



Rules for Writers

By
Michael McCollum



I began reading science fiction for enjoyment in 1956, at the age of ten. For the next 18 years, I read voraciously in a variety of fields, but science fiction was always my first love. Then, in 1974, something happened. I began to enjoy my reading less and less. The things I read began to irritate me. I could no longer willingly suspend my disbelief. I kept catching the authors in mistakes, or in what I considered to be poorly executed passages in their stories and books. I bored the people around me by telling them how much better the stories would have been if the author had just . . .

In other words, I was feeling the first stirrings of the urge to write myself.

Nearly every writer will tell you the same. You know someone is coming down with the writing bug when they begin to carp and criticize everything they read. Generally, this phase ends with the poor victim throwing a book or magazine across the room and yelling loudly, "Any idiot can write better than this!"

It is a scary feeling the first time you realize that you might possibly be able to compete with the masters whom you have enjoyed reading all those years. The feeling is similar to when you first tried to dance. You watched others gyrate the night away, you saw how they moved their arms and legs in time to the music, but your brain just wasn't sure how to start everything flapping in the proper rhythm.

I toyed seriously with the idea of becoming a writer throughout the spring of 1974. I am not sure what set me to thinking along those lines, but I remember clearly the event that convinced me that I ought to try my luck. *Analog Science Fiction* magazine printed the text of a speech that Robert Heinlein gave at the Naval Academy in 1973. Robert Heinlein was the greatest science fiction writer who ever lived (even his enemies agree on that). He was a graduate of Annapolis whose naval career was shortened by tuberculosis. The subject of Mr. Heinlein's speech was what it takes to be a writer. I read the article with great interest, comparing his requirements for writers with my own experience. To my surprise, I found that I met many of the qualifications.

It was in his Annapolis speech that Mr. Heinlein listed his four rules for being a successful writer:

Robert Heinlein's Rules for Writers

First, you must write!

Second, you must submit what you write.

Third, you must never rewrite except to editorial prescription.

Fourth, you must continue doing this until you are successful.

Like all great wisdom, the rules are remarkably simple, but also very subtle. Let us take them one at a time and explore the ramifications of each:

You Must Write!

There are probably fewer than 10,000 professional writers in the entire world. This is a remarkable statistic when you consider that virtually everyone alive sooner or later gets the urge to write. The primary reason that very few people are writers (compared to the huge number who would like to be) lies in a violation of Heinlein's First Rule. Quite simply, having the desire to be a writer is not enough. To be a writer, you must sit down and actually write! Fully 99% of those who think they might want to write one day never do. They talk endlessly about writing the great American novel, but they never manage to commit even a single word to paper.

"I don't know how!" you say. "I haven't taken any courses in it. Someone has to teach me."

I am sorry, but nothing could be more wrong. There are classes that can educate you about writing, but there are none that teach you how to write. If the point seems excessively subtle, then consider what it takes to be a painter. All of the art classes in the world will not help if you do not have an aptitude for painting. The same is true for writing, and for the same reason.

Writing is an art, not a science. There are quite a number of techniques that will make you a better writer, but telling a story is something for which you must have an innate feel.

If you have a basic aptitude for stringing words together, then you can sharpen your technique by reading voraciously and writing voluminously. However, no one can really teach you the technique out of a book. The sad truth is that successful writers don't really know how they do it. That is why you so often see a movie that clicks with the public and makes hundreds of millions of dollars, immediately followed by a sequel that is so bad that it dies at the box office. Often, the same screenwriter writes both the original and the sequel. So why couldn't he produce a blockbuster the second time? Because he does not know how he did it the first time. He sat for long hours in front of typewriter or computer screen and worked on the plot until the elements just sort of fell into place. Almost any author who has written a masterpiece would give his right arm to be able to do it again. This is why so many writers turn out to be one-book sensations. (Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*, comes immediately to mind.)

In the same article in which he promulgated his four rules for writing, Robert Heinlein also commented that "Creative writing classes have ruined more writers than

anything else I know.” In other words, it is a skill that can be learned, but not one that can be taught.

Don't let me discourage you from taking creative writing courses. Just remember that they are no substitute for actually writing. The one thing all successful writers have in common is the ability to make the words flow smoothly, and it takes a lot of practice to learn how to do that. The rule of thumb is that you have to write a million words before you write the first word that sells.

In my case, I knew I couldn't possibly write a story. Instead of *writing* a story, I set out to *fake* writing a story. That is, since it was a skill I knew I couldn't possibly master, I decided to counterfeit a short story. So, beginning on July 15, 1974, I typed my counterfeit story, “Morrison's Mountain.” Six weeks later, when I had written 7500 words, I discovered that my fake short story sounded just like the real thing!

It was not of professional quality, of course. I was too inexperienced for that. The narrative was choppy, the subject matter was too lightweight, and the punctuation was poor, but at least it had the *feel* of a real work of fiction.

The night I finally finished, I had a revelation. I discovered that writing a story was mostly a matter of putting one word down after the other, and doing so in the same way as all those stories I'd read. Although I started out to fake a story, what I had actually produced was a primitive, but very real, piece of fiction.

Having discovered that I could write, I set out to prove that I was better than those I had criticized so often. Three and a half years and 20 attempts later, I finally became adept enough to actually sell a story. (My first published piece of fiction, “Duty, Honor, Planet,” is available for free download from Sci Fi - Arizona.)

You Must Submit What You Write

An interesting phenomenon occurs after you have agonized for dozens of hours over a story or article. What started out as merely a collection of words has suddenly taken on a life of its own. It has become your baby! And like most parents, you are very protective of your newborn offspring, so much so that it will break your heart if anyone criticizes it. So, rather than send it to an editor and risk rejection, you put it in the drawer and never show it to anyone but your family and a few close friends. They, of course, tell you how talented a writer you are.

Sorry, but it does not work that way. It does no good to have your deathless prose parked in a drawer in your desk. It does not count unless strangers read your work. After all, they are not related to you. In fact, you cannot claim to be a *professional* writer until someone has actually paid money to read your work! If you are going to be a writer, then you must suffer the slings and arrows of rejection. No one likes to be rejected; there just isn't any other way to get into the business.

So, when you have produced the best piece of writing you can, you must stuff it into an envelope (don't forget to include the self-addressed-stamped-envelope for the inevitable rejection), and mail it to someone who might actually buy your words from you.

That someone is called an editor. Editors are very busy people who get tired of reading manuscripts in the slush pile. However, they also have magazines or books to fill

with prose. This makes them desperate to find people who can write. So, despite your fear that an editor will reject your work, there is always the slim possibility that they will buy your submission. They certainly are not going to buy it if you don't send it in.

You Must Never Rewrite Except To Editorial Prescription

One must be careful about Heinlein's Third Rule for Writers. It is dangerous! By not understanding its proper application, I put back the date of my first professional sale by one full year.

As Heinlein pointed out in his speech to the midshipmen, a writer's only capital is his or her time. The number of words you can write in a lifetime is finite. For some of us, that total is relatively low, while for others (such as Isaac Asimov), the words flow copiously for decades. Whether you write quickly or slowly, however, each day that passes is a day you can never recover. So, do not waste your days going over something you have already finished. Retracing old steps is wasteful. Once a story or article is done, mail it out, start another one, and do not look back – unless an editor asks you to, of course.

Writing new words is hard work, but polishing old words is easy. This simple reality is often a trap for new writers. They polish, and polish, and polish again, working to get everything just so! It is a temptation that you should avoid. Endless polishing is bad for two reasons: Not only are you wasting time that you could more profitably use in writing something new, but there is little chance that you will make your story better.

The reason Rule Three is dangerous is that it only applies to finished works. To say that one should not polish endlessly is not to imply that one should not polish at all. In fact, rewriting is the secret to good writing. However, like all virtues, this one can be a vice when carried to extreme. I did not understand this when I began to write. I took Heinlein's rule at face value and sent my stories out before they were truly ready.

I learned to write in the days before computers. I composed on a Smith-Corona portable typewriter, often *tap-tap-tapping* well past midnight. My technique in those days was to do a rough draft of a story in manuscript format (double space, with big margins all around). I would then go over my story and edit it with a pencil, marking out words and sections I didn't like, modifying others, rearranging sentences and paragraphs, and just basically scribbling all over the typewritten page. I would then type the final copy from the marked up draft, making sure I had as few typographical errors as possible. Then I would send it off with high hopes. A few months later it would come back rejected, by which time I had another one ready to go.

My problem was that I wasn't a good enough writer to produce professional quality work with only a single draft. In fact, I maintain that there are not many people on Earth who can. Because of a too rigorous application of Heinlein's Rule No. 3, I was not polishing my stories enough.

I eventually came to realize this and added a second draft to my working technique. I called it "blue typing" because the second draft was always typed on blue paper. To my surprise, I sold my first stories almost immediately after adopting this new technique!

The reason a second draft is important is simple. When you start out to write a story, you really do not know how it is going to end. Thus, the first draft is written with only the most cursory knowledge of the story's structure. However, when you do the second draft, you have read the story and know precisely where you are headed. Now manually retyping a manuscript is a boring job that takes very little conscious thought. And while your brain is bored, it thinks about the story. I found myself working on passages that seemed dead, only to have my subconscious provide me with a more exciting way to say the same thing. Often I became so excited that I could not retype fast enough to read the improved story as it poured out onto the paper. Since I was now intimately familiar with the story, I often found places where I could insert hints as to future events, or set up surprises for the reader to find later.

In fact, upon finishing my second draft, I was amazed at how much better my stories read. My fiction began to develop a professional feel. After the second draft on blue paper, I would then go through with a pencil and edit everything a second time before doing the final draft.

The advent of word processors has largely made the multiple draft system obsolete, at least insofar as it was practiced with typewriters. Now we find changing the words so effortless that we write everything a dozen times or more.

There comes a point in time, however, when the story is complete. You have polished it the very best you can, there is nothing left to do. That is the point when Heinlein's Rule No. 3 kicks in. Do your best, finish the story, send it out, and then forget about it. Do not spend the next ten years trying to polish it further. All you will end up with is a mess.

You Must Continue Doing This Until You Are Successful

The last rule is the most important. You have forced yourself to sit down and write, you've risked rejection by submitting your work to someone who might actually buy it, and despite temptation, you have avoided doing that 103rd rewrite because it isn't necessary. Now what do you do? Simple. You persevere. Having finished one story or article, you start a second. When you have twelve under your belt, you go for thirteen. You keep writing and submitting, and you never give up.

The sad truth is that you can expect to collect at least 50 rejections before you become skilled enough to sell your first work. I wish it were not so, but wishing doesn't carry much weight in the real world.

If you want to be a writer, you must doggedly pursue your goal through all manner of adversity. Editors are notoriously unable to see just how brilliant our work is ... at first. Later they become more perceptive. (Funny how that works!) Often the difference between a successful writer and an unsuccessful one is simply a matter of endurance.

As Robert Heinlein told the midshipmen thirty years ago, if you follow his Rules for Writers long enough, you will be successful. He guaranteed it!

So do I.

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The End

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Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$4.50

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$4.50

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$4.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$4.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$4.50

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

Non-Fiction Books

12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

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This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

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This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.