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TEN RULES OF WRITING

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The following is from Amitava Kumar's essay collection Lunch with a Bigot. A mix of memoir, reportage, and criticism, these essays explore how Kumar, a Professor of English at Vassar College, practices being a 'writer in the world.'

When I was promoted to the rank of professor, the library at the university where I was then employed asked me to send them the name of a book that had been useful to me in my career. I chose V. S. Naipaul's *Finding the Center*. The library then purchased a copy, which was duly displayed in one of its rooms, with a statement I had written about the book:

This was one of the first literary autobiographies that I read. Its very first sentence established in my mind the idea of writing as an opening in time or a beginning: that sentence conveyed to me, with its movement and rhythm, a history of repeated striving, and of things coming together, at last, in the achievement of the printed word: "It is now nearly thirty years since, in a bbc room in London, on an old bbc typewriter, and on smooth, 'non-rustle' bbc script paper, I wrote the first sentence of my first publishable book." This first sentence—about a first sentence—created an echo in my head. It has

lasted through the twenty years of my writing life. The ambition and the anxiety of the beginner is there at the beginning of each book. Every time I start to write, I am reminded of Naipaul's book.

But that wasn't the whole truth, neither about Naipaul, nor about beginnings. The sentence I had quoted had mattered to me, yes, and so had the book, but what had really helped was Naipaul's telling an interviewer that in an effort to write clearly he had turned himself into a beginner: "It took a lot of work to do it. In the beginning I had to forget everything I had written by the age of 22. I abandoned everything and began to write like a child at school. Almost writing 'the cat sat on the mat.' I almost began like that."

And I did that too, almost. About a decade ago, soon after I had received tenure, *Tehelka* asked me to come aboard as a writer. I was visiting my parents in India at that time; it was winter, and I went to the *Tehelka* office to talk to the editors. Later, when we were done, I was taken around for a tour of the place. There was a pen-and-ink portrait of Naipaul on the wall because he was one of the trustees. And high above someone's computer was a sheet of paper that said "V. S. Naipaul's Rules for Beginners." These were rules for writing. It was explained to me that Naipaul was asked by the *Tehelka* reporters if he could give them some basic suggestions for improving their language. Naipaul had come up with some rules. He had fussed over their formulation, corrected them, and then faxed back the corrections. I was told that I could take the sheet if I wanted. A few days later I left India and the sheet traveled with me, folded in the pages of a book that I was reading. In the weeks that followed, I began writing a regular literary column for *Tehelka*, and, in those pieces, I tried to work by Naipaul's rules. The rules were a wonderful antidote to my practice of using academic jargon, and they made me conscious of my own writing habits. I was discovering language as if it were a new country. Like a traveler in a new place, I asked questions, took notes, and began to arrange things in a narrative. I followed the rules diligently for at least a year, and my book *Bombay-London-New York* was a product of the writing I did during that period. Here, then, are "V. S. Naipaul's Rules for Beginners":

Do not write long sentences. A sentence should not have more than 10 or 12 words.

Each sentence should make a clear statement. It should add to the statement that went before. A good paragraph is a series of clear, linked statements.

Do not use big words. If your computer tells you that your average word is more than five letters long, there is something wrong. The use of small words compels you to think about what you are writing. Even difficult ideas can be broken down into small words.

Never use words whose meanings you are not sure of. If you break this rule you should look for other work.

The beginner should avoid using adjectives, except those of color, size and number. Use as few adverbs as possible.

Avoid the abstract. Always go for the concrete.

Every day, for six months at least, practice writing in this way. Small words; clear, concrete sentences. It may be awkward, but it's training you in the use of language. It may even be getting rid of the bad language habits you picked up at the university. You may go beyond these rules after you have thoroughly understood and mastered them.

In their simplicity and directness, I do not think the above rules can be improved upon. A beginner should take them daily, like a dose of much-needed vitamins. Of course, rules can never be a substitute for what a writer can learn, *should* learn, simply by sitting down and writing. But I offer my own students rules all the time. On the first day of my writing class this year, I handed out xeroxed sheets of rules by Ray Bradbury, not least because he offers the valuable advice that one should write a short story each week for a whole year. Why? "It's not possible to write 52 bad short stories in a row." I have also prepared my own list of rules for my students. My list isn't in any way a presumption of expertise and is offered only as evidence of experience. I tend to teach by example. These habits have worked for me and I want my students to use them to cultivate the practice of writing.

1. **Write every day.** This is a cliché, of course, but you will write more when you tell yourself that no day must pass without writing. At the back of a notebook I use in my writing class, I write down the date and then make a mark next to it after the day's work is done. I show the page to my students often, partly to motivate them, and partly to remind myself that I can't let my students down.

2. **Have a modest goal.** Aim to write 150 words each day. It is very difficult for me to find time on some days, and it is only this low demand that really makes it even possible to sit down and write. On better days, this goal is just a start; often, I end up writing more.

3. **Try to write at the same time each day.** I recently read a Toni Morrison interview in which she said: "I tell my students one of the most important things they need to know is when they are at their best, creatively."[i](#) It works best for me if I write at the same time each day—in my case, that hour or two that I get between the time I drop off my kids at school and go in to teach. I have my breakfast and walk up to my study with my coffee. In a wonderful little piece published on the *New Yorker* blog Page Turner, the writer Roxana Robinson writes how she drinks coffee quickly and sits down to write—no fooling around reading the paper, or checking the news, or making calls to friends or trying to find out if the plumber is coming: "One call and I'm done for. Entering into the daily world, where everything is complicated and requires decisions and conversation, means the end of everything. It means not getting to write." I read Robinson's piece in January 2013, and alas, I have thought of it nearly every day since.

4. **Turn off the Internet.** The Web is a great resource and entirely unavoidable, but it will help you focus when you buy the Freedom app. Using a device like this not only rescues me from easy distraction, it also works as a timer. When you click on the icon, it asks you to choose the duration for which you want the computer to not have access to the Net. I choose sixty minutes, and this also helps me keep count of how long I have sat at my computer.

5. **Walk for ten minutes.** Or better yet, go running. If you do not exercise regularly, you will not write regularly. Or not for long. I haven't been good at doing this, and have paid the price with trouble in my back. I have encouraged my students to go walking, too, and have sometimes thought that when I have to hold lengthy consultations with my writing class, I should go for walks with them on our beautiful campus.

6. **A bookshelf of your own.** Choose one book, or five, but no more than ten, to guide you, not with research necessarily, but with the critical matter of method or style. Another way to think about this is to ask yourself who are the writers, or scholars, or artists that you are in conversation with. I use this question to help arrive at my own subject matter, but it also helps with voice.

7. **Get rid of it if it sounds like grant talk.** I don't know about you, but I routinely produce dead prose when I'm applying for a grant. The language used in applications must be abhorred. Stilted language, jargon, etc. I'm sure there is a psychological or sociological paper to be written about the syntax and tone common in such things—the appeal to power, lack of freedom—but in my case it might just be because, with the arrival of an application deadline, millions of my brain cells get busy committing mass suicide.

8. **Learn to say no.** The friendly editor who asks for a review or an essay. Even the friend who is editing an anthology. Say no if it takes you away from the writing you want to do. My children are small and don't take no for an answer, but everyone who is older is pretty understanding. And if they're understanding, they'll know that for you occasional drinks or dinner together are more acceptable distractions.

9. **Finish one thing before taking up another.** Keep a notebook handy to jot down ideas for any future book, but complete the one you are working on first. This rule has been useful to me. I followed it after seeing it on top of the list of Henry Miller's "Commandments." It has been more difficult to follow another of Miller's rules: "Don't be nervous. Work calmly, joyously, recklessly on whatever is in hand."

10. **The above rule needs to be repeated.** I have done shocking little work when I have tried to write two books at once. Half-finished projects seek company of their own and are bad for morale. Shut off the inner editor and complete the task at hand.

If you have read this essay so far, you are probably a writer. That is what you should write in the blank space where you are asked to identify your occupation. I say this also for another reason. Annie Dillard wrote, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Those words scared the living daylights out of me. I thought of the days passing, days filled with my wanting to write, but not actually writing. I had wasted years. Each day is a struggle, and the outcome is always uncertain, but I feel as if I have reversed destiny when I have sat down and written my quota for the day. Once that work is done, it seems okay to assume that I will spend my life writing.

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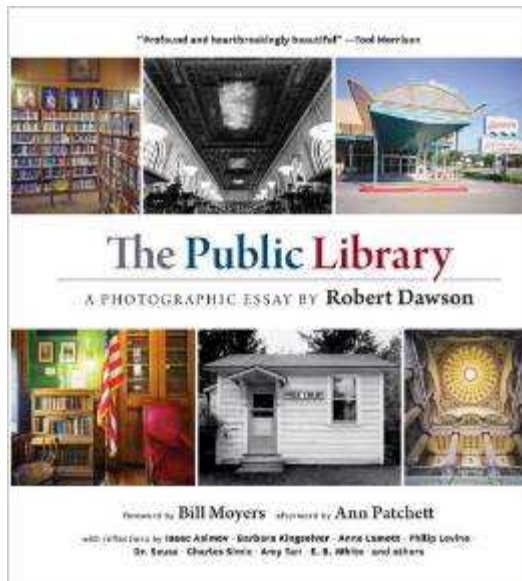
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IN HONOR OF BEER: A READING LIST

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