

# 10 rules for better fiction writing

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I recently completed James Patterson's creative writing course on [Masterclass](#), and it was incredible.

I'm not a huge fan of Patterson personally — or most commercial fiction writers for that matter — but it's got nothing to do with him as a writer, and everything to do with my taste in writing.

*(I like reading classics, but that's besides the point.)*

Anyway, what Patterson said was invaluable to me as a writer. Watching his passion helped me exude mine. Listening to him speak helped me understand my weak spots in writing (like, ahem, writing an outline, ahem). I now know what I need to work on to get better at my craft.

Here are 10 key takeaways, not only from Patterson's Masterclass, but about fiction writing in general.

## 1. Follow these six rules from George Orwell

Here are six rules on writing from [George Orwell](#):

“(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

(ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

(iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

(iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.

(v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

(vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

Study them. Worship them. Let them guide you to better writing. For fiction writing, the only rule I'd break here would be number one (unless you're writing science fiction, in which case rule number five is probably a goner, too).

## **2. Never use an adverb to modify a verb**

[Stephen King](#) once said:

‘The road to hell is paved with adverbs.’

Overdramatic, sure, but it's a good point. When you read

a story, each reader will interpret it in their own way. Adding in adverbs, then, removes that interpretation.

For example, many writers will follow the verb 'said' with an adverb, like 'suddenly' or 'intensely'. But a reader may have interpreted the dialogue in a different way.

Adverbs are distracting, unnecessary and ugly. Avoid them.

### **3. Keep your exclamation points to a minimum**

I used to be such a culprit of this. To this day, I have a writer friend who insists on writing to me with capital letters sporadically darted in her sentences to emphasise a point. I still have to go back and delete exclamation points when I casually write something, like a text or WhatsApp message.

It's INSANE to think that after all these years, I still can't expect my reader to add their own emphasis where they think necessary!

### **4. Read your writing aloud when you edit**

Simple practice, this one. Writing should sound conversational. Nobody says 'accoutrements' or

'parsimonious', they say 'accessories' or 'frugal'. By reading your work aloud, you can discover what words cut the flow of a sentence, and thus, what words to omit.

## **5. Keep your description to a minimum**

Fiction writing is about nothing more than story. Chunks of text that go into too much detail to describe something will halt that progression, and you'll lose your reader.

**Again, it comes down to interpretation.** Give away just enough about a scene that the reader can reference it in their head, but let them design the rest of the set, while you focus on driving the plot forward.

## **6. Do back exercises. Pain is distracting.**

This advice comes from [Margaret Atwood](#). I suffer from back and neck pain a lot, and it does distract me.

I also have more energy than I realise most days, and will often begin a day with a few cups of coffee. By midday I'm wired and tense, so I run and then stretch. After my run and stretch, I'm back to normal. I should run in the mornings. I should do more yoga. I should stretch more. Maybe I'd focus more and write for longer, too.

## **7. Work at your own pace**

Kerouac wrote *On The Road* in three weeks. But just because he did, it doesn't mean you have to.

Joseph Heller took eight years to produce *Catch 22*. Eight years.

Work at a pace that works for you. If that's an hour a week or 40 hours a week, it's entirely up to you. You don't have to descend into drug and alcohol-fuelled writing frenzies because 'the greats' did. Write however works best for you.

## **8. Know your audience**

Who you're writing for is the most important aspect of writing. Whether you're working on a romantic novel aimed at helping married couples add some spice into their sex lives, or a teen thriller aimed at pre-pubescent boys, you must take the time to understand your audience.

Freddie Mercury sang for 'misfits everywhere'. James Patterson claims he writes for middle-aged women, who will usually read his books on a resort holiday somewhere. I myself am trying to write for those people in the stage of 'self-discovery'.

Know your audience.

## **9. End each chapter on a cliff**

Like a TV series, each chapter should make the reader want to keep reading. A good piece of fiction should be page turning. It should be difficult for the reader to put down. It should lure the reader out of their own reality and into something completely new. They should enter back into their own reality only long after their loved ones have given up trying to talk and gone to bed.

## **10. Fiction writing should be relatable**

Superman had kryptonite. Achilles had a vulnerable heel. Everyone has weaknesses and 'a way to be attacked'. If they don't, they aren't human and consequently, your human reader won't empathise with them.

Your writing must be relatable to your audience. If you're writing for married middle-aged women, perhaps your character is searching for something new to experience or a way to drive away 'life boredom'. That's a generalisation, I realise, but it's a noteworthy example.

For me, as a 24-year-old writer living in a time where technology is taking over and people don't have time anymore, a time where the average 24-year-old is still searching for 'their thing', I can relate to my audience by focusing on themes like anxiousness, loneliness, a fear of

failure and an overwhelmed existence.