Conventional Writing Advice that Doesn't Work

BY REBECCA MONTERUSSO

There's nothing more frustrating than getting advice from a respected writer or trusted friend about how to get unstuck and back to writing, only to have it not work for you.

◆ ◆ ◆

Does that mean there's something wrong with you? That you're not a "real" writer and never will be? That you should just give up now and save yourself the heartbreak of rejection and failure?

No.

It means that the advice they gave isn't *for you*. It means you can be grateful for the insight into how your brain works, but that you can now find something useful to you instead.

How do I know? Because I've taken advice that's discouraged me and made me feel like I could never do this thing that I love so much—and I've let myself get so lost in it that the only choice I had was to crawl back to the page and do it my way.

If you've ever wanted to be a writer or asked for advice about how to get the work done and still haven't been able to finish your book, maybe the advice you're getting isn't working.

That doesn't mean you should force yourself to do it their way. It means you've got to know yourself well enough to take what anyone—even a famous, reputable author whose success you could only dream of—tells you with a grain of salt.

Apply what works for you, throw out what doesn't, and get back to the thing that matters however you can.

Just Sit Down and Write

1

In the words of Austin Kleon, author of *Steal Like an Artist*, "to be the noun, you must first do the verb. So it follows that to be a writer, you must write.

But what happens when you're stuck? What happens when—even if you've written something before—the words no longer show up and nothing you do works?

Some people will tell you to sit at your computer and force yourself to type. They'll say you need to show up every day, at the same time no less, and prove to the muse/Universe that you mean business.

And for some people, that might work.

(If you find yourself in this category, what are you still doing here? Go off and finish your stories, for goodness sake.)

For those of us who have tried to sit at our computers day in and day out and *still* can't get the words to come, for those of us who feel like we don't know how or need time to think, it's harmful to force ourselves to type just because someone else told us it was a good idea.

What can you do instead?

Honor your process.

Maybe your brain is telling you to take time off between projects. If you don't listen and force yourself to push through, you could end up writing a crappy story or spiraling into burnout.

Maybe your priorities aren't aligned, and you're subconsciously forcing yourself to take a look at what you want to accomplish and act accordingly. If you write anyway, you might miss out on things you'd rather spend your time doing.

Maybe you need to take time to digest other stories before writing your own. Your ideas might be all the richer for it.

Would you rather take time for a much-needed break or stare at a blank screen, silently hating yourself, wasting away days, months, or even years on a project that doesn't end up working out because you didn't let yourself do it your way?

You Should Write X Number of Words Every Day

2

If Stephen King says something, it must be true, right? He's built a career on writing 2,000 words a day—and who wouldn't want the career he's carved out for himself?

The problem is, he's not the only one. Tons of people fall into the "write every day" camp at varying word counts.

They'll tell you that the higher quantity will lead to higher quality. That the only way you get better is if you're practicing every day. That building a habit of your process is key. That everyone can make time for the things they really care about.

How can you argue with that? Most people, after all, are just trying to help.

But what they forget is that everyone doesn't see the world the same way. Sure, everyone can *probably* start writing a single sentence every day and build up from there, but should they?

What about binge writers?

Someone like **_Cheryl Strayed_**, for example, gives herself permission to not write for certain stretches of time and gets everything done in the times she's set aside to write.

Is she any less of a writer than Stephen King? (She has fewer books out, sure, but that's not what I'm asking.)

What I love about Cheryl is that she gives herself permission. Because anything you "should" do comes with implied shame when you're not doing that thing.

And shame will only keep you from the page longer.

Of course, if you're someone whose brain works better when you're writing every day, don't use this as permission not to. But don't berate yourself for taking the time you need either.

When you figure out your writing goals, work through your process (even as it changes), and prioritize writing against your other responsibilities, you'll free yourself from feeling guilty when you can't do the work.

You can come back to writing. It will always be there waiting. What that looks like and how it changes throughout your life is up to you—and no one else.

Because anything you "should" do comes with implied shame when you're not doing that thing.

And shame will only keep you from the page longer.

"

You Have to Write Quickly

3

I recently finished a short story that took me two years to write. Not two straight years of non-stop work, but two years from when I had the idea to when I wrote a draft I didn't hate that got published somewhere other than my blog.

Two. Years.

Of course, every story can't take that long if you want to make a career with your writing—especially given how little writers are paid nowadays.

But it was a joy to take an idea I really liked, write multiple drafts of it until the structure clicked, and finally put everything together in a way that *felt* good.

Writing that last draft was like putting the final pieces into an enormous puzzle.

When you deny yourself the joy of writing—whether because you're trying to keep up with the demands of your career, some unrealistic vision of what makes a "real" writer, or something else entirely—it's easy to lose your love for it.

Of course, I still live in this reality where we have to make money to pay our bills, so I won't tell you to slow down, or only write for joy, or anything else that would have you rolling your eyes telling me to come down from the clouds.

But.

Are there ways you can cultivate your love for writing even within your busy life?

Should you drop everything to keep pace with the book-every-month crowd just because someone told you that's the only way to build your career?

Do you need to make money from your writing, or can you make it part of your life without asking it to also sustain your standard of living?

I totally understand wanting to make a living from your writing. It's a dream of mine to be an author and get to travel the world writing stories that support me and everything I want out of life. So, I'm not telling you what goals you should set or how to achieve them.

But I will ask you to write down and think about:

- Your priorities/responsibilities in life

- Your goals for life and writing

- How your brain works and your specific writing process

- The careers of a couple of writers whose work you most admire (and whose careers you would be happy with)

Because weighing your responsibilities against your goals—and measuring both against what it will take to get where you want to be—will (hopefully) help you see very quickly what you have to do to get "there" or that "there" isn't really where you wanted to be in the first place.

It's not about trying to be the next [insert famous author here]; it's about doing what's right for you based on what you want to have/do/be and how your brain works/what you can reasonably expect from yourself.

There's more than one way to make a career—if that's what you want for yourself.

Outlines Help You Finish and Make You Write Faster

4

If you're driving somewhere you've never been before, it makes sense to follow a map or GPS to get where you're going, right? Without directions you could end up going out of your way, wasting time, gas, and money, and *still* not end up where you're going.

People will tell you the same is true for writing. If you're working from an outline, you're more likely to get to "the end." Right?

Not necessarily. For some people, writing to an outline feels confining. It might slow them down because they don't feel like they have the freedom to play. They might abandon the project altogether because it's no longer fun.

What if, without the map, you ended up in a location that was much better than where you thought you were going? What if your book ends up better without an outline you feel forced to follow?

Figure out what you need to know to get started—and then do the work.

Some people might need to outline.

Others might need to figure out the theme or how the characters change. Others might benefit from visualizing their finished book sitting on the shelves. Whatever it takes to finish, do that.

The quickest way to figure out what *you* need is to take a look at how you've done things best in the past.

Don't have enough data points?

Try forcing yourself to finish a bunch of short stories as quickly as possible. Sign up for an **NYCM** contest (which forces you to write a story in 24-48 hours). Think about what hasn't worked (and why) and try to do the opposite.

For me, getting to the end as quickly as possible is about letting myself write non-linearly without following someone else's version of an outline. I have to push through even when I don't have the clarity I think I need. And I have to be ok when my process changes between projects and mediums.

What will it take for you to finish the story you've always wanted to write?

You'll Need to Cut X% of Your First Draft

5

Once again, we have Stephen King to thank for this misconception.

Though it seems reasonable to the people who do need to cut 10% (or more) from their first drafts to get to the heart of the story. After all, no one wants to read your tangent about the possibility of a multiverse in your coming of age romance (or maybe they do, what do I know).

But it's not true *for everyone.*

I, for one, am a chronic under-writer. It's why I'm drawn to writing short stories before novels and why it's so dang hard for me to get a full-length story on the page (seriously, sometimes it's like pulling teeth).

When I hear I need to cut 10% from my first drafts in order to write the second, I can't help but laugh. You mean my too-short-for-publication draft needs to be *shorter*? I think not.

Maybe there are some words I will need to cut from my first drafts, but that never amounts to a certain percentage every time. Usually, I have to add more every "draft" (a term I use lightly because, as I'll share below, I edit while I write—*gasp!*).

This idea probably comes from the fact that newer writers make similar mistakes when learning to write. Adding in too many adverbs to describe what you mean. Using "filler" words like "just" and "very." Going on tangents that don't belong in the story you're currently writing.

But there's nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. Some readers love adverbs and filler words and tangents.

At the same time, there's something to be said for being economical with your words and making sure your story doesn't try to be everything for everyone.

What you end up doing (cutting, adding, etc.) depends on your natural instincts as a writer, how much you can (and should) modify your process along the way, and what your readers think about the stories you're producing.

It's a matter of finding what works for you—surprise, surprise—and doing whatever it takes to make your writing better with each draft and story you write. (And "better" is another term I use lightly—to me, it's about gauging how well your story does what you set out to accomplish and how your readers feel about it.)

Writer's Block Doesn't Exist

6

Why do writers try so hard to convince themselves Writer's Block isn't real?

The phrase "cellists don't get Cello's Block and plumbers don't get Plumber's Block" gets tossed around like it's a badge of honor to ignore when you're stuck and keep pushing through.

To some people, this isn't bad advice (actually, it's not so much "advice" at all, but bear with me here).

If you convince yourself Writer's Block isn't real, it might make it easier to ignore—especially on the days when it feels extra difficult to get started. But what happens if you deny the reality of being stuck and you still can't get the words out? What happens when you've tried everything, and nothing comes?

Does it help you to "not believe" in Writer's Block in those times when it feels like you can do anything but write?

If it does, great. Keep using this concept and go write your stories.

But if it doesn't, it might be more helpful to recognize the problem, find something that helps you move past it, and then get back to work after you've taken a break or done whatever it is you need to do to get back to writing. (And I recommend Becca Syme's *Dear Writer, Are You in Writer's Block?* as an excellent place to start.)

> **Don't let someone else's idea of what it means to be a "real" writer convince you you're doing it wrong and force you into changing your process. You need to pay attention to your body, your mind, your goals, and what works for you.**

Ignoring the problem might make it worse.

Because the truth is, writing involves creating something from nothing. Comparing ourselves to cellists and plumbers doesn't make sense. Maybe artists and composers are closer, and I'd be willing to bet they've been stuck a time or two on their projects.

Admitting you're blocked (or in burnout) allows you to be kind to yourself, to take a much-needed break, and to come back with renewed vigor when you've taken time to feed your creativity (if that's what you need).

Don't let someone else's idea of what it means to be a "real" writer convince you you're doing it wrong and force you into changing your process. You need to pay attention to your body, your mind, your goals, and what works for you.

And even if your "process" involves being stuck for years (like I have), that's ok too. Sometimes, writing can't be your top priority. It will always be there when you're ready to get back to it.

You Can't Edit a Blank Page/ Don't Edit While You Write

7

On the surface, this feels like sound advice, right?

You literally *can't* edit words that aren't yet on the page. And doesn't it make sense to try and separate editing from your writing? They're totally different brain processes, after all.

But this advice assumes too many things.

First, that the story you're working on is only the words you're putting to paper. What about writers who visualize their story before typing it up? Should they not make edits in their head to the story?

Second, that it's faster for you to push through your rough draft and get to the end before you start making changes. What about the writers cannot move forward when they've made a major mistake? Should they "push through" even when it would be quicker to fix the problem and rewrite from there?

For me, crafting a story often takes place on the page. I figure out what I'm trying to say by getting the words right in my head and on paper at the same time. Instead of translating what I see in my head, I figure out what I'm seeing by writing it out and gauging whether or not it's what I meant based on what's in print.

When I get stuck/totally blocked, it's often because the story isn't cooperating or I've made a mistake somewhere down the line— and I can't get back to work until I've found the mistake and fixed it.

I wish this worked differently (and maybe someday it will), but for now, the way I write best is by editing the story as I go, by figuring out what I mean and editing along the way.

Story isn't only about the prose.

For many writers, typing is the very last part of the process. Those writers might need to make sure they're using the "right" words as they're typing. Or, they'll get to "done" faster because it will take fewer drafts from start to finish.

No one can tell you how to write or what you need to do to get to "the end".

Want to try writing a fast draft? Do it. Think an outline will help? Try making one. Will editing in the middle of your draft slow you down?

Then try writing forward from whatever "mistake" you might have made and fix it in a later draft.

Advice from other writers—even well-known, successful ones—comes from their perspective and what they need to finish their stories. They can't speak for you or how your brain works. You can try out their advice and see what works, but don't get stuck doing something that doesn't work *for you.*

> "
>
> No one can tell you how to write or what you need to do to get to "the end".

Other Advice You Have Permission to Ignore

What about all the other "rules" floating around the writer-sphere?

Write what you know. Show, don't tell. Only work on one project at a time. Kill your darlings. Don't use adverbs. You have to write a book in a month. The list is endless.

But the truth is: **the only right way to write a book is the way that's right for you.**

Any hard and fast "rules" aren't rules at all. Most are mere suggestions based on what your readers might expect or what works for someone else. Some of it you'll need to listen to, but some of it you can throw out the window and ignore forever.

How can you tell the difference?

Examine the advice you're being offered, figure out why it's a "rule" (and when you can break it), and make the choice for yourself based on what you want your story to accomplish.

And if you're still stuck, sign up for my course, _**Get Unstuck—and Back to Writing**_, for a personalized approach to figuring out your process.

Thank you
for reading

• • •

Click the button below for
more information for writers

→