

MY RULES – TODAY

Donald M. Murray

1. *nulla dies sine linea* – Never a day without a line. Horace 65-8 BC.

To write you have to set up a routine, to promise yourself that you will write. Just state in a loud voice that you will write so many pages a day, or write for so many hours a day. Keep the number of pages or hours within reason, and don't be upset if a day slips by. Start again; pick up the routine. Don't look for results. Just write, easily, quietly.

Janwilliam van de Wetering

2. "Write about what makes you different," Sandra Cisneros.
3. Lower your standards until you can write.

I believe that the so-called "writing block" is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance....one should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's easy to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing.....I can imagine a person beginning to feel he's not able to write up to that standard he imagines the world has set for him. But to me that's surrealistic. The only standard I can rationally have is the standard I'm meeting right now...You should be more willing to forgive yourself. It doesn't make any difference if you are good or bad today. The *assessment* of the product is something that happens *after* you've done it.

William Stafford

4. Write to start writing.

*If writing a book is impossible, write a chapter.
If writing a chapter is impossible, write a page.
If writing a page is impossible, write a paragraph.
If writing a paragraph is impossible, write a sentence.
If writing a sentence is impossible, write a word and
teach yourself everything there is to know about that
word and then write another, connected word and see
where the connection leads.*

Richard Rhodes

5. Write to discover what you have to say.

I believe that fiction feeds on itself, grows like a pregnancy. The more you write, the more there is to draw from; the more you say, the more there is to say. The deeper you go into your imagination, the richer that reservoir becomes. You do not run out of material by using all that's in you; rather, when you take everything that is available one day, it only makes room for new things to appear the next... You don't need to know a whole book in order to write the first page. You don't even need to know the end of the first page. You need only the desire to create something that will say what you feel needs to be said, however vague its form at the beginning. You need a willingness to discover the wealth and wisdom of your own subconscious, and to trust that it will tell you what to do and how to do it - not all at once, but as needed, step by step. You have to take a deep breath, let go of your usual control, and then begin walking in the dark.

Elizabeth Berg

6. Write out loud. Hear what you are writing before you see it and revise with your ear. Let your voice instruct.

7. Don't correct error. Build on what works, extending by layering, writing over what you have written so it deepens, grows stronger, reminds you of what you didn't know you knew.

8. Writing is a visual art. Write what you see. When you are stuck, begin with description.

When I construct a scene, I don't describe the hundredth part of what I see; I see the characters scratching their noses, walking about, tilting back in their chairs -- even after I've finished writing -- so much so that after a while I feel a weariness which does not derive all that much from my effort of imagination but is more like a visual fatigue: My eyes are tired from watching my characters.

Graham Greene

9. Fail. Writing is built on instructive failure as you attempt to say what you do not yet know in a way you have never said it before.

Fail.

Fail again.

Fail better.

Samuel Beckett

10. Write fast -- write badly -- so you will write what you don't yet know you knew -- and so you will outrun the censor within is all.

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 unspeakable, whereas we are looking for the as-yet-unspeakable, the as-yet-unspoken.

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 is a slender intuition, not much greater than an itch.

Donald Barthelme

11. Know tomorrow's task at the end of the writing morning. Let the subconscious do the writing.

12. Finish. Submit. Many have talent. Some begin; few finish. The field is left to those of us who have little talent and great stubbornness.

**...it isn't "talent" which is so important to a writer....
The most important assets, I believe, are those associated with mules - a kind of stubbornness to get it done, to make it right, to make it better, and grit - not to quit -- and even narrowness of purpose, a euphemism for being almost dumbly dedicated to accomplishing something.**

Theodore Weesner