

Ed's Top Ten "Rules of Writing"

engl 131 / composition / university of washington / chang

NO.10: GOOD READERS MAKE GOOD WRITERS

If milk helps build strong bones, then reading helps build strong vocabularies and strong writers. Read all of the time. Hopefully, some of the time, you'll be reading solely for pleasure. Whenever you encounter a word you don't recognize, look it up. There are very few guarantees in life, but one of them is that all good writers are also good readers and vice versa.

NO.9: IT'S ALL ABOUT TIME MANAGEMENT

Keep track of the time it takes you to complete a writing assignment. If you're not sure how long it takes you to write something, then keep a log of the time you spend on the paper. Include time spent researching, thinking about it, procrastinating about it, and actually writing it. Then you will know how long you need to set aside for the whole of the writing process. Build in time for drafting, revision, and polishing. Generally, though, writing takes longer than you think it will.

NO.8: GET HELP

If you have questions, concerns, or even need another pair of eyes to look at your writing, then get help. Seek out a friend or classmate that you know is a good writer. Seek out your teacher or professor during office hours or make an appointment to go over a draft. Seek out the campus's writing resources such as the Odegaard Writing and Research Center (OWRC), Third Floor, Odegaard Library, <<http://depts.washington.edu/owrc/>> or the UW's Center for Learning and Undergraduate Enrichment (CLUE), 191K Mary Gates Hall, <<http://depts.washington.edu/clue/index.htm>>.

NO.7: SPELLING COUNTS, EVERYTHING COUNTS

Life is in the details. So is good writing. Everything counts in small and large amounts. Spelling, punctuation, grammar, margins, font face, font size, manuscript format, topic sentences, supporting details, title page, page numbers, turning papers in on time, and so on. All of it matters. Don't squander the easy stuff. Therefore, keep in mind Rule No.7 and have a good usage book or writer's handbook on hand such as Diana Hacker's A Writer's Reference.

NO.6: KNOW THE ASSIGNMENT, BE THE ASSIGNMENT

One of the top mistakes new writers make is not following directions, not fully understanding the assignment. Know what is expected from you. Understand what is required for your assignment. Identify the key skills, concepts, criteria, and materials needed by the assignment and employ them effectively. When in doubt, see Rule No. 8.

NO.5: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Who are you writing for? What are their expectations? What do they know about your topic? How will they respond to your point of view? Knowing your audience is very important for successful writing. Addressing a university classroom is very different than writing for a children's magazine. Understanding your audience helps you tailor your writing to the needs of the audience. Keep in mind, too, that your instructor and your classmates are part of your audience.

NO.4: READ IT ALOUD

Read your papers out loud. Really. Read your papers out loud. Right now. Read your papers out loud. It helps. Reading your paper out loud (or even mouthing the words as you read quietly) allows you to catch things, hear things, notice things that you wouldn't catch if you were just silently skimming. Read your paper out loud to someone else, or have someone else read your paper to you. Wherever you stumble as you read there might be a problem or a bump in the writing. Read your papers out loud.

NO.3: WRITE WITH AUTHORITY

You are the expert. You are the scholar. You are the writer. You have done the research. You have read and thought about and analyzed and written about your topic. You know things. You understand things. Now show it in your writing. Be confident. Make clear, solid, direct statements and claims. Support your claims with clear, solid, and direct evidence and detail.

NO.2: BE TELLING, BE CLEAR, BE PRECISE

As per Rule No.7, writing is in the details. Don't make vague claims. Don't use meaningless adjectives. Don't over inflate your language. Rarely can you sound smart without actually being smart. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Writing must be telling. Writing must be compelling. Writing must communicate clearly. Think of writing like sculpture rather than painting. In painting, you add to the canvas to create something; in sculpture, you start with a block of stone and slowly chisel away what's not necessary. When in doubt, be simple and elegant.

NO.1: WRITE ALL OF THE TIME

Practice makes perfect. Since you're already reading all of the time, you need to be writing all of the time. Put some of the skills and vocabulary you are learning to use. Be willing to try new things. Be ready to make mistakes. Be conscientious in correcting those mistakes. The more writing you do, the better you will become at it. Keep a journal or a blog or try going out for the school newspaper or literary magazine. You might even discover that you like writing for pleasure.