GOOD WRITERS ALWAYS FOLLOW MY RULES

Monique Dufour and Jennifer Ahern-Dodson

What is good writing? And how does good writing get written? In the first question, writing is a noun—a product made of elements such as words, sentences, and paragraphs. In the second question, writing is a verb—a process by which we create these texts.

Wisdom about writing—as a product and as a process—is often expressed as hard and fast rules. Always begin an essay with a catchy hook. Never use the passive voice. Always make your writing flow. Always make a detailed outline before you start to write. Never edit as you draft.

People espouse unambiguous rules about writing for many good reasons. Writing is a notoriously challenging, complex, even mysterious skill; nevertheless, we are expected to learn it and to do it well throughout our lives. And there is often much at stake when we write. We create texts to persuade others about all manner of significant things: the best course of action, our qualifications for a job, the quality of our ideas, and even the content of our characters. Do we seem smart and capable? Are our claims true and fair? Will things turn out as we wish? With these questions at stake, why wouldn't we want to discover and use foolproof writing techniques? Adhering to clear-cut do's and don'ts could cut through the ambiguity and difficulty of writing, and of making judgments about the quality of texts. So let's identify the rules for good writing, state them unequivocally, and learn to write effectively for once and for all.

The trouble is: An unwavering rule-driven approach to writing often causes more difficulties than it solves. First, there is an important distinction between rules and techniques. Simply put,

techniques are ways of doing things. For instance, one can approach the writing process as a sequence of steps that should follow a strict order: Have and refine an idea, conduct all the research, write a complete draft from the beginning to the end, revise the draft, edit it, and let it go. The writer completes each step in the process before moving on to the next. (Writing assignments in school are commonly structured this way.) This linear approach to the writing process is a useful technique that works under many circumstances. But it's not the only way to approach the writing process, and it doesn't work especially well for some tasks. Still, for many writers, it has calcified into a hard and fast rule. This good option becomes the only option.

But good options may not work under every circumstance. Thus, when writers treat options as rules, writing can actually become more frustrating because the writer insists on abiding by the rule, *whether it works or not*. For example, that linear model of the writing process can be very effective—it might work for a writer for virtually every email, report, and research project she writes, year after year. Until it doesn't. Perhaps she's writing a long, complex project such as a dissertation or a book. Suddenly, she will likely need to revise her prose and her ideas, continue her research, and incorporate feedback throughout the process. She might write the introduction last. She may need to write parts without knowing where everything is leading. In short, she may need to abandon the belief that writing must proceed through clearly delineated, linear steps. It's not that the linear model of the writing process never works. The problem arises when a writer treats it as a rule. And it's especially frustrating because writers think they are being good and doing the right thing by following the rules, only to find that those rules more often impede their progress than enable it.

As writing consultants for faculty instructors, we have witnessed many smart, capable teachers who were *undermined* rather than helped by their own staunch rules about the writing process. They believed unequivocally that they could only write when they had big blocks of uninterrupted time. Or that they should never share unpolished, messy works-in-progress. Or that they could only work on one project at a time. Of course, most faculty writers simply don't routinely enjoy big blocks of uninterrupted time. They likely need to write in smaller windows of time—30 minutes here, an hour there—between their administrative, mentoring, and teaching responsibilities (not to mention their lives). They could learn to create time machines, or they could change their rules about the

writing process and learn techniques that allow them to write in the time they have. Similarly, writers who refuse to share unpolished or partial works-in-progress for feedback from trusted readers often end up wasting their precious writing time in the effort to advance a project alone. We have seen faculty members end up feeling like bad writers in the midst of personal failure, when in fact they are simply making the mistake of treating a technique as a rule.

Rule-driven writing instruction may intend to make writing easier, but it often undermines the very skills it is designed to foster. For instance, many undergraduate writers have been taught that they must create a detailed outline for a research paper before they begin writing. And they are often told that a first draft of a research paper must be presented in polished, error-free prose, and that the draft must be complete, from beginning to end. In fact, we know many teachers who refuse outright to read messy or incomplete works-in-progress. So, students put extensive effort into planning just how the essay will proceed and what it will say before they write. And they spend time carefully polishing prose in a first draft. Of course, outlining can be a powerful conceptual and organizational tool. However, when writers believe that they must outline first, they often lock themselves into the ideas as expressed on the outline, rather than allowing their ideas to develop and change as they work. Writers who always create detailed outlines and who write very polished preliminary drafts also tend to resist revision, because they have already committed a great deal of upfront effort on their initial plans and prose. By treating the linear model of the writing process as a rule, teachers can create writers who don't want to and don't know how to revise as a powerful part of thinking and writing.

We propose another way. Think of good writing as the thoughtful use of an evolving repertoire, rather than adherence to a static list of commandments. In order to become a skillful writer, one discovers and experiments with a range of techniques. A writer draws upon this repertoire to meet the needs of the project, the ideas at hand, and the rhetorical situation. As one's repertoire grows, and as one becomes practiced in drawing upon it, one can grow more confident about overcoming difficulties, taking up challenges, and expressing one's ideas effectively. Ultimately, writers become skillful when they are willing to assess and reassess the quality of any idea about writing in terms of its effectiveness in their own experiences.

People will continue to present useful techniques as though they are divine laws. However, we suggest that writers mentally translate rules into suggestions and *what if* questions. Take, for example, the common advice to always begin an essay with a catchy hook. Catchy hooks such as apt, vivid anecdotes can be used to excellent effect, if they meet the needs of the text and the circumstances. A writer can try it out and see what happens. What effect does it have on the text? Does it meet the audience's and context's needs (i.e., the rhetorical situation)? Does it contribute to expressing what the writer is trying to say? How do real readers respond? In this way, writers can experiment with techniques, deliberate about their implications, and make judgments about the best course of action among their options. And, most importantly, writers focus their goals and purposes, rather than on the rote adherence to rules, which is more meaningful, and more fun.

To be clear: We are not suggesting that there are no rules and that rules don't matter. Without adherence to conventions of grammar and usage, for instance, many readers may misunderstand a writer's point or not take them seriously. However, writers are ultimately undermined by a thoroughgoing rule-bound mentality. First, if writing is simply a matter of following rules and plugging in formulas, it's boring to most people. Second, in writing, problems are normal. When we think of writing as an opportunity to use and develop our repertoires to make and express meaning, writers can define the problems and needs before them and draw on their resources to solve them with creativity and aplomb. Perhaps we don't have as much uninterrupted time to write as we once did. We cannot create more time where there is none, but we can learn to write in the time we have. Perhaps our longer, more complex ideas cannot be crammed into a five-paragraph theme. We can learn new ways of organizing an essay to express an ambiguous claim. We don't need to stop writing when the rules don't work. And, we don't need to read and judge one another's writing only in terms of our own strictures. When we acknowledge that many of our rules are in fact techniques, and when we understand that writing is the skillful use of evolving repertoires, we can focus on expressing ideas worth sharing and become the kind of readers and writers who are in a position to listen.

Further Reading

For more about the process of writing, identifying potential pitfalls, and expanding one's repertoire of strategies, see Peter

Elbow's *Writing with Power* (Oxford University Press), Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (Shambhala), Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (Anchor), and Paul Silva's *How to Write a Lot* (American Psychological Association). For more on developing revision strategies as a writer, consider Joe Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Utah State University Press), Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools* (Little, Brown and Company), and Verlyn Klinkenborg's *Several Short Sentences about Writing* (Vintage).

For more about how writing scholars are thinking about the relationship between beliefs about writing and college writing assignments, take a look at Dan Melzer's *Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing* (Utah State University Press) and Nancy Sommers's "Across the Drafts" (*College Composition and Communication* journal).

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Author Bios

Jennifer Ahern-Dodson teaches writing at Duke University and consults with faculty across the disciplines on ways to employ and assess writing in their own courses. She studies the relationship between writing and teaching and has been working with student, community, and faculty writers for more than 20 years. She is @jaherndodson on Twitter.

Monique Dufour is an assistant collegiate professor in the history department at Virginia Tech, where she teaches the history of medicine, the history of books and reading, and writing. She also directs the Medicine and Society minor. Before completing her PhD in science and technology studies, she was a faculty development consultant at Virginia Tech's Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. As a writer and cultural historian, she investigates scenes of encounter among medicine, science, and the humanities from the 20th century to the present. Her book manuscript, *The Embodied Reader*, is a history of bibliotherapy, the use and study of reading as a form of medical treatment and a path to health.