

try to please oneself. One must never go out on a limb. Figures of speech such as “go out on a limb” are perfectly acceptable but not the actual practice of doing it, which is to say that publishers will never do it for you and they have no interest in writers who wish to indulge that radical aspect of themselves.

Generalizing is generally satisfactory, leaving things as undeveloped and ambiguous as comes naturally to the writing of a rough draft. Since there can never be any deep ideas or real human beings in your stories, personal revelation will only get in the way of the plot. Use the words “thing” or “stuff” whenever possible in place of specific nouns. Since **THERE IS NO SUBJECT** do not be afraid to abruptly halt without any concluding message or moral. Remember to insert ellipses whenever you . . . forget . . . the rule is three to start . . . three inside . . . four to end. . . .

—SUMNER CARNAHAN



Fiction 101

A FEW BASIC TIPS: Generally speaking, there is no subject. The “I” remains imprecise and vaguely defined. Nostalgia is not tolerated in any guise; personal revelations and expressions of pedestrian beauty are to be set off as neologisms and used only in an ironic sense: that is, demarcated with quote marks or italics. Whatever is said must refer to something said by someone else, preferably a trendy cultural icon such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and can never be guessed to have erupted from one’s own isolated consciousness.

Our age, being degraded in terms of language use and complexity of thought, employs single quotes inside doubles to indicate a sense of lost glory, except in England where everything is the other way around. Block quotes employ no quote marks at all but an indent in order to avoid a longing for the clarity of expression inherited from another era in which thinking was tolerated and in fact encouraged. Innocence, read ignorance, is viewed as an accomplishment. Tenses are insignificant. No one but foreigners understands them.

Cynicism, once widely in use, has fallen out of favor since it can only be regarded as romantic idealism turned on its head. Question marks and exclamation points are also quite useless. The exclamation is useful in cartoons, comic books, and openly salacious material. The question mark is out of the question, since all questions are insincere, rhetorically speaking. Don’t you agree?

It is mandatory that sentences be kept short and declamatory. (Parentheses are never allowed.) This is designed to override all varieties of sentimentality and regret. The accepted view holds that genuine feelings are experienced and expressed through bold bodily clues, such that the way the words themselves are laid down on the page can invoke a sensation of grandeur, pathos, cuteness, or an apocalyptic sentiment, depending entirely on the choice of typeface and line spacing. This sense of immanent materialism remains unacknowledged in some, mitigating the use of crudely exaggerated adolescent fantasy material that, at least in Japan, may last into late middle age. Most adults find their sensory receptors atrophied in comparison to adolescents, hence the over-reliance on repetitious chatter. An interest in depth of thought is generally diminished by advancing age due to the infusion of sticky sap from soda pop and television. Poets, sages, and mathematicians, to get their points across, rely mostly on guns.

The current literary agenda has adopted a code of ethics engaging disgust, bravado, revulsion, and voraciousness reminiscent of the lack of sophistication proffered by modern adrenaline-based sex and violence films. The grotesque aesthetic of teenage boys affecting an attitude of avid cruelty has become a cultural standard in the field of experimental art, being easily emulated by the luminaries padding our nationwide MFA creative writing programs, laboriously deconstructed by Doctor of Philosophy candidates worldwide. Therefore, the only verb allowable is active, present company excused. The passive, reflective forms—utilizing the infinitive “to be” widely relied on throughout mankind’s history—have been replaced by a breezy aggression inherited from advertising.

The tension in your plot should be between “bad” characters of varying levels of savvy and strength. An impoverishment in vocabulary heralds a desirable sluggishness of the senses. Although some techniques may seem culturally disadvantaged, they are rigged out by extreme exhibitionism which gives them power, and, notwithstanding someone singing her heart out all night long will intensify the moment-to-moment effect of one’s

carefully cultivated infantile style. Antiquated clichés, such as, “her golden tresses,” can only be salvaged by being pervaded with a degraded sensation, as suggested above. For example, “her golden tresses caked with vomit” would probably make its way past the contemporary hipness censors.

After signing any three-or-more-book contract, any mildly ambitious writer can and will produce publishable plot-driven works with marketable characters to be packed off on a whopping twenty-city tour. After that, she might not give a fig for writing anymore. Clinically sensitive individuals may decide to try to revive a sense of wonder by the use of distillates or other psychoactive substances, though as is true with the turns of phrase accomplished in dreams, the net worth is often less in daylight than under the influence of anything, even the unconscious, which, like our critics, pretends to wield a faculty of judgment but often gets its values, characters, and physics all mixed up.

Cannibalism is encouraged, theft is accepted, as is the practice of borrowing heavily the words, phrases, patterns of thought, and stylistic devices of other peoples and times. Chicago is to be visited only once in a writer’s lifetime, Oxford never; San Francisco is always okay except in summer when it rains but here I must reiterate, commas schwammas, there is absolutely no subject, particularly not the writer—though you will be required to stand up and justify the words you have written throughout your life. If these terms seem too dear, consider making other arrangements for a career.

THE CARDINAL RULE IS: BE SIMPLE, never sincere. There is no need to pander toward the heroic or engaged. Refrain from sleeping with the teacher, no matter what interesting permutations she suggests. Always use your resources sparingly. Don’t let out one-half of what you get. Overload is the only sin known to the literati. Be irresponsible toward your inner life; i.e., never use the word “entelechy” or any word for that matter that isn’t part of a normal eighth-grade vocabulary. Writing is a matter of saying what everyone thinks they already know. One must not