

Elmore Leonard: Using adverbs is a mortal sin

1 Never open a book with weather. If it's only to create atmosphere, and not a character's reaction to the weather, you don't want to go on too long. The reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people. There are exceptions. If you happen to be Barry Lopez, who has more ways than an Eskimo to describe ice and snow in his book *Arctic Dreams*, you can do all the weather reporting you want.

2 Avoid prologues: they can be annoying, especially a prologue following an introduction that comes after a foreword. But these are ordinarily found in non-fiction. A prologue in a novel is backstory, and you can drop it in anywhere you want. There is a prologue in John Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday*, but it's OK because a character in the book makes the point of what my rules are all about. He says: "I like a lot of talk in a book and I don't like to have nobody tell me what the guy that's talking looks like. I want to figure out what he looks like from the way he talks."

3 Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue. The line of dialogue belongs to the character; the verb is the writer sticking his nose in. But "said" is far less intrusive than "grumbled", "gasped", "cautioned", "lied". I once noticed Mary McCarthy ending a line of dialogue with "she asseverated" and had to stop reading and go to the dictionary.

4 Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said" ... he admonished gravely. To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange. I have a character in one of my books tell how she used to write historical romances "full of rape and adverbs".

5 Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose. If you have the knack of playing with exclamers the way Tom Wolfe does, you can throw them in by the handful.

6 Never use the words "suddenly" or "all hell broke loose". This rule doesn't require an explanation. I have noticed that writers who use "suddenly" tend to exercise less control in the application of exclamation points.

7 Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly. Once you start spelling words in dialogue phonetically and loading the page with apostrophes, you won't be able to stop. Notice the way Annie Proulx captures the flavour of Wyoming voices in her book of short stories *Close Range*.

8 Avoid detailed descriptions of characters, which Steinbeck covered. In Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants", what do the "American and the girl with him" look like? "She had taken off her hat and put it on the table." That's the only reference to a physical description in the story.

9 Don't go into great detail describing places and things, unless you're Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language. You don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.

10 Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip. Think of what you skip reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them.

My most important rule is one that sums up the 10: if it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

Diana Athill

1 Read it aloud to yourself because that's the only way to be sure the rhythms of the sentences are OK (prose rhythms are too complex and subtle to be thought out – they can be got right only by ear).

2 Cut (perhaps that should be CUT): only by having *no* inessential words can every essential word be made to count.

3 You don't always have to go so far as to murder your darlings – those turns of phrase or images of which you felt extra proud when they appeared on the page – but go back and look at them with *a very beady eye*. Almost always it turns out that they'd be better dead. (Not every little twinge of satisfaction is suspect – it's the ones which amount to a sort of smug glee you must watch out for.)

Margaret Atwood

- 1** Take a pencil to write with on aeroplanes. Pens leak. But if the pencil breaks, you can't sharpen it on the plane, because you can't take knives with you. Therefore: take two pencils.
- 2** If both pencils break, you can do a rough sharpening job with a nail file of the metal or glass type.
- 3** Take something to write on. Paper is good. In a pinch, pieces of wood or your arm will do.
- 4** If you're using a computer, always safeguard new text with a memory stick.
- 5** Do back exercises. Pain is distracting.
- 6** Hold the reader's attention. (This is likely to work better if you can hold your own.) But you don't know who the reader is, so it's like shooting fish with a slingshot in the dark. What fascinates A will bore the pants off B.
- 7** You most likely need a thesaurus, a rudimentary grammar book, and a grip on reality. This latter means: there's no free lunch. Writing is work. It's also gambling. You don't get a pension plan. Other people can help you a bit, but essentially you're on your own. Nobody is making you do this: you chose it, so don't whine.
- 8** You can never read your own book with the innocent anticipation that comes with that first delicious page of a new book, because you wrote the thing. You've been backstage. You've seen how the rabbits were smuggled into the hat. Therefore ask a reading friend or two to look at it before you give it to anyone in the publishing business. This friend should not be someone with whom you have a romantic relationship, unless you want to break up.
- 9** Don't sit down in the middle of the woods. If you're lost in the plot or blocked, retrace your steps to where you went wrong. Then take the other road. And/or change the person. Change the tense. Change the opening page.
- 10** Prayer might work. Or reading something else. Or a constant visualisation of the holy grail that is the finished, published version of your resplendent book.

Roddy Doyle

- 1** Do not place a photograph of your favourite author on your desk, especially if the author is one of the famous ones who committed suicide.
- 2** Do be kind to yourself. Fill pages as quickly as possible; double space, or write on every second line. Regard every new page as a small triumph –
- 3** Until you get to Page 50. Then calm down, and start worrying about the quality. Do feel anxiety – it's the job.
- 4** Do give the work a name as quickly as possible. Own it, and see it. Dickens knew *Bleak House* was going to be called *Bleak House* before he started writing it. The rest must have been easy.
- 5** Do restrict your browsing to a few websites a day. Don't go near the online bookies – unless it's research.
- 6** Do keep a thesaurus, but in the shed at the back of the garden or behind the fridge, somewhere that demands travel or effort. Chances are the words that come into your head will do fine, eg "horse", "ran", "said".
- 7** Do, occasionally, give in to temptation. Wash the kitchen floor, hang out the washing. It's research.
- 8** Do change your mind. Good ideas are often murdered by better ones. I was working on a novel about a band called the Partitions. Then I decided to call them the Commitments.
- 9** Do not search amazon.co.uk for the book you haven't written yet.
- 10** Do spend a few minutes a day working on the cover biog – "He divides his time between Kabul and Tierra del Fuego." But then get back to work.

Helen Dunmore

- 1** Finish the day's writing when you still want to continue.
- 2** Listen to what you have written. A dud rhythm in a passage of dialogue may show that you don't yet understand the characters well enough to write in their voices.
- 3** Read Keats's letters.
- 4** Reread, rewrite, reread, rewrite. If it still doesn't work, throw it away. It's a nice feeling, and you don't want to be cluttered with the corpses of poems and stories which have everything in them except the life they need.
- 5** Learn poems by heart.
- 6** Join professional organisations which advance the collective rights of authors.
- 7** A problem with a piece of writing often clarifies itself if you go for a long walk.
- 8** If you fear that taking care of your children and household will damage your writing, think of JG Ballard.
- 9** Don't worry about posterity – as Larkin (no sentimentalist) observed "What will survive of us is love".

Geoff Dyer

1 Never worry about the commercial possibilities of a project. That stuff is for agents and editors to fret over – or not. Conversation with my American publisher. Me: "I'm writing a book so boring, of such limited commercial appeal, that if you publish it, it will probably cost you your job." Publisher: "That's exactly what makes me want to stay in my job."

2 Don't write in public places. In the early 1990s I went to live in Paris. The usual writerly reasons: back then, if you were caught writing in a pub in England, you could get your head kicked in, whereas in Paris, *dans les cafés* . . . Since then I've developed an aversion to writing in public. I now think it should be done only in private, like any other lavatorial activity.

3 Don't be one of those writers who sentence themselves to a lifetime of sucking up to Nabokov.

4 If you use a computer, constantly refine and expand your autocorrect settings. The only reason I stay loyal to my piece-of-shit computer is that I have invested so much ingenuity into building one of the great autocorrect files in literary history. Perfectly formed and spelt words emerge from a few brief keystrokes: "Niet" becomes "Nietzsche", "phoy" becomes "photography" and so on. Genius!

5 Keep a diary. The biggest regret of my writing life is that I have never kept a journal or a diary.

6 Have regrets. They are fuel. On the page they flare into desire.

7 Have more than one idea on the go at any one time. If it's a choice between writing a book and doing nothing I will always choose the latter. It's only if I have an idea for two books that I choose one rather than the other. I always have to feel that I'm bunking off from *something*.

8 Beware of clichés. Not just the clichés that Martin Amis is at war with. There are clichés of response as well as expression. There are clichés of observation and of thought – even of conception. Many novels, even quite a few adequately written ones, are clichés of *form* which conform to clichés of expectation.

9 Do it every day. Make a habit of putting your observations into words and gradually this will become instinct. This is the most important rule of all and, naturally, I don't follow it.

10 Never ride a bike with the brakes on. If something is proving too difficult, give up and do something else. Try to live without resort to perseverance. But writing is all about perseverance. You've got to stick at it. In my 30s I used to go to the gym even though I hated it. The purpose of - going to the gym was to postpone the day when I would stop going. That's what writing is to me: a way of postponing the day when I won't do it any more, the day when I will sink into a depression so profound it will be indistinguishable from perfect bliss.

Anne Enright

1 The first 12 years are the worst.

2 The way to write a book is to actually *write* a book. A pen is useful, typing is also good. Keep putting words on the page.

3 Only bad writers think that their work is really good.

4 Description is hard. Remember that all description is an opinion about the world. Find a place to stand.

5 Write whatever way you like. Fiction is made of words on a page; reality is made of something else. It doesn't matter how "real" your story is, or how "made up": what matters is its necessity.

6 Try to be accurate about stuff.

7 Imagine that you are dying. If you had a terminal disease would you finish this book? Why not? The thing that annoys this 10-weeks-to-live self is the thing that is wrong with the book. So change it. Stop arguing with yourself. Change it. See? Easy. And no one had to die.

8 You can also do all that with whiskey.

9 Have fun.

10 Remember, if you sit at your desk for 15 or 20 years, every day, not counting weekends, it changes you. It just does. It may not improve your temper, but it fixes something else. It makes you more free.

Richard Ford

- 1** Marry somebody you love and who thinks you being a writer's a good idea.
- 2** Don't have children.
- 3** Don't read your reviews.
- 4** Don't write reviews. (Your judgment's always tainted.)
- 5** Don't have arguments with your wife in the morning, or late at night.
- 6** Don't drink and write at the same time.
- 7** Don't write letters to the editor. (No one cares.)
- 8** Don't wish ill on your colleagues.
- 9** Try to think of others' good luck as encouragement to yourself.
- 10** Don't take any shit if you can possibly help it.

Jonathan Franzen

- 1** The reader is a friend, not an adversary, not a spectator.
- 2** Fiction that isn't an author's personal adventure into the frightening or the unknown isn't worth writing for anything but money.
- 3** Never use the word "then" as a conjunction – we have "and" for this purpose. Substituting "then" is the lazy or tone-deaf writer's non-solution to the problem of too many "ands" on the page.
- 4** Write in the third person unless a really distinctive first-person voice offers itself irresistibly.
- 5** When information becomes free and universally accessible, voluminous research for a novel is devalued along with it.
- 6** The most purely autobiographical fiction requires pure invention. Nobody ever wrote a more autobiographical story than "The Metamorphosis".
- 7** You see more sitting still than chasing after.
- 8** It's doubtful that anyone with an internet connection at his workplace is writing good fiction.
- 9** Interesting verbs are seldom very interesting.
- 10** You have to love before you can be relentless.

Esther Freud

1 Cut out the metaphors and similes. In my first book I promised myself I wouldn't use any and I slipped up during a sunset in chapter 11. I still blush when I come across it.

2 A story needs rhythm. Read it aloud to yourself. If it doesn't spin a bit of magic, it's missing something.

3 Editing is everything. Cut until you can cut no more. What is left often springs into life.

4 Find your best time of the day for writing and write. Don't let anything else interfere. Afterwards it won't matter to you that the kitchen is a mess.

5 Don't wait for inspiration. Discipline is the key.

6 Trust your reader. Not everything needs to be explained. If you really know something, and breathe life into it, they'll know it too.

7 Never forget, even your own rules are there to be broken.

Neil Gaiman

1 Write.

2 Put one word after another. Find the right word, put it down.

3 Finish what you're writing. Whatever you have to do to finish it, finish it.

4 Put it aside. Read it pretending you've never read it before. Show it to friends whose opinion you respect and who like the kind of thing that this is.

5 Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.

6 Fix it. Remember that, sooner or later, before it ever reaches perfection, you will have to let it go and move on and start to write the next thing. Perfection is like chasing the horizon. Keep moving.

7 Laugh at your own jokes.

8 The main rule of writing is that if you do it with enough assurance and confidence, you're allowed to do whatever you like. (That may be a rule for life as well as for writing. But it's definitely true for writing.) So write your story as it needs to be written. Write it honestly, and tell it as best you can. I'm not sure that there are any other rules. Not ones that matter.

David Hare

- 1** Write only when you have something to say.
- 2** Never take advice from anyone with no investment in the outcome.
- 3** Style is the art of getting yourself out of the way, not putting yourself in it.
- 4** If nobody will put your play on, put it on yourself.
- 5** Jokes are like hands and feet for a painter. They may not be what you want to end up doing but you have to master them in the meanwhile.
- 6** Theatre primarily belongs to the young.
- 7** No one has ever achieved consistency as a screenwriter.
- 8** Never go to a TV personality festival masquerading as a literary festival.
- 9** Never complain of being misunderstood. You can choose to be understood, or you can choose not to.
- 10** The two most depressing words in the English language are "literary fiction".

PD James

1 Increase your word power. Words are the raw material of our craft. The greater your vocabulary the more effective your writing. We who write in English are fortunate to have the richest and most versatile language in the world. Respect it.

2 Read widely and with discrimination. Bad writing is contagious.

3 Don't just plan to write – write. It is only by writing, not dreaming about it, that we develop our own style.

4 Write what you need to write, not what is currently popular or what you think will sell.

5 Open your mind to new experiences, particularly to the study of other people. Nothing that happens to a writer – however happy, however tragic – is ever wasted.

AL Kennedy

- 1** Have humility. Older/more experienced/more convincing writers may offer rules and varieties of advice. Consider what they say. However, don't automatically give them charge of your brain, or anything else – they might be bitter, twisted, burned-out, manipulative, or just not very like you.
- 2** Have more humility. Remember you don't know the limits of your own abilities. Successful or not, if you keep pushing beyond yourself, you will enrich your own life – and maybe even please a few strangers.
- 3** Defend others. You can, of course, steal stories and attributes from family and friends, fill in filecards after lovemaking and so forth. It might be better to celebrate those you love – and love itself – by writing in such a way that everyone keeps their privacy and dignity intact.
- 4** Defend your work. Organisations, institutions and individuals will often think they know best about your work – especially if they are paying you. When you genuinely believe their decisions would damage your work – walk away. Run away. The money doesn't matter that much.
- 5** Defend yourself. Find out what keeps you happy, motivated and creative.
- 6** Write. No amount of self-inflicted misery, altered states, black pullovers or being publicly obnoxious will ever add up to your being a writer. Writers write. On you go.
- 7** Read. As much as you can. As deeply and widely and nourishingly and irritatingly as you can. And the good things will make you remember them, so you won't need to take notes.
- 8** Be without fear. This is impossible, but let the small fears drive your rewriting and set aside the large ones until they behave – then use them, maybe even write them. Too much fear and all you'll get is silence.
- 9** Remember you love writing. It wouldn't be worth it if you didn't. If the love fades, do what you need to and get it back.
- 10** Remember writing doesn't love you. It doesn't care. Nevertheless, it can behave with remarkable generosity. Speak well of it, encourage others, pass it on.

Hilary Mantel

1 Are you serious about this? Then get an accountant.

2 Read *Becoming a Writer*, by Dorothea Brande. Then do what it says, including the tasks you think are impossible. You will particularly hate the advice to write first thing in the morning, but if you can manage it, it might well be the best thing you ever do for yourself. This book is about becoming a writer from the inside out. Many later advice manuals derive from it. You don't really need any others, though if you want to boost your confidence, "how to" books seldom do any harm. You can kick-start a whole book with some little writing exercise.

3 Write a book you'd like to read. If you wouldn't read it, why would anybody else? Don't write for a perceived audience or market. It may well have vanished by the time your book's ready.

4 If you have a good story idea, don't assume it must form a prose narrative. It may work better as a play, a screenplay or a poem. Be flexible.

5 Be aware that anything that appears before "Chapter One" may be skipped. Don't put your vital clue there.

6 First paragraphs can often be struck out. Are you performing a *haka*, or just shuffling your feet?

7 Concentrate your narrative energy on the point of change. This is especially important for historical fiction. When your character is new to a place, or things alter around them, that's the point to step back and fill in the details of their world. People don't notice their everyday surroundings and daily routine, so when writers describe them it can sound as if they're trying too hard to instruct the reader.

8 Description must work for its place. It can't be simply ornamental. It usually works best if it has a human element; it is more effective if it comes from an implied viewpoint, rather than from the eye of God. If description is coloured by the viewpoint of the character who is doing the noticing, it becomes, in effect, part of character definition and part of the action.

9 If you get stuck, get away from your desk. Take a walk, take a bath, go to sleep, make a pie, draw, listen to music, meditate, exercise; whatever you do, don't just stick there scowling at the problem. But don't make telephone calls or go to a party; if you do, other people's words will pour in where your lost words should be. Open a gap for them, create a space. Be patient.

10 Be ready for anything. Each new story has different demands and may throw up reasons to break these and all other rules. Except number one: you can't give your soul to literature if you're thinking about income tax.

Michael Moorcock

- 1** My first rule was given to me by TH White, author of *The Sword in the Stone* and other Arthurian fantasies and was: Read. Read everything you can lay hands on. I always advise people who want to write a fantasy or science fiction or romance to stop reading everything in those genres and start reading everything else from Bunyan to Byatt.
- 2** Find an author you admire (mine was Conrad) and copy their plots and characters in order to tell your own story, just as people learn to draw and paint by copying the masters.
- 3** Introduce your main characters and themes in the first third of your novel.
- 4** If you are writing a plot-driven genre novel make sure all your major themes/plot elements are introduced in the first third, which you can call the *introduction*.
- 5** Develop your themes and characters in your second third, the *development*.
- 6** Resolve your themes, mysteries and so on in the final third, the *resolution*.
- 7** For a good melodrama study the famous "Lester Dent master plot formula" which you can find online. It was written to show how to write a short story for the pulps, but can be adapted successfully for most stories of any length or genre.
- 8** If possible have something going on while you have your characters delivering exposition or philosophising. This helps retain dramatic tension.
- 9** Carrot and stick – have protagonists pursued (by an obsession or a villain) and pursuing (idea, object, person, mystery).
- 10** Ignore all preferred rules and create your own, suitable for what you want to say.

Michael Morpurgo

1 The prerequisite for me is to keep my well of ideas full. This means living as full and varied a life as possible, to have my antennae out all the time.

2 Ted Hughes gave me this advice and it works wonders: record moments, fleeting impressions, overheard dialogue, your own sadnesses and bewilderments and joys.

3 A notion for a story is for me a confluence of real events, historical perhaps, or from my own memory to create an exciting fusion.

4 It is the gestation time which counts.

5 Once the skeleton of the story is ready I begin talking about it, mostly to Clare, my wife, sounding her out.

6 By the time I sit down and face the blank page I am raring to go. I tell it as if I'm talking to my best friend or one of my grandchildren.

7 Once a chapter is scribbled down rough – I write very small so I don't have to turn the page and face the next empty one – Clare puts it on the word processor, prints it out, sometimes with her own comments added.

8 When I'm deep inside a story, living it as I write, I honestly don't know what will happen. I try not to dictate it, not to play God.

9 Once the book is finished in its first draft, I read it out loud to myself. How it sounds is hugely important.

10 With all editing, no matter how sensitive – and I've been very lucky here – I react sulkily at first, but then I settle down and get on with it, and a year later I have my book in my hand.

Andrew Motion

- 1** Decide when in the day (or night) it best suits you to write, and organise your life accordingly.
- 2** Think with your senses as well as your brain.
- 3** Honour the miraculousness of the ordinary.
- 4** Lock different characters/elements in a room and tell them to get on.
- 5** Remember there is no such thing as nonsense.
- 6** Bear in mind Wilde's dictum that "only mediocrities develop" – and challenge it.
- 7** Let your work stand before deciding whether or not to serve.
- 8** Think big and stay particular.
- 9** Write for tomorrow, not for today.
- 10** Work hard.

Joyce Carol Oates

- 1** Don't try to anticipate an "ideal reader" – there may be one, but he/she is reading someone else.
- 2** Don't try to anticipate an "ideal reader" – except for yourself perhaps, sometime in the future.
- 3** Be your own editor/critic. Sympathetic but merciless!
- 4** Unless you are writing something very avant-garde – all gnarled, snarled and "obscure" – be alert for possibilities of paragraphing.
- 5** Unless you are writing something very post-modernist – self-conscious, self-reflexive and "provocative" – be alert for possibilities of using plain familiar words in place of polysyllabic "big" words.
- 6** Keep in mind Oscar Wilde: "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal."
- 7** Keep a light, hopeful heart. But expect the worst.

Annie Proulx

1 Proceed slowly and take care.

2 To ensure that you proceed slowly, write by hand.

3 Write slowly and by hand only about subjects that interest you.

4 Develop craftsmanship through years of wide reading.

5 Rewrite and edit until you achieve the most felicitous phrase/sentence/paragraph/page/story/chapter.

Ian Rankin

1 Read lots.

2 Write lots.

3 Learn to be self-critical.

4 Learn what criticism to accept.

5 Be persistent.

6 Have a story worth telling.

7 Don't give up.

8 Know the market.

9 Get lucky.

10 Stay lucky.

Zadie Smith

- 1** When still a child, make sure you read a lot of books. Spend more time doing this than anything else.
- 2** When an adult, try to read your own work as a stranger would read it, or even better, as an enemy would.
- 3** Don't romanticise your "vocation". You can either write good sentences or you can't. There is no "writer's lifestyle". All that matters is what you leave on the page.
- 4** Avoid your weaknesses. But do this without telling yourself that the things you can't do aren't worth doing. Don't mask self-doubt with contempt.
- 5** Leave a decent space of time between writing something and editing it.
- 6** Avoid cliques, gangs, groups. The presence of a crowd won't make your writing any better than it is.
- 7** Work on a computer that is disconnected from the internet.
- 8** Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.
- 9** Don't confuse honours with achievement.
- 10** Tell the truth through whichever veil comes to hand – but tell it. Resign yourself to the lifelong sadness that comes from never being satisfied.

Colm Tóibín

1 Finish everything you start.

2 Get on with it.

3 Stay in your mental pyjamas all day.

4 Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

5 No alcohol, sex or drugs while you are working.

6 Work in the morning, a short break for lunch, work in the afternoon and then watch the six o'clock news and then go back to work until bed-time. Before bed, listen to Schubert, preferably some songs.

7 If you have to read, to cheer yourself up read biographies of writers who went insane.

8 On Saturdays, you can watch an old Bergman film, preferably *Persona* or *Autumn Sonata*.

9 No going to London.

10 No going anywhere else either.

Rose Tremain

- 1** Forget the boring old dictum "write about what you know". Instead, seek out an unknown yet knowable area of experience that's going to enhance your understanding of the world and write about that.
- 2** Nevertheless, remember that in the particularity of your own life lies the seedcorn that will feed your imaginative work. So don't throw it all away on autobiography. (There are quite enough writers' memoirs out there already.)
- 3** Never be satisfied with a first draft. In fact, never be satisfied with your own stuff at all, until you're certain it's as good as your finite powers can enable it to be.
- 4** Listen to the criticisms and preferences of your trusted "first readers".
- 5** When an idea comes, spend silent time with it. Remember Keats's idea of Negative Capability and Kipling's advice to "drift, wait and obey". Along with your gathering of hard data, allow yourself also to dream your idea into being.
- 6** In the planning stage of a book, don't plan the ending. It has to be earned by all that will go before it.
- 7** Respect the way characters may change once they've got 50 pages of life in them. Revisit your plan at this stage and see whether certain things have to be altered to take account of these changes.
- 8** If you're writing historical fiction, don't have well-known real characters as your main protagonists. This will only create biographical unease in the readers and send them back to the history books. If you must write about real people, then do something post-modern and playful with them.
- 9** Learn from cinema. Be economic with descriptions. Sort out the telling detail from the lifeless one. Write dialogue that people would actually speak.
- 10** Never begin the book when you feel you want to begin it, but hold off a while longer.

Sarah Waters

1 Read like mad. But try to do it analytically – which can be hard, because the better and more compelling a novel is, the less conscious you will be of its devices. It's worth trying to figure those devices out, however: they might come in useful in your own work. I find watching films also instructive. Nearly every modern Hollywood blockbuster is hopelessly long and baggy. Trying to visualise the much better films they would have been with a few radical cuts is a great exercise in the art of story-telling. Which leads me on to . . .

2 Cut like crazy. Less is more. I've often read manuscripts – including my own – where I've got to the beginning of, say, chapter two and have thought: "This is where the novel should actually start." A huge amount of information about character and backstory can be conveyed through small detail. The emotional attachment you feel to a scene or a chapter will fade as you move on to other stories. Be business-like about it. In fact . . .

3 Treat writing as a job. Be disciplined. Lots of writers get a bit OCD-ish about this. Graham Greene famously wrote 500 words a day. Jean Plaidy managed 5,000 before lunch, then spent the afternoon answering fan mail. My minimum is 1,000 words a day – which is sometimes easy to achieve, and is sometimes, frankly, like shitting a brick, but I will make myself stay at my desk until I've got there, because I know that by doing that I am inching the book forward. Those 1,000 words might well be rubbish – they often are. But then, it is always easier to return to rubbish words at a later date and make them better.

4 Writing fiction is not "self-expression" or "therapy". Novels are for readers, and writing them means the crafty, patient, selfless construction of effects. I think of my novels as being something like fairground rides: my job is to strap the reader into their car at the start of chapter one, then trundle and whizz them through scenes and surprises, on a carefully planned route, and at a finely engineered pace.

5 Respect your characters, even the minor ones. In art, as in life, everyone is the hero of their own particular story; it is worth thinking about what your minor characters' stories are, even though they may intersect only slightly with your protagonist's. At the same time . . .

6 Don't overcrowd the narrative. Characters should be individualised, but functional – like figures in a painting. Think of Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Mocked*, in which a patiently suffering Jesus is closely surrounded by four threatening men. Each of the characters is unique, and yet each represents a type; and collectively they form a narrative that is all the more powerful for being so tightly and so economically constructed. On a similar theme . . .

7 Don't overwrite. Avoid the redundant phrases, the distracting adjectives, the unnecessary adverbs. Beginners, especially, seem to think that writing fiction needs a special kind of flowery prose, completely unlike any sort of language one might encounter in day-to-day life. This is a misapprehension about how the effects of fiction are produced, and can be dispelled by obeying Rule 1. To read some of the work of [Colm Tóibín](#) or Cormac McCarthy, for example, is to discover how a deliberately limited vocabulary can produce an astonishing emotional punch.

8 Pace is crucial. Fine writing isn't enough. Writing students can be great at producing a single page of well-crafted prose; what they sometimes lack is the ability to take the reader on a journey, with all the changes of terrain, speed and mood that a long journey involves. Again, I find that looking at films can help. Most novels will want to move close, linger, move back, move on, in pretty cinematic ways.

9 Don't panic. Midway through writing a novel, I have regularly experienced moments of bowel-curdling terror, as I contemplate the drivel on the screen before me and see beyond it, in quick succession, the derisive reviews, the friends' embarrassment, the failing career, the dwindling income, the repossessed house, the divorce . . . Working doggedly on through crises like these, however, has always got me there in the end. Leaving the desk for a while can help. Talking the problem through can help me recall what I was trying to achieve before I got stuck. Going for a long walk almost always gets me thinking about my manuscript in a slightly new way. And if all else fails, there's prayer. St Francis de Sales, the patron saint of writers, has often helped me out in a crisis. If you want to spread your net more widely, you could try appealing to Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, too.

10 Talent trumps all. If you're a really great writer, none of these rules need apply. If James Baldwin had felt the need to whip up the pace a bit, he could never have achieved the extended lyrical intensity of *Giovanni's Room*. Without "overwritten" prose, we would have none of the linguistic exuberance of a Dickens or an Angela Carter. If everyone was economical with their characters, there would be no *Wolf Hall* . . . For the rest of us, however, rules remain important. And, crucially, only by understanding what they're for and how they work can you begin to experiment with breaking them.

Jeanette Winterson

- 1** Turn up for work. Discipline allows creative freedom. No discipline equals no freedom.
- 2** Never stop when you are stuck. You may not be able to solve the problem, but turn aside and write something else. Do not stop altogether.
- 3** Love what you do.
- 4** Be honest with yourself. If you are no good, accept it. If the work you are doing is no good, accept it.
- 5** Don't hold on to poor work. If it was bad when it went in the drawer it will be just as bad when it comes out.
- 6** Take no notice of anyone you don't respect.
- 7** Take no notice of anyone with a gender agenda. A lot of men still think that women lack imagination of the fiery kind.
- 8** Be ambitious for the work and not for the reward.
- 9** Trust your creativity.
- 10** Enjoy this work!

Stephen King's Top 20 Rules for Writers

1. First write for yourself, and then worry about the audience. "When you write a story, you're telling yourself the story. When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story."
2. Don't use passive voice. "Timid writers like passive verbs for the same reason that timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe."
3. Avoid adverbs. "The adverb is not your friend."
4. Avoid adverbs, especially after "he said" and "she said."
5. But don't obsess over perfect grammar. "The object of fiction isn't grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story."
6. The magic is in you. "I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing."
7. Read, read, read. "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write."
8. Don't worry about making other people happy. "If you intend to write as truthfully as you can, your days as a member of polite society are numbered, anyway."
9. Turn off the TV. "TV—while working out or anywhere else—really is about the last thing an aspiring writer needs."
10. You have three months. "The first draft of a book—even a long one—should take no more than three months, the length of a season."
11. There are two secrets to success. "I stayed physical healthy, and I stayed married."
12. Write one word at a time. "Whether it's a vignette of a single page or an epic trilogy like 'The Lord of the Rings,' the work is always accomplished one word at a time."
13. Eliminate distraction. "There's should be no telephone in your writing room, certainly no TV or videogames for you to fool around with."
14. Stick to your own style. "One cannot imitate a writer's approach to a particular genre, no matter how simple what that writer is doing may seem."
15. Dig. "Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible."
16. Take a break. "You'll find reading your book over after a six-week layoff to be a strange, often exhilarating experience."
17. Leave out the boring parts and kill your darlings. "(kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings.)"
18. The research shouldn't overshadow the story. "Remember that word back. That's where the research belongs: as far in the background and the back story as you can get it."

19. You become a writer simply by reading and writing. "You learn best by reading a lot and writing a lot, and the most valuable lessons of all are the ones you teach yourself."

20. Writing is about getting happy. "Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid or making friends. Writing is magic, as much as the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink."

Kurt Vonnegut: 8 Basics of Creative Writing

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

The greatest American short story writer of my generation was Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964). She broke practically every one of my rules but the first. Great writers tend to do that.

Jack Kerouac: 30 Cool Tips

Jack Kerouac was one of those writers who reinvented literature. He climbed in James Joyce's stream of consciousness car then careened down the streets of Beat poetry and the alleyways of Bebop jazz, creating such novels as *The Dharma Bums*, *Big Sur*, and the landmark *On the Road*. He influenced countless writers and, some say, helped usher in the 1960s counter-culture movement.

These tips may or may not make sense to you, but that's Kerouac, man:

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You're a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

Henry Miller: 10 Writing Tips

1. Work on one thing at a time until finished.
2. Start no more new books, add no more new material to Black Spring. (Apparently he's giving himself this advice.)
3. Don't be nervous. Work calmly, joyously, recklessly on whatever is in hand.
4. Work according to the program and not according to mood. Stop at the appointed time!
5. When you can't create you can work.
6. Cement a little every day, rather than add new fertilizers.
7. Keep human! See people, go places, drink if you feel like it.
8. Don't be a draught-horse! Work with pleasure only.
9. Discard the Program when you feel like it but go back to it the next day. Concentrate.
Narrow down. Exclude.
10. Forget the books you want to write. Think only of the book you are writing.
11. Write first and always. Painting, music, friends, cinema, all these come afterwards.

George Orwell's 5 Rules for Effective Writing

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

This sounds easy, but in practice is incredibly difficult. Phrases such as toe the line, ride roughshod over, stand shoulder to shoulder with, play into the hands of, an axe to grind, Achilles' heel, swan song, and hotbed come to mind quickly and feel comforting and melodic.

For this exact reason they must be avoided. Common phrases have become so comfortable that they create no emotional response. Take the time to invent fresh, powerful images.

2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.

Long words don't make you sound intelligent unless used skilfully. In the wrong situation they'll have the opposite effect, making you sound pretentious and arrogant. They're also less likely to be understood and more awkward to read.

3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree (Ezra Pound). Accordingly, any words that don't contribute meaning to a passage dilute its power. Less is always better. Always.

4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

This one is frequently broken, probably because many people don't know the difference between active and passive verbs. I didn't myself until a few months ago. Here is an example that makes it easy to understand:

The man was bitten by the dog. (passive)The dog bit the man. (active).The active is better because it's shorter and more forceful.

5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

This is tricky because much of the writing published on the internet is highly technical. If possible, remain accessible to the average reader. If your audience is highly specialized this is a judgment call. You don't want to drag on with unnecessary explanation, but try to help people understand what you're writing about. You want your ideas to spread right?

6. Break any of these rules sooner than saying anything outright barbarous.

This bonus rule is a catch all. Above all, be sure to use common sense. These rules are easy to memorize but difficult to apply. Although I've edited this piece a dozen times I'm sure it contains imperfections. But trust me, it's much better now than it was initially. The key is effort. Good writing matters, probably more than you think.

Advice for a Young Writer

And so, this is the price you pay for seeing things from the outside: solitude. You might not relate to people anymore. It does not make you any better than them. But equally, it does not make you any worse. If you decide that this is a price worth paying, you must make peace with the distance and the silence. You must live here awhile, see if there are any others who live here too. If there are, welcome them. But if there are not, do not be afraid. Learn to listen to the sound of silence, the heavy, ever-present thrum of words not said and roads not taken. Little by little, your existence will not seem like a price anymore. Little by little, your existence will become a life.

- Tanvi Roberts

Advice to young writers, by Sarah J Maas, who published her first novel online at the age of just 16.

I began writing *Throne of Glass* when I was 16 - and it became a project that I worked on through high school and college, and several years after that. I decided by the end of high school that I wanted to be a professional writer - that I wanted to publish *Throne of Glass*. Little did I know just how long it'd take me to reach that goal. Writing as a teen (and later as a young adult in college) was certainly not an easy thing to do, especially when I had loads of homework and extra-curriculars to juggle. But those years I spent writing as a teen were crucial in my development as a writer.

1. Read. A lot.

This is probably the most obvious bit of advice, but read as much as you can. Read what your professors assign you, but also make time to read for fun. Honestly, school nearly crushed the love of reading right out of me. I didn't get to read the books I was interested in for class, and analyzing them one after another made me forget the sheer joy and entertainment that comes from curling up with a book. Make time to read the books you love, and never be ashamed of them, even if they're considered uncool or unintellectual.

2. Draw your inspiration from everywhere

Go to museums, take art classes, see movies you have no interest in seeing... Take the time to observe people: how they talk, how they move, how they interact. Keep your eyes open wherever you go, because you never know when inspiration will strike.

3. Be open to criticism and don't be afraid to get your writing out there

Take a creative writing class (they're not as scary as you think!), ask a favorite teacher to read your work, or wrangle your friends into reading whatever material you produce. Being able to accept and incorporate criticism is one of the hardest things to do - and one of the most crucial to our professions. Learning to accept it will only help you in the long run - and will help your writing improve. As Lloyd Alexander once wrote (in *Taran Wanderer*), 'Metal's worthless till it's shaped and tempered.'

4. Pay attention in history class

Okay, this is mostly just related to writing fantasy, but you'd be surprised by how much my history classes have helped out my writing. I frequently kick myself for not paying more attention in high school - and for not taking more history classes in college.

5. Write whenever you can, however you can

I shouldn't say this, but I wrote during my classes (only math and excruciatingly boring seminars, I swear!) I also wrote on weeknights (after homework), weekends, holiday vacations, trips to various parts of the world... No matter what I was doing, no matter where I was, I always made time to write. Not because I felt like it was an obligation or requirement, but because it was something I HAD to do - because my stories were something I HAD to get out of me, had to write down.

People will tell you not to write. Don't listen to them. They will tell you your writing isn't good, and that you shouldn't be writing the kind of stories that are in your heart (believe me, as a fantasy

author, I've gotten that a LOT). But keep writing. I only made it to publication because I kept writing - because I wrote whenever and however I could, because I wrote what I loved.

6. Live your life

This is the most important bit of advice I can give you. Go out with your friends. Get in trouble (but not too much). Travel. Meet interesting and diverse people. Live a full life (writing whenever you have some spare time, of course), and enjoy every moment of it. I can't begin to tell you how many of my real life experiences influenced my writing - how a twisted ankle and a bruised knee (the prize of a wild night out with friends on iced-over streets) can become a realistic-sounding injury in your novel. Be curious - be open to anything. But live your life. Because good, brave living means good, brave writing.

25 rules for writing a novel, by Matt Haig

The *How To Stop Time* author shares his pointers on getting started on your masterpiece.

1. Never be in awe of your own style.
2. Writer's block = writer's indecision.
3. Write anything at first. Francois Sagan said, 'I have to write to begin to think.' So do you.
4. Right now, forget about money. It eats imagination.
5. The first page of your first novel is the most important thing you will ever write.
6. Know that you won't win the Booker Prize. Fact: no-one has ever won the Booker Prize apart from Hilary Mantel, and you are not Hilary Mantel.
7. A first draft is the beginning of the end. But the end lasts for ever.
8. It isn't the words you choose to use. It's the words you choose not to use.
9. Adverbs dilute.
10. Raise your effort. Lower your expectations.
11. Ignore discouragement. You'll never know real negativity until you tell people you are writing a novel. The last thing a human who spends their day selling home insurance in an office that smells of egg sandwiches and despair wants to hear is that their old school friend is going to be an international bestselling author. So ignore them. All of them. Well, except that latter-day Malcolm Bradbury, Katy Perry: 'Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh/ As you shoot across the sky.'
12. The 'track changes' function is the greatest miracle since the wheel.
13. Write as though your mother will never read it.
14. Forget about what you want the book to achieve. Think about what you want the words to achieve.
15. Be ship-shape. An ocean liner might be big, but all the screws need to be tight. Or you end up drowning. So, y'know, observe each sentence as if it was the only one.
16. It's OK to write about people you know if you change the names.
17. If you write about a dog, and the dog dies, you are in trouble.
18. Jeanette Winterson once told me to change the phrase 'epiphanic moment' to 'moment of epiphany'. That is the single greatest piece of advice anyone has ever given me.
19. Write the book you most want to read. That will be the best book you can write.
20. If you write in the first person people will think that the views of that person are your own views. Don't let that stop you writing Hitler's fictional autobiography. I just thought you should know.
21. Read Graham Greene. He infects you with greatness.
22. The hardest bit of writing always comes at the 30,000 word mark. Keep going. After 50,000 the hill slopes in your favour.
23. Read it aloud. You'll notice more mistakes that way.
24. Love is the most important ingredient. Love of words. Of your characters and their flaws. Of truth. You are playing God, but it has to be a loving God.
25. Enjoy it. There is nothing as exciting in this world as roaming the beautiful wilds of the human imagination. There really isn't.

Writing Advice from Ian Sansom

The best piece of advice I can offer my fellow writers – indeed, the only piece of writing advice about which I can feel any real confidence in offering – is that in order to write, you have to write.

Like a lot of ‘How To’ writing advice – be yourself, read widely, do this, don’t do that, blah, blah, whatever – this of course seems entirely obvious and perhaps rather less than useful. But unlike most writing advice, it has the advantage of being demonstrably true.

In order to begin to write, most of us have to overcome a sense of inadequacy. One occasionally meets writers who are convinced of their own brilliance and prowess, but it’s much more common to meet people who have the skills and the inclinations and the ideas to write, but who also believe that they’re the wrong age, the wrong class, the wrong colour, in the wrong job, or just living the wrong sort of life to be able to do so.

In his book *Learned Optimism* (1990), the psychologist Martin Seligman argues that ‘A composer can have all the talent of Mozart and a passionate desire to succeed, but if he believes he cannot compose music, he will come to nothing.’ He has a point. Certain kinds of self-belief can be dangerous and damaging, but if you’re going to write anything, you have to at least believe that you’re capable of writing something.

This is why a lot of writers keep notebooks and journals. Your musings and jottings may not be much, but they are something; they’re a start. They may even be more than a start: they may be the cure; they might be the answer. In her biography of Henry Thoreau, Laura Dassow Walls identifies a particular day in November 1850 when Thoreau’s life completely changed, when he ‘stopped using his Journal as the means to the “real” work of art somewhere else and started treating the Journal itself as the work of art’. ‘*I have learned what art really is*’, writes Lydia Davis in her short story ‘Extracts from a life’, ‘Art is not in some far-off place.’

You are here. It’s as good a place as any to begin.

Ian Sansom