

The Twelve Commandments

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I am not the sort of person that normally gives advice, recently, however, I forgot my reticence and actually gave an earful of it to someone. A young writer friend had sent me a story, and suffered a panic attack while I was reading her work, because as she re-read the piece on her end, she was suddenly embarrassed by her story. She became suddenly afraid that I would denigrate her as a writer, and say something devastatingly funny and brutally savage about her work, as I have been known to do when speaking of people that I particularly dislike. In order to reassure her I extemporised a list of rules for writers, composed of things I had learned over the course of a lifetime. In truth, there was nothing wrong with her story that couldn't be corrected with extensive rewriting. Frankly she would be a better writer if high school composition and English courses *actually taught students how to write*. But then, such ideas are generally denounced as cultural fascism, and if you have any doubts feel free to visit Live Journal.

After the fact, I realised that others might benefit from the observations, as well, and so set about writing this article. These rules are meant primarily for writers, but I suppose that they apply to any artistic endeavour, and I trust that non writers reading this article can find ways to apply the lessons within to their own lives. Some of these rules are seemingly obvious on the face, but bear repeating and expansion, some involve my rejection of writing canards, because a lot of what young writers are taught is self defeating. So, without further ado...

The 1st Commandment: There is in fact a magic formula to writing well, here is the equation:

Good Writing= Time + Practise + Perseverance + Patience + Self Confidence

Every commandment on this list is derived from this equation, as this is the general formula that governs the craft. The first item takes care of itself, the rest of the variables you will need to supply yourself. Time (independently of practise) does improve your writing, because, theoretically, you will have read that much more, and so have a greater recognition of what good writing is, and how to produce it yourself. Secondly it improves your understanding of people, and your acceptance of the fact that you share the planet with six and a half billion people, If you don't understand other people, your characters will come across as either variants of yourself or complete cardboard cutouts, and no one reads authors like that. OK, so John Grisham puts the lie to that observation, but it can't hurt to have characters that people can think of as real. These observations about time are meant, primarily, as encouragement for those of you older people that gave up on yourself as writers when you were young, and are thinking of taking it up again. Here, try writing something, and compare it to a story from way back when (presuming you saved some of your work), you'll be surprised to see how much better you are now, even without practise, and it's because time has improved you. That isn't enough, though, you need the other four items, and that brings us to the second commandment.

The 2nd Commandment: Write every single day, even if all you're writing are letters, and DON'T keep a daily journal

The first part of the commandment gets hammered home all the time, always with the self defeating recommendation that writers ought keep daily journals. An amateur psychologist (the emphasis being on the words *amateur* and *psycho*) thought the best way to get people to write every day was to have them write about themselves, bloody loon. Why is keeping a daily journal a problem? Because no one's life is that interesting, and if your life *is* that interesting, you probably don't have enough time to write about it. If you were with the 3rd Infantry or the 101st Airborne as they stormed through Iraq, your life was fascinating, you also didn't have a lot of time to write about it. Daily journals are self defeating because let's face it, for 99.8% of us, life sucks, and endless repetition of such misery drags you down. Oh yes, I know, more than .2% of the population claims that life is a happy, shiny, blissful thing, but 99% of those are liars, they are sort of people that lie to their therapists. Show me someone that thinks life is a golden haze of orgasmic joy and I'll show you a dreadful writer. This is separate from personal happiness, I am a pretty happy fellow, that doesn't mean that life sucks any less, just that I am better able to cope with it.

Every young writer falls out of the habit of keeping a daily journal because daily journals enforce bad habits. They encourage self absorption, which leads to writing about things no one will or even can care about and deep thoughts on dreadfully shallow subjects. The resulting prose is so bloody awful that you'll become discouraged, full of self doubt and eventually give up writing. If you're any good, that is, bad writers slog on oblivious to how rotten their work is. Again, see the Live Journal phenomenon for reference. Writing is like anything else, you get better with repetition, the more you write the better you'll get at it, and letter writing (email for you young writers) can be a positive part of that. I have a reputation as the Russian novelist of email, eventually most of my correspondents figured out that when I was sending them emails that required six pages to print I was merely keeping myself sharp as I wasn't doing any other writing. I am not advising you against journaling, I used to keep a weekly journal myself, and I was bright enough not to write about my execrable life, but wrote instead on current affairs, a habit that served me well when I began writing political satire. I am simply cautioning you to develop habits that enforce positive writing. Once you know the formula and implement it, you'll find that your writing improves in leaps and bounds.

The 3rd Commandment: Even Shakespeare's first drafts sucked like a medieval London whore. No matter how bad you think it is, finish the damned thing, worry about perfection later.

It is a little known fact of literary history that it took Will four drafts before he would show his work to Burbage. All first drafts suck, get over it. If you're going to base your self evaluation as a writer on the quality of your first drafts, it's time to give it up, because no first draft will ever be good enough.

Consider this scenario, you're thirty pages in to a short novel, and what you have sucks, so you decide to switch gears and start a

new story instead. Problem is that the exact same thing will happen again, and again, and again. Stop comparing yourself to other writers, because you'll always lose that comparison. Get the story finished, and ready for revision, because that's where the craft is really employed. Before a potter can make a vase he needs a lump of wet clay on the wheel to shape, that's what your first draft is, a lump of wet clay, learn to think of it that way. Sometimes you'll get lucky, you'll toss that lump of wet clay on the wheel and it lands in something close to its final shape, praise the lord and pass the thesaurus, because you got lucky and you're not done by a long shot. Don't expect it to ever happen that way again, either. There is an adjunct to this commandment, hey, even the Old Testament features a couple of different versions of the *Ten Commandments*, just consider this next Commandment 3A.

NOBODY'S writing is perfect, not even God Almighty, read the bible sometime and you'll see what I mean.

Read the Apocrypha some time, though Protestants like to pretend they didn't happen, they are part of the canon. It seems presumptuous to edit God after the fact, except that many Protestants believe that He wrote the books personally; Jews, Catholics and Orthodox Christians all understand that God is really naught more than a publisher who occasionally hired some less than sterling writers to write for His periodical. There are sections of the Old Testament that feature verse as good as any ever written, though most of that was because God hired James VI of Scotland to be director of His English language division and James hired some of the greatest writer/translators in English language history, many of the lesser books of the Old Testament aren't written quite so well.

Now, profanity aside, the point is a real one, there is not, there never has been, nor will there ever be a perfect story. Ever. No, you won't be the first. No, it isn't a good goal to have, either. Unachievable goals cause frustration, and frustration causes sloppy writing. Stop worrying about being perfect, no one ever is, worry about doing what you do well. So long as writing well is the goal, you will get ever better, when writing well stops being the goal, well, you get the picture.

The 4th Commandment: Read, and read some more, when you learn to recognise good writing, you will start writing well.

Now, while I am recommending that you read voraciously, and widely, there is one book that you had best have in your collection, and if ever I visit you I had best find that your copy is falling apart from use, and that is *Strunk & White's Elements of Style*. There are other usage guides, but no better style guide has ever been written. Read it, learn it, use it.

Some writing instructors advise you to read the sort of things you want to write, and while I think it a good idea, don't put all your chips in to a single pot. When I was young, I fancied myself the next C. S. Lewis (I was 16, cut me some slack), at least in the area of fiction, my intention was to write fantasy/sci-fi, and perhaps a little satire when I could. While it helps to read broadly in the genre you hope to write in, read more broadly still, because your tastes in writing, as well as reading, will change. The real purpose of this is to learn discernment, to know the difference between good writing and mediocre writing. When you recognise good writing, you will learn to practise good writing, subconsciously you will be aiming to write as well as what you have read. Your parents tried to teach you this when you were young, remember that whole "Garbage in, garbage out." lecture they gave you about watching too much television?

The 5th Commandment: Meet your new friends, ruthlessness and discernment.

This is another of those two part commandments, these are skills you need to develop if you're going to survive. Writing isn't easy, and it's even harder when you hamstring yourself.

Throw every punch you have; no fears, no regrets, no mercy.

This is a war, and like every war, it's won and lost on logistics, for a writer this means that you need events, dialogue and characters. It is simply too tough to make all these up *ex nihilo*, eventually you imitate every invading army in history and forage for supplies. You model characters on people you know, you take conversations you've had and use them for dialogue, you take experiences you've had and reset them. Invariably, when you do, friends & family become mortified at their lives, words, and actions being put on paper. Will they ever learn to like it? Probably not. But they'll either need to learn to accept it or leave. The same can be said of yourself, if you don't have that ruthless streak within you, then perhaps writing isn't the best choice in second careers.

Learn to discern: there IS a difference between a cold appraisal of your work and hating it.

When we started, I mentioned my young writer friend and her panic attack after emailing the short story to me, she had gone over that edge. A cold appraisal of the story would have told her that the piece needed extensive work if it were ever to be published, *that didn't mean that the story was unpublishable*. Discernment is really the hardest skill for a writer to learn, the tendency is always to loathe one's own work, we all fight that battle. Look at the most successful writers, now start rummaging amongst their personal essays and bio-pieces, somewhere you will find this thought expressed. We ALL go through it, so we've all been where you are now. Every writer needs detachment, just as every writer needs encouragement, which leads us to the sixth commandment.

The 6th Commandment: Every writer needs detachment, just as every writer needs encouragement.

Detachment is the most important skill that I ever learned as a writer, the act of creation is intensely personal, and the tendency is to take every nuance of every story too personally. Eventually I learned to step back and look at my work the same way I looked at my students' work, with a cold dispassionate eye. If you can't do this you'll drive yourself straight through despair and on to insanity. Sometimes the act of creation is too personal, and if at the end of the first draft you are unable to view your work with

detachment, don't be afraid to set it aside for a bit and move onto something else, eventually you will have enough distance to see the work clearly.

It is time for me to give you some encouragement rather than caution, so let me follow my own canard, we ALL need encouragement (feel free to leave copies of this for your friends and family just so that understand their real duty to you). Unless one has written some crappy books with serious merchandising potential for young children and enough new age pablum to appeal to adolescents of every age; in short the sort of story that movie executives will squander huge sums to option (at which point you will no longer care), you need to hear a good word every once in a while. Now, as your friends and family are reading this section, which you've thoughtfully highlighted in translucent yellow (as pink is simply gauche and I am simply not), allow me to tell you what a good word *is not*. A good word does not mean that a writer wants to hear you sing their praises, in fact, to this day nothing grates on my nerves more. Making a hymn of your praises for someone's skill might lead you to believe that you have done your duty, allowing you to proceed straight on to cutting them with no guilt, but you've failed. A good word is not "Bob, that was perfect, couldn't see any way to write it better." What the writer needs to know is what parts of the story tickled your fancy, touched you or otherwise stuck in your mind. Make certain to say thank you, that's a good word, and every good word encourages said writer to improve. Think of this as *your* role in their work. When the writer in your life can write full time without worrying about bankruptcy, you can be proud knowing that your encouragement helped them to achieve this (have I laid it on thick enough for them?). All this segues into the next two sections...

The 7th Commandment: It won't get any better unless you let people read it and you can accurately gauge the impact you made.

Every story has two basic parts, the parts people remember and everything that gets them from one such part to the next. Both are important, of course, but occasionally something you see as filler moves readers, and it's good to know what those parts are. You need to know how others react. If you never show your work about, you will never know the effect it has on readers. On the one hand, you can reassure yourself that your story is good, because no one has told you otherwise, in truth you're simply accepting paralysis as the natural state of affairs. This is the self confidence piece of the formula above, and you develop it by showing your work to others, and braving their critiques. If you can't get past showing your work to a dozen people, you'll never get to the point where it's read by thousands.

The 8th & 9th Commandments: Don't let the bastards beat you down.

These commandments are two different expressions of the thought expressed above, if you're going to do this, you will need to develop a hide of steel. Your friends and family may think you a touch oblivious, but in a sense, it is their "help" that you're hardening yourself to.

Never be too critical of yourself, that's what friends are for.

There is one sort of friend we need address before all others, that is the friend who knows full well what drives you, your fellow artist "friends". These are the people that understand the compulsion, and stab you in the back anyways. These are the people that know what a good word is, and even when they give it to you, can't resist slipping in some poison. These are the real bastards, learn to recognise them, and when their backs are turned slip the knife in good and deep. Better still, broom them from your life. It isn't easy, of course, but it's usually necessary. Believe me, I have barred many people of this sort from life, including a former romantic partner, and have zero regrets for doing it. Neither should you regret giving such people a swift kick to the head .

Even your real friends will fail you, mostly in the mistaken belief that they're doing you a favour, they'll say or do something quite damaging to your psyche, thinking that they're helping you get over all this writing nonsense. Worse still is their habit of humouring you, not that there is anything wrong with their humouring you, it's that they always insist that you be cognisant of the fact. Can't they simply be encouraging and leave it at that? You'll need be patient with them, also it will help you to find friends that are nothing like this.

In life you get what you pay for, and your family is free.

Family is often the biggest burden to a writer, especially for you younger writers. There is nothing worse than listening to your mother turn into a harpy just because you want to be a writer, rather than doctor, lawyer, or genetics researcher. Unless, of course, it is your father's disappointed stare and hang dog expression. Unless, of course, it is the 80 minute lecture where they tag team you and your unrealistic hopes. Even your siblings will abandon you in these circumstances. Most frustrating of all is the fact that NONE of them will ever once ask themselves the simple question "I wonder if he/she is good enough to do it?" No, your family doesn't hate you, they love you, and that's the problem. Were you to ask them, they would tell you that they were helping you.

Here it is, no writer in human history has EVER (well, there is one exception, but I'll get to that in a moment) had a good relationship with their parents. Psychotherapists theorise that because writers had bad parental relationships, they resorted to their art to work these things out. They have it backwards, the bad relationship starts the first time you tell your parents that your life's goal is to be a writer, things go down hill from there. Christopher Marlowe was thrown out of the house when he told his parents that he wanted to be a playwright, Ben Jonson's father got him drunk and packed off into the army after learning that his son was giving up his steady mason job to be a writer and scholar. Bernard Shaw's mother told him that no one made a living as a playwright anymore and George Eliot's parents were so embarrassed at their daughter's choice of careers that she changed her name to publish. Spouses are oft enough no better. Ask Virginia Woolf and Dawn Powell if you have any doubts. Ms. Powell observed one of the first rules of dealing with family; she was born and raised in Ohio, and shipped off for New York as soon as she was able. For those of you in the US, if your family lives on the east coast, start hunting for flats in LA, if they live on the west coast, time to start looking in New York. We call this the *inverse proportion of parental proximity* rule of writing, the closer

you live to your parents, the worse your writing is. The only writer in history with a supportive family was Jane Austen, and her father and brother were so inept that she would probably have done better for herself without them.

The 10th Commandment: Find a day job you can live with, and then arrange your life around your research & writing schedule.

I had a tiresome post with a company I really didn't like, the only saving grace was that I was required to sit on a commuter train for fifty minutes every morning and the same at night. This meant up to ninety minutes a day of prime productivity, as I hadn't anything else to do. I found a better job closer to home, and lost the commute, and shot my productivity to hell. After all, I no longer had that block of time where I had to write because there wasn't anything else to do. Try to arrange your life, not just your living situation, but also employment and leisure activity, to provide you with the maximum amount of time for writing/researching.

Research is essential to good writing, even in science fiction/fantasy, so get used to it. Thankfully the internet simplifies the search, google can be used to develop bibliographies and Amazon to doublecheck the quality of the sources. Inquisitiveness is an essential trait of all good writers, if you lack it it's time to develop it or find another second career.

The 11th Commandment: The New Age mystics are wrong, life is not a circle, it's a wave function, learn to recognise when your creative wave is on the wax and ride it for all it's worth.

Life is not a circle, it's a sine wave, a regular series of peaks and troughs, you may think that said peaks and troughs are irregular, but that's because you're traveling along it, rather than viewing it from a distance. These peaks and troughs happen everywhere in your life, personally, professionally and creatively. The hardest part of this is learning to write during the troughs, when you would rather do anything but. More importantly, however, learn your own wave pattern, learn recognise those points where your creative urges start to wax, and ride it for all it's worth. If ever a first draft will look good, it is going to be written during these times. As important as it is to force yourself to write in a trough, it is *more* important to take advantage of those peaks. Productivity is about the optimal use of your time, when it is flowing, don't stop, for anything. Even sleep if need be and possible. Of course, when you are in these overdrive periods, where everything is clicking and you're obsessively pouring yourself into your work, those around you will think you somewhat, well, insane. No, they probably won't ever understand, get used to it.

The 12th Commandment: Suffering doesn't produce great writing, great writers do.

The fabulous Penn Gillette gave us all these words to live by "*When I was young I used to think that I was suffering for my art, years later I realised that I was just suffering.*" There it is, in a nutshell. One of the oldest clichés is that of the suffering artist, the image of gaunt faced, starving artists, wrestling with their personal demons to produce something magnificent. It's also bunk. Great writers produce great work, needless suffering is just that. Look, if you're insistent on being a writer you will need learn this basic lesson, all your suffering will go into your work, yes, along with your joys, ecstasies, heartaches, and loves, because you are taking your experience brewing it in the cauldron of your imagination and making of it something new. If all that is going into your stew is misery and suffering, guess what the soup will taste like?

I have a former friend, a tremendously talented writer and comic. That being said, she is obsessed with her personal misery, and justifies it to herself as the price of being an artist. To be brutally frank, there are times when her comedy is so laden with melancholy that the audience is choked. If ever she learns to let go of the crutch, she will have her dream, to be a working writer and comic. Because in the end, that's all the suffering is, a crutch, and we all go through it. Learn to let go of the needless suffering and give it your best shot.

There you have it, the twelve commandments of writing, apply them as you will, it isn't an easy life, and the financial remuneration is slight. The best you can really hope is to make a living doing it and the satisfaction that comes from beating long odds. Remember, God in Heaven created the universe *ex nihilo*, you did not, you're merely a demiurge. You will take your researches, your knowledge and your experiences and use them to bring into being a new creation, a story not yet told. But like the works of a demiurge, your creations are works in progress, don't forget your duty to them.