

## “The Rules for Writing Practice” from *Wild Mind*, by Natalie Goldberg

For fifteen years now, at the beginning of every writing workshop, I have repeated the rules for writing practice. So, I will repeat them again here. And I want to say why I repeat them: Because they are the bottom line, the beginning of all writing, the foundation of learning to trust your own mind. Trusting your own mind is essential for writing. Words come out of the mind.

And I believe in these rules. Perhaps I'm a little fanatical about them.

A friend, teasing me, said, "You act as if they are the rules to live by, as though they apply to everything."

I smiled. "Okay, let's try it. Do they apply to sex?"

I stuck up my thumb for rule number one. "Keep your hand moving." I nodded yes.

Index finger, rule number two. "Be specific." I let out a yelp of glee. It was working.

Finger number three. "Lose control." It was clear that sex and writing were the same thing.

Then, number four. "Don't think," I said. Yes, for sex, too, I nodded.

I proved my point. My friend and I laughed.

Go ahead, try these rules for tennis, hang gliding, driving a car, making a grilled cheese sandwich, disciplining a dog or a snake. Okay. They might not always work. They work for writing. Try them.

1. *Keep your hand moving.* When you sit down to write, whether it's for ten minutes or an hour, once you begin, don't stop. If an atom bomb drops at your feet eight minutes after you have begun and you were going to write for ten minutes, don't budge. You'll go out writing.

What is the purpose of this? Most of the time when we write, we mix up the editor and creator. Imagine your writing hand as the creator and the other hand as the editor. Now bring your two hands together and lock your fingers. This is what happens when we write. The writing hand wants to write about what she did Saturday night: "I drank whiskey straight all night and stared at a man's back across the bar. He was wearing a red T-shirt. I imagined him to have the face of Harry Belafonte. At three A.M., he finally turned my way and I spit into the ashtray when I saw him. He had the face of a wet mongrel who had lost his teeth." The writing hand is three words into writing this first sentence—"I drank whiskey..."—when the other hand clenches her fingers tighter and the writing hand can't budge. The editor says to the creator,

"Now, that's not nice, the whiskey and stuff. Don't let people know that. I have a better idea: 'Last night, I had a nice cup of warmed milk and then went to bed at nine o'clock.' Write that. Go ahead. I'll loosen my grip so you can." If you keep your creator hand moving, the editor can't catch up with it and lock it. It gets to write out what it wants. "Keep your hand moving" strengthens the creator and gives little space for the editor to jump in. Keeping your hand moving is the main structure for writing practice.

2. *Lose control.* Say what you want to say. Don't worry if it's correct, polite, appropriate. Just let it rip. Allen Ginsberg was getting a master's degree from Columbia University. Back then, they were doing rhymed verse. He had a lot of practice in formal meter, and so forth. One night, he went home and said to himself that he was going to write whatever he wanted and forget about formalities. The result was "Howl." We shouldn't forget how much practice in writing he had prior to this, but it is remarkable how I can tell students, "Okay, say what you want, go for it," and their writing takes a substantial turn toward authenticity.

3. *Be specific.* Not car, but Cadillac. Not fruit, but apple. Not bird, but wren. Not a codependent, neurotic man, but Harry, who runs to open the refrigerator for his wife, thinking she wants an apple, when she is headed for the gas stove to light her cigarette. Be careful of those pop-psychology labels. Get below the label and be specific to the person.

But don't chastise yourself as you are writing, "I'm an idiot; Natalie said to be specific and like a fool I wrote 'tree.'" Just gently note that you wrote "tree," drop to a deeper level, and next to "tree" write "sycamore." Be gentle with yourself. Don't give room for the hard grip of the editor.

4. *Don't think.* We usually live in the realm of second or third thoughts, thoughts on thoughts, rather than in the realm of first thoughts, the real way we flash on something. Stay with the first flash. Writing practice will help you contact first thoughts. Just practice and forget everything else.

Now here are some rules that don't necessarily apply to sex, though you can try to apply them to sex if you like.

5. *Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar.*

6. *You are free to write the worst junk in America.* You can be more specific, if you like: the worst junk in Santa Fe; New York; Kalamazoo, Michigan; your city block; your pasture; your neighborhood restaurant; your family. Or you can get more cosmic: free to write the worst junk in the universe, galaxy, world, hemisphere, Sahara Desert.

7. *Go for the jugular.* If something scary comes up, go for it. That's where the energy is. Otherwise, you'll spend all your time writing around whatever makes you nervous. It will probably be abstract, bland writing because you're avoiding the truth. Hemingway said, "Write hard and clear about what hurts." Don't avoid it. It has all the energy. Don't worry, no one ever died of it. You might cry or laugh, but not die.

I am often asked, "Well, isn't there a time when we need to stop our hand moving? You know, to figure out what we want to say?"

It's better to figure out what you want to say in the actual act of writing. For a long time, I was very strict with myself about writing practice. I kept that hand moving no matter what. I wanted to learn to cut through to first thoughts. Sure, you can stop for a few moments, but it is a tricky business. It's good to stop if you want, look up and get a better picture of what you're writing about, but often I don't stay there. If I give myself a little gap, I'm off for an hour daydreaming. You have to learn your own rhythm, but make sure you do some focused, disciplined "keeping the hand moving" to learn about cutting through resistance.

If you learn writing practice well, it is a good foundation for all other writing.

When I was young, I played tennis. My arm wasn't very strong, and I was impatient. I was so eager to play, I held the racquet up higher on the grip than I was supposed to in order to compensate. Unfortunately, I got used to using the racquet this way. I was a fine tennis player, but no matter how much I played, there was just so far I could improve, because I never mastered one of the important basics: the proper grip on the racquet.

I use this as an example for writing practice. Grow comfortable with it in its basic form before you begin to veer off into your own manner and style. Trust it. It is as basic as drinking water.

Sometimes an interviewer asks me, "So writing practice is old hat? Have you developed something new?"

And I say, "It would be like a Zen master teaching you meditation one year and the next year saying, 'Forget compassion. Standing on our head is what's in.'"

The old essentials are still necessary. Stay with them under all circumstances. It will make you stable-something unusual for a writer.