

21 Rules for Improving Your Writing

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Polishing Your Prose

Rule #1: Tell a good story—a story that keeps people turning the pages.

Write this on Post-It notes: “Tell a good story!” and put it on your bathroom mirror, on your computer, on the TV set. (If you’re staring at the boob tube, you’re not writing.) Don’t be boring. Your goal is to keep people awake half the night, not put them to sleep—interweave action, suspense, drama, humor.

Rule #2: You achieve Rule #1 when your readers want to know “What will happen next?”

Create uncertainty, danger, drama and suspense; create “cliff hangers”; throw up ever higher hurdles for your protagonist so the story builds to a suspenseful, death-defying climax. (Or, if not death defying, at the very least the readers must wonder whether Lizzy will marry Darcy—or simply strangle him.) A good writer puts her character up a tree, throws rocks, then lights the tree on fire.

Rule #3: Write a strong narrative hook.

In today’s competitive world of not only literary agents acting as gatekeepers for book publishers but a million new titles a year, this may be the most important aspect of your manuscript. Agents say (as do readers): “I read the first sentence, and if I like it, I read the first paragraph. If I like that, I read the first page, and so on.”

Rule #4: Write fresh(ly).

Nevada Barr offers many examples of using old words and phrases in new ways. Sometimes it’s a stretch, but generally the usage invigorates. Ditto with Lawrence Sanders and his Archie McNally series.

Rule #5: Be plausible.

Your story must be believable so readers can suspend their disbelief. If writing a historical novel, get your history right; if writing about technology or some specialty, get that right. You will have readers who know more than you.

Rule #6: Good writing is rewriting.

The first draft is usually crap, a brain dump to get your thoughts on paper. From that you create a road map of critical way points needed to turn it into a real story.

Thus spake Mark Twain: “You need not expect to get your book right the first time. Go to work and . . . rewrite it.”

Rule #7: Have a road map.

If you don’t know where you’re going, how do you know when you’ve arrived? (Viz: the tired debate of blank page versus outline—blank pages not only waste a lot time—I know of what I speak: I were one—they eventually create an outline.)

Rule #8: Fill your plot holes.

It's good to leave your characters dangling (for a while), but don't leave your readers dangling. At some point you either rescue the guy or let him fall on his ass.

Rule #9: Show, don't tell. Write visually and viscerally.

Write this down in big, block letters and have it where you can see it whenever you are writing. The old saw "actions speak louder than words" holds true in writing. Don't tell us: "She was angry!" or even "She was mad, mad as a hornet, mad as a rattlesnake with a hornet on his forked tongue, madder than the Hatter!" Show us: "She picked up the skillet, cocked her arm like Sandy Koufax in the bottom of the ninth, and flung a slider across his balding pate." Or you could simply say: "She kicked him in the balls."

Rule #10: Breathe life into your characters.

Give us three-dimensional people. They are not all angels or devils. Your hero needs a flaw; if not a fatal flaw, then a flaw that creates suspense. Your hero is afraid of [insect], allergic to the venom of [said insect], so he ends up trapped in a musty basement crawling with [said insects]. Or your protagonist is afraid of heights but has to scale a cliff to escape a death trap and grab the Holy Grail and rescue Prince Charming. Of course, you don't tell us your hero is afraid of spiders; rather, he shrieks after turning on the bedroom light, piercing the ear drum of the new woman in his life. Or she refuses to walk to the edge of a tall building or high cliff to peer at a body lying far below. Your antagonist needs a positive trait or two; perhaps she likes spiders and keeps them as pets.

Rule #11: Create meaningful dialogue.

Avoid tedious, he-said, she-said chatter. Dialogue needs to reveal character as well as move the story forward; make it natural, not contrived, and have each character speak with a different voice. Don't spend several pages of back and forth, mindless chit-chat that could be summed up in a few narrative paragraphs. Nor does dialogue need to be equitable, one or two people should dominate. You do not have a *Law & Order* or *The Closer* ensemble cast of highly paid egos who log their screen time by the syllable.

Rule #12: Hone your craft—spelling, correct usage, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation.

- Beware of homophones and near homophones, especially in contractions; do NOT rely on spell-check—homophones will pass the test:
 - its, it's
 - there, their, they're
 - your, you're, yore
 - are, our
 - bare, bear
 - chute, shoot
 - conscious, conscience
 - lightening, lightning
 - one, won
 - reign, rein, rain
 - wander, wonder
 - peek, peak, pique

- Improve and double-check your vocabulary: Use a dictionary and thesaurus, but judiciously, especially the thesaurus; if you're not certain the context is appropriate, find out. E.g., a lectern is not a podium; a mall is not a shopping center. And "e.g." (for example) is not the same as "i.e." (that is).
- Know your grammar, then you can break the rules. It's OK for your characters to be ungrammatical in dialog, but you should not be ungrammatical in your narrative—unless it's intentional; e.g., T. Jefferson Parker.
- Know the rules for lay versus lie. (Sleeping dogs do not lay, they lie.)
- Use correct punctuation—if you use a dash, ellipsis, semicolon or exclamation mark, or if you use an apostrophe in a word fragment, use it correctly. A hyphen is NOT a dash, a single quotation mark is NOT an apostrophe—I don't care what Bill Gates says. (E.g.: correct = 'em; incorrect = 'em.)

Rule #13: Use active, descriptive verbs, not passive, avoid participles (e.g., words that end with -ing). Get rid of "was" whenever possible. The use of "to be"—especially "was"—dilutes the effect, takes the punch out of your prose. It gives your writing the "wuzzies."

- The wound was bleeding profusely . . . versus . . . the wound bled, or blood oozed from the wound, or blood spurted from the gash in his arm.
- Billie was breathing hard . . . versus . . . Billie gasped for air.
- Bertha had a serious frown on her face as she turned toward Todd . . . versus . . . Bertha frowned as she glanced at Todd.
- Cindy was nodding in apparent agreement . . . versus . . . Cindy nodded at Walter, then winked.

Rule #14: Use power words, not "ad-" words—adverbs and adjectives.

The English language has 500,000 words—use them.

Avoid needless adverbs, especially in describing tone of voice or mood. These should be self-evident. Rather than: he said softly, write: he whispered, or he muttered. Rather than: "Exactly!" Tweetie said enthusiastically, write: "Exactly!" Tweetie shouted.)

Avoid the use of "very"—using "very" is laziness. If you feel the urge to write "very," slap yourself, maybe bang your head on the wall, then hunt up a different verb. English is the richest language in the world for its sheer quantity of words. If you can't find the perfect word, make one up—Milton and Shakespeare did.

Limit your adjectives (and avoid "purple prose"); use more descriptive terms. Rather than: "The sky was the deepest blue she had ever seen, and it was so hot the air was shaking like a leaf." Try: "The cerulean sky shimmered in the heat like silk undies fluttering in a Santa Ana breeze."

Mark Twain wrote in 1878: "God only exhibits his thunder and lightning at intervals, and so they always command attention. These are God's adjectives. You thunder and lightning too much, the reader ceases to get under the bed, by and by."

And in 1880: ". . . [U]se plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff

and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice.”

Rule #15: Beware of pronoun profusion.

Readers (and editors) become annoyed when there are multiple people of the same gender and you refer to them as he or she. The reader (or editor) must back up and try to (not “try and”) figure out which he or she it is.

Rule #16: Avoid clichés (like the plague).

Or rewrite them. Rather than: He was beating a dead horse. Try: He flogged the erstwhile equine. That said, in fiction it's OK for your characters to use clichés, because it reveals character, but you, as the narrator, should be invisible to the reader—unless you intentionally include the narrator in the story, as does Lawrence Sanders in his Archy McNally series.

Rule #17: Read out loud to yourself.

In groups, you become self-conscious, and, unless you're an actor, the reading rarely comes off as well as you imagined it. However, if you are having trouble with a sentence, have someone read it to you—does the reader stumble?

Rule #18: Use effective tools.

- *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* by Steven Pinker
- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King
- *How to Write Killer Fiction* by Carolyn Wheat—she discusses the Four Arcs and Hero's Journey. These help you plot your book and craft a good story.
- *Style that Sizzles & Pacing for Power: An Editor's Guide to Writing Compelling Fiction* by Jodie Renner
- *Rivet Your Readers with Deep Point of View* by Jill Elizabeth Nelson
- *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White
- *Chicago Manual of Style*
- *The Elements of Grammar*
- *Grammar Girl* — <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>

Rule #19: Join a critique group—where you are the weakest writer.

Get in a group that reads in advance, not out loud—you will get better feedback and not waste a lot of time.

Rule #20: Read (and analyze) good story telling. And learn from it.

These are authors whose books I have read at least twice (listed in no particular order):

- Barbara Kingsolver (especially *The Poisonwood Bible*)
- T. Jefferson Parker (especially *Cold Pursuit*)
- Nevada Barr (especially *High County*)

- Sue Grafton (especially *S is for Silence*)
- Dick Francis
- John Irving (especially *The Cider House Rules*)
- Walter Mosley
- Lawrence Sanders (especially the Archie McNally series)
- Carl Hiaasen
- Agatha Christie
- Edgar Allen Poe
- Mark Twain
- Stephen Ambrose
- Tobias Wolff (especially *This Boy's Life*)
- O. Henry
- Ray Bradbury (especially *Dandelion Wine*)
- Michael Deaver's book of short stories (in tribute to O. Henry)
- . . . and so many more . . .

Rule #21: Follow submission guidelines provided by editors, agents and publishers.

Your mss should be "letter perfect." Double-spaced, 12-point Times Roman font, etc.

Manuscripts are rejected for a variety of reasons, including not being double-spaced, extra spaces between paragraphs, typos, factual errors, over use of "was" . . .

Rule #22: Hire a (brutally) honest editor.*

You do NOT want an editor or critic who is afraid of hurting your feelings (and your feelings will get hurt). You want someone who will give you a truthful critique and offer constructive criticism (not family or friends: they will lie to you).

* Yes, I can count. This is a "bonus" rule. Actually, I just like the sound of twenty-one.

Larry M Edwards is an award-winning author, journalist, book editor and writing coach. He is the author of three published books as well as short stories and essays, and he has written thousands of newspaper and magazine articles. He won Best of Show honors from the San Diego Press Club in 1994, 1997, 2004 and 2005. His memoir, *Dare I Call It Murder? A Memoir of Violent Loss*, took first place in the 2014 San Diego Book Awards for Best Published Memoir, and the book was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Edwards has served as a judge for the San Diego Book Awards since 2005. He also operates Wigeon Publishing (wigeonpublishing.com).

For a cost estimate on editing your manuscript, send Larry an email and the first 20-30 pages in MS Word format.

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