humiliated. I despair. I want to quit but I have to remind myself that failure is essential. If I am not failing, I am not writing. I am repeating what I have said before—in the way I have said it before.

The wrong word leads to the right word, the broken syntax points toward the phrase that clarifies. Writing is not stenography. Writing is thinking, a process of trial-and-error experimentation in which failure reveals what we cannot yet say, but where the saying may lay hidden. Novelist John Fowles tells us, "Follow the accident, fear the fixed plan—that is the rule."

## 9. REVISION AND EDITING ARE THE SAME

In school I was told that when I finished a draft, I was to check the spelling, grammatical usage, and punctuation. Correctness was all.

As a writer I learned that writing was a search for a significant meaning and then communicating it. Correctness was the last part of the writing process, patting your hair in place, straightening your tie.

Revision is literally the process of re-seeing. When writers revise they reconsider the subject, the genre, the focus, its development, its voice. Writers revise first to discover and develop what they have to say and then to shape it so readers who have no interest in reading the message will read it.

Editing is the process of clarification. Writers go through the entire piece line by line, again and again, to make sure each detail is accurate, that every word or phrase that needs to be defined is, to cut what is unnecessary, to add what is necessary, to move words around to make the meaning clear, and to follow the conventions of language if they help the reader receive and understand the meaning.

## 10. SAY WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO SAY, SAY IT, SAY WHAT YOU'VE SAID

I can hear my teacher repeating this counsel again and again and again. She demanded an introduction, a repetitive body of prose, and a conclusion. It was once good advice, and in fact such an organization may be required in certain situations, in writing scientific papers, for example. But the general reader today does not have the patience to read the same thing three times.

In this book we will demonstrate the lede, or lead, that propels the reader right into the subject in the first paragraph, in the first sentences, in the first words. And the book will also show the conclusion that implies the meaning without insulting readers by telling them what to think or how to feel.

## 11. WRITE IN GENERALITIES FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE

Makes sense, but it doesn't work. Universal writing rises from the specific, the resonating detail that sparks emotions, memories, thoughts in the mind of the reader. As novelist and essayist James Carroll says:

The law of particularity forces fiction writers, poets, and dramatists to obsess over details, instances, and concrete images, while treating the experience of one or two characters as if it matters as much as the sum total experience of the entire human race. To writers, a moment in time, properly rendered, is worth all time—a single, vividly imagined place is worth the cosmos.

The more particular I am—writing of my Scots Baptist grandmother, for example—the more readers read the memories of their Russian Jewish, Irish

Catholic, Chinese Buddhist grandmothers. Accurate, resonating specifics makes readers read—and trust what they read.

## 12. TALENT IS RARE

Talent is common. I once wrote with a class of elementary students so talented I asked them how they were chosen. They had IQs between 80 and 85—and a teacher who respected the stories they had to tell and their potential to tell them. Every class I taught had students that were more talented than I was. I did not have a freshman English class that had a student who could not become a professional—if they worked at it. I have had students who have careers in writing and editing with verbal scores in the 300s on their SATs.

What most of my students did NOT have was the desire to be published and the work habits to make it possible. The distinguished short story writer Andre Dubus declares, “Talent is cheap. What matters is discipline.” Novelist E. M. Forster testifies, “The act of writing inspires me,” and Graham Greene says, “I have no talent. It’s just a question of working, of being willing to put in the time. . . . If one wants to write, one simply has to organize one’s life in a mass of little habits.”

## 13. EASY WRITING IS BAD WRITING

Writing should be easy. The cliché states, “easy writing makes hard reading.” Just the opposite. Hard, constipated writing makes difficult reading, writing that is not read. We make writing hard out of displaced virtue.

I work hard to make writing easy, remembering the times when the writing went well and repeating those attitudes and conditions.

## 14. STUDY WHAT IS PUBLISHED AND IMITATE IT

Wrong. It is logical, but what is being published can be reproduced by staff members or experienced freelancers. Editors are looking for the voices they haven’t yet heard telling the stories they don’t know exist in ways they have not yet imagined. As Doris Lessing says, “You have to remember that nobody ever wants a new writer. You have to create your own demand.”

How do you do that? By respecting your own vision of the world. Sandra Cisneros says it best:

Imagine yourself at your kitchen table, in your pajamas. Imagine one person you’d allow to see you that way, and write in the voice you’d use to that friend. Write about what makes you different.

I have found that all the things that made me strange—even frightening—to my family, my neighbors, my pastor and my church members, my teachers

and schoolmates, and continue to puzzle my wife and my children, colleagues and friends, and even myself are those things that I have to offer the world.

As my writer friend Chip Scanlan says, "Do the writing only you can do."

### 15. DON'T MAKE MISTAKES

Failure is essential to the writer. It is the failures that reveal the possibilities for good writing. We have to write badly to write well. Writers take risks, they take chances.

Be promiscuous—as a writer. Write in as many forms and voices for as many readers or publications as possible. Write what you know and what you need to know and what you will know only by writing. As Annie Dillard advises,

One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, like well water.

John Jerome says, "Perfect is the enemy of good."

### 16. YOU CAN'T TEACH WRITING

Of course you can. My students taught themselves to write better in my classes than they wrote before the class. Take instruction from the writer Ursula Le Guin:

If you want to be a tuba player you get a tuba, and some tuba music. And you ask the neighbors to move away or put cotton in their ears. And you probably get a tuba teacher, because there are a lot of objective rules and techniques to both written music and to tuba performance. And then you sit down and you play the tuba, every day, every week, every month, year after year, until you are good at playing the tuba; until you can—if you desire—play the truth on the tuba.

It is exactly the same with writing. You sit down, and you do it, and you do it, and you do it, until you have learned how to do it.