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How to Write

By COLSON WHITEHEAD Published: July 26, 2012

The art of writing can be reduced to a few simple rules. I share them with you now.

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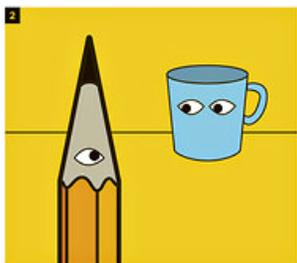


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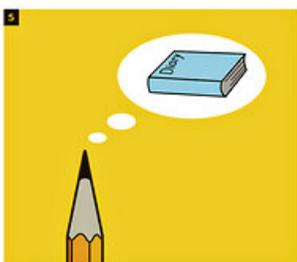


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Rule No. 1: Show and Tell. Most people say, "Show, don't tell," but I stand by Show and Tell, because when writers put their work out into the world, they're like kids bringing their broken unicorns and chewed-up teddy bears into class in the sad hope that someone else will love them as much as they do. "And what do you have for us today, Marcy?" "A penetrating psychological study of a young med student who receives disturbing news from a former lover." "How marvelous! Timmy, what are you holding there?" "It's a Calvinoesque romp through an unnamed metropolis much like New York, narrated by an armadillo." "Such imagination!" Show and Tell, followed by a good nap.

Rule No. 2: Don't go searching for a subject, let your subject find you. You can't rush inspiration. How do you think Capote came to "In Cold Blood"? It was just an ordinary day when he picked up the paper to read his horoscope, and there it was — fate. Whether it's a harrowing account of a multiple homicide, a botched Everest expedition or a colorful family of singers trying to escape from Austria when the Nazis invade, you can't force it. Once your subject finds you, it's like falling in love. It will be your constant companion. Shadowing you, peeping in your windows, calling you at all hours to leave messages like, "Only you understand me." Your ideal subject should be like a stalker with limitless resources, living off the

inheritance he received after the suspiciously sudden death of his father. He's in your apartment pawing your stuff when you're not around, using your toothbrush and cutting out all the really good synonyms from the thesaurus. Don't be afraid: you have a best seller on your hands.

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Rule No. 3: Write what you know. Bellow once said, "Fiction is the higher autobiography." In other words, fiction is payback for those who have wronged you. When people read my books "My Gym Teacher Was an Abusive Bully" and "She Called Them Brussels Sprouts: A Survivor's Tale," they're often surprised when I tell them they contain an autobiographical element. Therein lies the art, I say. How do you make that which is your everyday into the stuff of literature? Listen to your heart. Ask your heart, Is it true? And if it is, let it be. Once the lawyers sign off, you're good to go.

Rule No. 4: Never use three words when one will do. Be concise. Don't fall in love with the gentle trilling of your mellifluous sentences. Learn how to "kill your darlings," as they say. I'm reminded of the famous editor-author interaction between Gordon Lish and Ray Carver when they were working on Carver's celebrated short story "Those Life Preservers Are Just for Show," often considered the high-water mark of so-called dirty realism. You'll recall the climax, when two drunken fishermen try to calm each other after their dinghy springs a leak. In the original last lines of the story, Nat, the salty old part-time insurance agent, reassures his young charge as they cling to the beer cooler: "We'll get help when we hit land. I'm sure of it. No more big waves, no more sharks. We'll be safe once again. We'll be home." If you examine the Lish papers in the Lilly Library at Indiana University, you'll see how, with but a few deft strokes, Lish pared that down to create the now legendary ending: "Help — land shark!" It wasn't what Carver intended, but few could argue that it was not shorter. Learn to kill your darlings, and don't be shy about softening them up in the hostage pit for a few days before you do.

Rule No. 5: Keep a dream diary.

Rule No. 6: What isn't said is as important as what is said. In many classic short stories, the real action occurs in the silences. Try to keep all the good stuff off the page. Some "real world" practice might help. The next time your partner comes home, ignore his or her existence for 30 minutes, and then blurt out "That's it!" and drive the car onto the neighbor's lawn. When your children approach at bedtime, squeeze their shoulders meaningfully and, if you're a woman, smear your lipstick across your face with the back of your wrist, or, if you're a man, weep violently until they say, "It's O.K., Dad." Drink out of a chipped mug, a souvenir from a family vacation or weekend getaway in better times, one that can trigger a two-paragraph compare/contrast description later on. It's a bit like Method acting. Simply let this thought guide your every word and gesture: "Something is wrong — can you guess what it is?" If you're going for something a little more postmodern, repeat the above, but with fish.

Rule No. 7: Writer's block is a tool — use it. When asked why you haven't produced anything lately, just say, "I'm blocked." Since most people think that writing is some mystical process where characters "talk to you" and you can hear their voices in your head, being blocked is the perfect cover for when you just don't feel like working. The gods of creativity bless you, they forsake you, it's out of your hands and whatnot. Writer's block is like "We couldn't get a baby sitter" or "I ate some bad shrimp," an excuse that always gets you a pass. The electric company nagging you for money, your cell provider harassing you, whatever — just say, "I'm blocked," and you're off the hook. But don't overdo it. In the same way the baby-sitter bit loses credibility when your kids are in grad school, there's an expiration date. After 20 years, you might want to mix it up. Throw in an Ellisonian "My house caught fire and burned up my opus." The specifics don't matter — the important thing is to figure out what works for you.

Rule No. 8: Is secret.

Rule No. 9: Have adventures. The Hemingway mode was in ascendancy for decades

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before it was eclipsed by trendy fabulist “exercises.” The pendulum is swinging back, though, and it’s going to knock these effete eggheads right out of their Aeron chairs. Keep ahead of the curve. Get out and see the world. It’s not going to kill you to butch it up a tad. Book passage on a tramp steamer. Rustle up some dysentery; it’s worth it for the fever dreams alone. Lose a kidney in a knife fight. You’ll be glad you did.

Rule No. 10: Revise, revise, revise. I cannot stress this enough. Revision is when you do what you should have done the first time, but didn’t. It’s like washing the dishes two days later instead of right after you finish eating. Get that draft counter going. Remove a comma and then print out another copy – that’s another draft right there. Do this enough times and you can really get those numbers up, which will come in handy if someone challenges you to a draft-off. When the ref blows the whistle and your opponent goes, “26 drafts!,” you’ll bust out with “216!” and send ’em to the mat.

Rule No. 11: There are no rules. If everyone jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too? No. There are no rules except the ones you learned during your Show and Tell days. Have fun. If they don’t want to be friends with you, they’re not worth being friends with. Most of all, just be yourself.

Colson Whitehead’s most recent novel is “Zone One.”

A version of this article appeared in print on July 29, 2012, on page BR8 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: How to Write.

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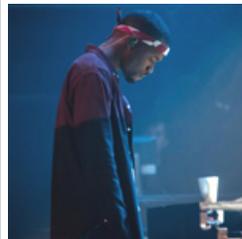
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