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MA in Creative Writing

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'How has studying the novels selected called into question the dogmatic "rules" of creative writing, and what are the implications for your own work in progress?'

Discussing Vladimir Nabokov's 'Lolita', David Lodge says:

'The golden rule of fictional prose is that there are no rules – except the ones that each writer sets for him or herself.' (Lodge, 1992)

However, in this essay I will argue that aspiring writers developing their practice, particularly in creative writing courses and in writing groups, encounter an informal set of 'rules' or truisms. The definition of these 'rules' is widely acknowledged and agreed by participants in these environments, particularly regarding to feedback given in writing 'workshops'.

It is difficult to find the most pervasive 'rules' documented in written form but their existence is often referenced in textbooks or online blogs, particularly when their teachings are disputed. For example: 'Rigid rules are made and enforced by people who don't know good writing when they read it' (Darwin, 2010).

In this essay I will draw on my own experience of writing and interacting with other writers to identify some of the more commonly known 'rules' and consider how their indiscriminate and often erroneous application has been encouraged by some providers of writing advice. I will also take some examples from the texts studied in the course to illustrate clear exceptions to these 'rules' and how skilful authors ignore or break them.

The 'Rules of Creative Writing' exist almost as a form of oral folklore – often manifested as 'quick tips' or 'questions to ask yourself' in newspaper or magazine articles or blog postings. Such nuggets of advice have little connection with literary criticism and tend to reflect the simplistic concept that there is a 'correct' way of writing.

These 'rules' are implicitly acknowledged by the writing community as a whole but, because of their dogmatic inflexibility, are rarely documented. Even writers of prescriptively titled works, such as 'How To Write A Blockbuster', include caveats about over-zealous rule application.

These rules tend to be cited informally – either repeated orally in a workshop session by a tutor (or more usually a poorly-informed student), as comments scribbled in the margins of a manuscript or as transient remarks in

an on-line chat-room. In common with other forms of communication that have been passed down in an oral tradition, creative writing 'rules' tend to be over-simplified, often based on misunderstood pieces of advice taken out of context.

Because their exact documentation is elusive, I carried out some primary research for this essay among a sample of writers (including aspiring, professional, published and student writers) I have met through courses and social networking sites. All immediately acknowledged the existence of the rules and I have collected some of the examples in Appendix 1.

Of the many potential rules I could examine, I will discuss the following in this essay:

- 'You must not over-write' – a rule that aims to curb excessive or indulgent writing but can, if misapplied, limit ambition and innovation.
- 'Adverbs suck' – this is the most extreme form of much advice about diction which discourages writers from using types of word such as adjectives and adverbs but also celebrates a conservative approach to vocabulary.
- 'Do not have whole pages of dialogue'
- 'Show don't tell' – this injunction is widely used for many different purposes and interpretations and has many subordinate rules that seek to influence narrative strategy and form (e.g. description, tense, character interior/exterior, etc.).

While the rules themselves may be elusive to pin-down, sources that inspire and encourage their practice can be identified. One example is a series of series of tips by established authors in an article in *The Guardian*. Many concentrated on the practice of writing, motivation or theme but some were extremely prescriptive:

'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...Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said"...To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin.' Elmore Leonard in *the Guardian*, 20th February 2011

While Leonard's quasi-religious tone may be slightly tongue-in-cheek, his use of the word sin is echoed by Stephen King who gives similar advice in 'On Writing':

'While to write adverbs is human, to write he said or she said is divine.' King, 2000, p.144

Leonard and King are established writers in the crime and horror genres where application of these fundamentalist-sounding instructions may be successful.

¹ King's emboldening.

However, one of the authors studied on the course, Margaret Drabble commits at least four mortal sins in the space of half a page in *The Millstone*:

'I'm pregnant,' I said crossly...
'I don't see why,' I stubbornly repeated...
'Roger, you mean,' I said faintly.
Drabble, 1965, p. 36

The advice is obviously intended to warn inexperienced writers of the tautological dangers of weakening the impact of a piece of dialogue with an adverb that repeats what the reader can infer from a character's speech – to use King's own example: "Don't be such a fool, Jekyll," Utterson said contemptuously.' (King, 2000, p. 140).

However, Drabble's use of the modifying adverb and 'repeated' rather than 'said' cannot be dismissed so crassly. In the example from *The Millstone*², Rosamund makes the shocking revelation (for the mid-60s) that she is unmarried and pregnant; the conversation with Joe immediately moves to the possibility of illegal abortion. Drabble is extremely economical with Rosamund's dialogue, realistically limiting most of her speech to three or four words. In this context the use of the adverbs 'crossly', 'stubbornly' and 'faintly' and the verb 'repeated' rather than 'said' demonstrates more concise and authentic insight into Rosamund's personality and state-of-mind, and the consequent direction of the novel, than would any other narrative strategy (e.g. implausibly lengthy lines of spoken dialogue or introspective internal dialogue).

King's best-selling book has had a potentially significant influence on how large numbers of aspiring writers judge what makes 'good' writing. However, it is foolish to believe that its advice is universally applicable to all, if not most, forms of fiction. 'On Writing's' subtitle is 'A Memoir of the Craft' and King lucidly articulates the underlying principles, using humorous and engaging prose, of his own successful style – a style that he terms a craft (i.e. something that can be learned). It is apt that its section on writing techniques makes an extended analogy with a toolbox:

'I want to suggest to you that to write to your best ability, it behooves (sic) you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle to carry it with you.' King, 2000, p. 125

The implication is that writing is democratic: there are no barriers to entry. Properly equipped with good toolbox any literate person has a reasonable chance of succeeding.

Nabokov, another author studied, held exactly the opposite view. In the closing remarks of his lecture on Jane Austen he states:

² I would have quoted at more length but edited for space purposes.

'I do not believe anybody can be taught to write fiction unless he already possesses literary talent. Only in the latter case can a young author be helped to find himself, to free his language from clichés, to eliminate clumsiness, to form a habit of searching with unflinching patience for the right word, the only right word which will convey with the utmost precision the exact shade and intensity of thought.'
Nabokov, 1980, p. 60

Compare Nabokov's 'unflinching patience' with King's approach to diction and vocabulary:

'You can happily pack what [vocabulary] you have without the slightest guilt or inferiority...Some writers have enormous vocabularies; these are folks who'd know if there really is such a thing as an insalubrious dithyramb or a cozening raconteur...put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your tool box, and don't make any conscious effort to improve it.' King, 2000. (pp. 125-9)

'On Writing' contains several other strident passages on writing style that appear to have influenced and re-inforced common writing 'rules', some of are quoted at further length in Appendix 2.

By contrast Nabokov's concept of a 'good reader' (surely anathema to commercially motivated fiction) is someone who possesses the following: 'imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense' (Nabokov, 1960, p. 3). Whereas Nabokov expects the reader to refer to a dictionary, King even appears to discourage the writer from reaching for one:

'Remember the basic rule of vocabulary is use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colourful.' King, 2000 (p. 130)

In 'Pnin' Nabokov illustrates his own determination to use precisely the right word by drawing his vocabulary from idioms unusual to English language fiction. He quotes extensively from other languages, often Pnin's native Russian but also others from Europe, of which Nabokov expects his reader to have at least some basic knowledge. Watching a Soviet documentary Pnin notes:

'Handsome, unkempt girls marched in an immemorial Spring Festival with banners bearing snatches of old Russian ballads, such as "Ruki proc hot Korei," "Bas les mains devant la Corée," "La paz vencera a la Guerra," "Der Friede besiegt den Kreig." Nabokov, 1957, p.68

To fully understand Pnin and appreciate its humour, a reader would need to be familiar with Russian, French, Spanish and German – or at least reference dictionaries of those languages. Similarly, Nabokov borrows anatomical terminology:

'The organs concerned in the production of English speech sounds are the larynx, the velum, the lips, the tongue (that punchinello in the troupe), and last, but not least, the jaw; mainly upon its over-energetic and somewhat ruminant motion did Pnin rely when translating in class passages in the Russian grammar or some poem by Pushkin.'
ibid, p.54.

King and Nabokov represent two contrasting attitudes towards language itself. To King, language is purely the medium by which the narrative is delivered – a vehicle for the story. The two quotations above from Pnin suggest that Nabokov is at least as much interested in the nature of English – the physical process of speaking words and the equivalent means of expression in other languages.

David Lodge says of Nabokov:

'[His] virtuosity in a language that was not his mother-tongue never ceases to amaze; but perhaps it was this very fact that allowed him to discover the full resources of English prose, and to use them with uninhibited delight.' Lodge, 1992, p.96

Nabokov's use of language is also delightful for a reader interested in language. However, Lodge's use of the word 'uninhibited' is significant. One of the most frequently applied 'rules' of creative writing is 'don't over-write' – defined by the OED as to 'write too elaborately or ornately'. This definition is clearly relative – how can an objective judgement be made as to whether a piece of writing is too elaborate or too ornate?

The general advice against over-writing may be a reaction to Nabokov's inherently elitist argument that it is only writers in possession of literary talent who can be taught to produce writing where execution matches ambition. The expansion of the creative writing industry to service a market of an interested, wider public inevitably means that the majority will fail to meet the standards set by Nabokov – and for most participants any attempt to create elaborate prose would be doomed to be over-written. Such a conclusion appears to have inspired another tip in the Guardian's article:

'Don't be one of those writers who sentence themselves to a lifetime of sucking up to Nabokov.' Geoff Dyer quoted in the Guardian, 20th February 2011

Aspiring to 'suck up to Nabokov' is presumably a reference to a desire to use the resources of the English language uninhibitedly – i.e. to risk over-writing.

This may be a very practical rule. Nabokov realised that avoiding over-writing involved a risky and painstaking approach, involving the avoidance of clichés, 'unflinching patience' and 'utmost precision'. In any case, there is no agreed objective measurement of such success – one tutor's purple prose may be another's 'quality of majesty' (King, 2000, p.137).

King makes an interesting point about causes of bad writing:

'I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing.' King,
2000 p.142

In this context, King means the fear to adopt the style as defined in his own toolbox. However, his assertion suggests an underlying motivation behind many of the rules and tips given to writers: protection from fear of failure. However, advice aimed at limiting indulgence may also risk limiting ambition and inhibiting innovation.

Another indirect example of the 'rules' of writing is contained in the following from a checklist given to students of a leading UK University's³ Advanced Creative Writing Course in its assessment submission guidelines:

- *Are any metaphors or similes used? Do they work?*
- *Is the point of view consistent throughout the story?*
- *Do the descriptions utilise the senses? Are they specific?*
- *Is there too much or too little description?*
- *Are adjectives or adverbs overused? Are the nouns and verbs strong enough?*
- *Is there too much dialogue or not enough?*

UK University, 2008

The publication of these points as part of course materials implies there are standards against which work will be assessed – and that the success of the students in the examination depends, at least to some degree, on following these implied 'rules'. The first three points are prescriptive: the work should use metaphors and similes; have a consistent point-of-view⁴; and descriptions should utilise the senses. The second three points are, as with the OED definition of over-writing, subjective – presumably the marker has the experience and skill to make that subjective judgement. However, the existence in the course materials of this list, even if intended as an aide-memoire, may encourage the less experienced writer to believe there is a ideal amount of description or dialogue⁵ or that sensory description is necessary in every piece of fiction.

The above example shows how good advice that needs to be intelligently applied in context or its meaning can become corrupted. Combined with the vociferous tone of popular works like 'On Writing' and bon-mots in the media, it is unsurprising that advice becomes reduced to a pithy slogan. A typical example is a blog post found on the Internet headed: 'Why Adverbs Suck':

³ University's name has been anonymised but the author has the original documentation.

⁴ Admittedly the work assessed was a short-story or first few thousand words of a novel so there would be little scope for many changes of point-of-view

⁵ Or at least a definable point where too much is excessive or too little is inadequate

I've been coming across a lot of stylistic guides over the past few days ... about great writing tutorials online. A lot of them are good, and a lot of them talk about the horror of adverbs.' Novelr, 2007

Such a dogmatic view on an element of the English language takes no account of the skill with which a writer like Nabokov uses adverbs sparingly but inventively: such as Pnin 'lavishly sugaring his coffee' (p. 91) or 'delicately exiling' books to a chair' (p. 26).

Similarly, other writers studied on the course have produced powerful pieces of writing that challenge 'rules' such as 'Never Have Full Pages of Dialogue'. At the start of chapter six of 'Disgrace' J.M.Coetzee uses six pages of almost continuous dialogue to describe the hearing Lurie's faces after being accused of having an affair with a student. Physical and sensory description is minimal, generally limited to the terse 'a general shifting and shuffling' and 'he takes a deep breath' (p. 48). The use of the present tense accentuates an impression that the reader is participating in the hearing in real time and further justifies a concentration on dialogue. Coetzee largely dispenses with dialogue attribution, expertly providing enough context to allow the reader to infer the correct speaker or planting enough information in the dialogue to imply the speaker's identity:

*"'We want to give you an opportunity to state your position.'
'I have stated my position. I am guilty.'
'Guilty of what?'
'Of all that I am charged with.'
'You are taking us in circles, Professor Lurie.'
'Of everything Ms Isaacs avers, and of keeping false records.'"*
Coetzee, 2000, p. 49

The conventional 'rule' earlier advocated by Leonard and King would have tagged 'Hakim said' or 'Lurie said' to at least some of these lines. This rule is based on the assumption that the 'he said/she said' speech tags are so familiar to a reader (unlike other verbs) that they are subconsciously ignored and the pace is improved. However, if a writer has the ability to largely dispense with dialogue attribution without confusing the reader experiences a heightened sense of immediacy.

Many of the dogmatic creative writing 'rules' appear to have been derived from visual media, such as film and television. At its most fundamental, the maxim 'show don't tell' is an assertion of the superiority of the visual over the verbal technique of story-telling. The ubiquity of visual media in contemporary society, particularly compared with the eras of the Nabokov and Drabble novels, means that 'show don't tell' is an easily understood concept – fiction teaching often refers to 'close-ups' or 'wide angle shots' to explain relative closeness of point-of-view or the use of filmic techniques to deal with the passage of time, such as cuts or montages:

'I find it useful to think of [show don't tell] as a film: what would I expect/want to see on the screen.' Watts, 2006, p93.

However, 'show don't tell' is a rule that also limits the reader's imagination if over-applied. Indirectly told narrative can be far more effective than an explicit 'showing' of an event. In 'Disgrace' Coetzee 'tells' the pivotal rape scene from Lurie's very limited point-of-view (he's locked in the toilet unable to see or hear anything that is happening to his daughter, Lucy):

'His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past.' Coetzee, 2000, p.94.

This quotation could be viewed as a metaphorical rebuke to 'show don't tell' – the narrative is in the 'hands of strangers' to be 'set in stone' – the reader does not witness the event. The closest the narrator comes to describing the rape is in Lurie's imagination:

'A vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them.' *ibid* p.97

The first six chapters of 'The Misogynist' also flout the 'show don't tell' rule. Piers Paul Read uses the opening of the novel to 'tell' a comprehensive account of Jomier's life that dwells exclusively on his past (career, education) and his outlook on life and his own circumstances. The narrative starts 'showing' events in real-time in chapter seven, signalled by the opening line 'It is half term'. The novel does not quote spoken dialogue⁶ until page 46 – surely an instance of 'too little dialogue' (if this is a valid concept). After this point, the novel unfolds in a more conventional form: 'showing' with dialogue and using the immediacy of present tense. The 'telling' in the first six chapters allows the rest of the plot to flow without the encumbrance of having to entwine Jomier's considerable backstory into its events.

Nicola Morgan makes a general point about 'show don't tell' that could apply to many of the assumed rules: 'as a rule it's rubbish but as a guideline it has some point.' Morgan, 2011 p. 164.

Regarding my own writing and development as a writer, I believe that the scepticism I have developed about simply applied "rules" shows that I have learned enough about literary techniques to confidently apply these to my own literary practice. I have also become more selective about whose advice and criticism helps my own writing – as one of Ian Rankin's tips quoted in the Guardian says: 'Learn what criticism to accept' (Ian Rankin in the Guardian, 20th February 2011).

3,300 words.

⁶ The only dialogue up to this point is Jomier's internal musings.

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Appendix 1

'Rules' identified by other writers in response to my research (thanks to Guy Russell, Rick Kellum and Charlotte Haigh):

- Point of View switches - can sometimes be ok - even EM Forster's 'Aspects of a Novel' says so
- Uninterrupted page of dialogue - John Fowles does this a lot - so does Hemingway.
- 'Make your character likeable' - lots of examples where they aren't! Eg American Psycho!
- 'Remove noise words' - for some first-person voices they're an important part of the character
- Never start a chapter with dialogue.
- Never begin a sentence with "and".
- And of course, write what you know. How many dull novels about young men moving to the city to become writers has that last rule produced?
- You've already got the adverbs one. Ditto adjectives.
- Also, 'show, don't tell.' Excellent advice in most cases, but there are exceptions.
- And maybe something about the importance of strong plot, which I think is partly just a taste and fashion thing - I've read a lot of early-to-mid 20th century novels this year without strong plots, and they have still been brilliant, gripping reads (Carson McCullers, Patrick Hamilton, Jean Rhys). Then again, plotting's my biggest weak point so I would say that!

Appendix Two

Stephen King – ‘On Writing’ – Selected Quotations

‘*You should avoid the passive tense.* I’m not the only one who says so; you can find the same advice in *The Elements of Style*...I think timid writers like [passive verbs] for the same reason timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe...it’s weak, it’s circuitous and it’s frequently tortuous, as well.’ King, 2000 (pp.136-7)

‘*The adverb is not your friend*...Adverbs, like the passive voice, seem to have been created with the timid writer in mind...With adverbs the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn’t expressing himself/herself clearly...I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs and I will shout it from the rooftops.’ King, 2000 (pp. 138-9)

‘The commonest [tool] of all, the bread of writing is vocabulary. In this case you can happily pack what you have without the slightest guilt or inferiority...Some writers have enormous vocabularies; these are folks who’d know if there really *is* such a thing as an insalubrious dithyramb or a cozening raconteur...put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your tool box, and don’t make any conscious effort to improve it...One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes.’ King, 2000. (pp. 125-9)

‘Remember the basic rule of vocabulary is *use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colourful.*’ King, 2000 (p. 130)

‘I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing.’ King, 2000 p.142
‘While to write adverbs is human, to write **he said** or **she said** is divine.’ King, 2000, p.144

King., S., (2000), ‘On Writing’, Hodder and Stoughton, London