

Jay's Guidelines for Writing Fiction

Based on my experiences of the past few years, I've come up with four pretty simple rules. These guidelines only apply to me -- writing is such an inherently idiosyncratic pursuit that what works for me may well be disaster for another writer. Accordingly, take them with a large grain of salt. The core point is that habit is very good for you, and good writing habits eventually generate good writing.

- 1) Write a story every week.
- 2) Finish everything you start.
- 3) Don't self-critique while you're writing.
- 4) Work on one thing at a time.

1) Write a story every week.

The point here is to set an achievable goal that is completely under your control. For example, setting a goal of selling a story a week (or a month, or even a year) is out of your control. Setting a goal of having a story critiqued every week isn't even fully under your control -- it is easy to miss a group meeting, or for your critiquers to get busy. Writing, however, you can control.

Length is irrelevant. This is important for two reasons -- time management and idea sizing. Even on a terrible week with sick kids and overtime at work, you can carve out an hour somewhere to rip off a 500 word flash piece. Then you've met your goal. On an easy week, you can work on a novella. This helps you meet the goal more consistently, where a word-count target would be in greater jeopardy. (Obviously that rule is different if working on a novel.) The same thing applies to idea sizing -- a small, clever idea that might be worthy of a thousand words should only be written in a thousand words. You don't have to stumble over fattened-up work, or pare down a Big Idea story.

(Note that some writers find a weekly writing schedule or word count goal preferable to a weekly goal of story completion. This is especially true of novels. Experiment -- see what works for you.)

Writing a story a week also helps improve craft. Just like going to the gym or practicing a foreign language, you get better with repetition. Consider this -- many newer writers write a story a month, as that is often the frequency at which writers' groups meet. In a year, you'd write twelve stories. At a story a week, you'd write fifty-two stories. (In my case the number seems to run into the high sixties for a variety of reasons.) If you consider twelve stories a year to be a reasonable annual output, a story a week will put you four to five years down your developmental path *in one year*.

Like craft, habits improve. At the professional level, writing is much more like athletics than it is like office work. Serious athletes *need* to work out all the time, to practice their game. If they don't, they get irritable or worse. The exercise is a physical and psychological addiction. Serious writers *need* to write all the time. If you can train yourself to that state, through sheer force of habit, you will become more productive than most people think possible.

Writing a story a week drives inventory. Inventory drives sales -- you can't sell what you don't have. I expect that 50% of my first draft stories will be throwaways, 25% will be worth investing redrafting or editing time in, and 25% will be ready to go out the door with light editing. (In actual experience, the ration is more like 25-50-25, but I've improved with practice.) Back to the fifty-two stories a year, that yields twenty-six salable pieces, at a minimum. At twelve stories a year, that yields six salable stories. How widely read do you want to be?

I'll discuss editing in 3) below, but a quick comment is on order. A story a week is quick writing. Many writers and teachers of writing will tell you that quick writing is sloppy writing. That may well be true for them -- writing is after all a distinctly idiosyncratic pursuit as I said before -- but it is not a universal truth. The most distinct counter to that is something I learned at the Oregon Coast Professional Writers' Workshop Master Class: to consider the role of voice in writing. Some of the most successful writers

are those with strong voice. Voice is impossible to polish *in* to a manuscript, but it is very easy to polish *out* of a manuscript. Your first draft may be very sloppy at the craft and consistency levels, depending on what type of writer you are, but it will be the closest to your natural story telling voice and intentions for the story. Working it over and over for polish, as M.F.A. Lit types will insist you do, has at least as much danger of filing off all the interesting and worthwhile parts as it has chance of improving the story. Writing a story a week forces you to concentrate on voice, and you may well find stronger, more vibrant writing emerging from the work.

I've broken this rule perhaps twice since I began following it, for family emergencies -- it's my first and oldest rule of writing -- and both times, I made up by writing two stories the following week.

2) *Finish everything you start.*

It's a truism that far more stories are begun than ended. Endings are hard -- when you sit down to write, the idea or image glitters with interest. Somewhere around page four, or seventeen, or thirty-two, you begin to break down. There is a powerful tendency to say, "this isn't going where I want it to," and abandon the work in favor of a new idea. This is closely related to item 3) below, as well.

This is writing death. It's a terrible habit to get into, and even worse to maintain and reinforce. It also makes writing a story a week a lot more difficult, because of your lost investment of time in false starts. Unfinished stories can't be critiqued, improved, placed in inventory, submitted or sold. You don't learn very much from them, either. You can *always* throw a story away after you're done. You'll never know if it deserves to live if you don't finish it.

Ultimately, this is about self-discipline. Pushing through the hard stories makes it easier in the future, keeps your habits consistent and fills inventory. In the past two years, I think I've abandoned two drafts unfinished. That's with over one hundred twenty stories started.

3) *Don't self-critique while you're writing.*

Let the writing flow. You can read it afterward, and decide whether or not you like it. Very few newer writers can judge their own work when they're in the middle of it. I certainly can't.

There are a lot of writers, especially those who have been through creative writing tracks in college or graduate school, who will start a story, exclaim, "This is shit!" then delete over and over, so they write two or three thousand words before they get to the end of page two. This kind of perfectionism is the worst form of self-sabotage. It may well be shit on page two, but the story may blossom on page five. Delete one through four during the editing process in that case.

Also, per the earlier note on voice, some of the best writing can come from an unencumbered burst of creativity. The critical voice is the creative voice's worst enemy. They're both important, but keep them separate.

You can always critique and polish later, to whatever degree your writing process requires of you. If you self-critique while writing, you'll miss some of your finest creativity, discourage yourself, and lose what may be some of your best work.

Of course, once you've *finished* a draft, you can edit like Maxwell's demon if that pleases you. It's a lot easier to edit a manuscript that exists than one that does not. The more experience I get, the less willing I get to edit manuscripts beyond basic line editing, typo patrols and checks for major errors-of-fact, errors-of-plot and errors-of-continuity. Other writers find profit in days, weeks, even months of reconsideration of a story. That's very much a part of each individual writer's process.

I almost never, ever break this rule. On the rare occasions when I find myself tempted to do, I stop, think carefully about what's bothering me -- or even take a break -- then tell myself to "trust the process." These rules give me a framework in which my process can take place. Trusting the process hasn't steered me wrong yet.

4) *Work on one thing at a time.*

This is important, at least for me. The integrity of a given story idea, my thinking about plot and character, the natural voice of the story, all the factors that go into quality writing, can be substantially muddled by interruption. It's hard enough to deal with the necessary interruptions of family, work and sleep -- you can't control those. Interrupting one story with another *is* something you can control. Also, when you jump back and forth between multiple in-progress stories, it's a lot harder to meet a completion goal such as writing a story a week.

Of my four rules, this is the one I most often honor in the breach. For example, I've been able to compartmentalize my creative thinking sufficiently to have an in-progress novel with a separate goal of a chapter a week, while continuing to create a story a week. Clearly I'm working on two things at once when I do that. From time to time, I get a sales opportunity with a short deadline, and find myself stopping one story to quickly write another. Occasionally, I'll be struck by an idea so powerful I have to deal with it immediately.

Even in those cases, I only pull back one step -- have a second story open or in progress. As quickly as possible, I return to my original effort. I don't recommend breaking this rule, for myself or others, but it is the softest of the four.

Are These Guidelines For You?

I can't tell you what works for you. I can't even tell you for sure what works for me, though these rules have served me well. I have two suggestions for implementing them, based on my own experience.

First, back into them. Go easy. Commit to a story a week for a month. See how it works out. At the end of the month, promise yourself you'll go to the end of the quarter. At the end of the quarter, give yourself the rest of the year.

If you sit down and say, "I'm going to write a story a week for the rest of my life," you won't. It's like trying to lose fifty pounds. The goal is overwhelming. Incrementalism is your friend. It also gives you a chance to find out in easy steps if this system works for you.

Second, have some reading or writing buddies you share this process with. With their agreement, email each story out when it's done -- *in first draft*. Your buddies won't care if your verb agreement is broken. They can function as first readers, giving you one-line reactions, or even full critiques if their time permits. That will help you evaluate the stories, and give you a support system to keep going. Even better if a few of those folks are also trying to write a story a week. You have someone to trade with.

My first reader list is about twenty names long. With any given story, I may hear from three or four of them. Some readers are silent for months, only speaking up occasionally, some readers are almost weekly responders. It works for me.

For what it's worth, I have a fifth, shadow rule, which is keep everything I've finished in the mail. Some stories I don't consider finished -- I abandon them as unworkable once I've completed a draft and evaluated it or workshopped it. But once it *is* finished, keep it in the mail!

What works for you? Only you can know. These rules might serve as a launching point. If you find something else that works well, let me know. I'd like to learn it, too.

Jay Lake
PO Box 42611
Portland, OR 97242-0611

jlake@jlake.com
<http://www.jlake.com/>