

Heinlein's Business Habits for Writers, Annotated

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This was originally published as a pair of blog posts. I present it in slightly different form here in the hope it will help.

Introduction

Robert A. Heinlein included these “business habits” as he called them in an essay in 1947 in a book called *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science Fiction Writing*. He included them almost as an afterthought.

He wrote that these five business habits had more to do with being a professional writer than any other advice he could provide.

What have become known as Heinlein's Rules are deceptively simple yet, in his own words, “they are amazingly hard to follow—which is why there are so few professional writers and so many aspirants.”

There y'go. That's a thrown gauntlet if ever I've seen one.

My Personal Experience

I started following Heinlein's Rules and a Zen-like technique called *Writing Off Into the Dark* in April of 2014.

The Rules gave me discipline.

Writing Off Into the Dark gave me the freedom to simply have fun writing.

The former was a matter of hanging on. The latter was a matter of letting go.

I set a recurring goal to write one short story per week. Before I finally missed a week, I had written 70 short stories. (I am writing a short story per week again now.)

On October 19, 2014 I started following the Rules in earnest, writing full time. I kept the recurring weekly goal of writing and publishing one short story per week. I added to that the recurring daily goal to write 3,000 publishable words of fiction per day.

In one year, from October 19, 2014 to October 18, 2015, I wrote ten novels, a novella and around ninety short stories. From the short stories, I've also compiled twelve 5-story collection and six 10-story collections. (As of August 26, 2016, I have written 19 novels and a novella, and 147 short stories.)

During that year, I fell far short on my daily goal on several occasions. I surpassed it a few times as well.

Yet even though I fell short on my daily goal several times, I still wrote over three-quarters of a million (750,466) words of published fiction during that year. In only three hours per day on the days that I worked. Not a bad day job, eh?

But I was able to accomplish all of that—ALL of it—only because I was following Heinlein's Rules. That's how important they are.

Note: Everybody who's ever heard of Robert A. Heinlein knows he was a science fiction writer. That is not news. However, his business habits (Heinlein's Rules) are applicable to ALL writing. If you want to be a professional writer, you should apply these rules.

If you can read Heinlein's Rules and still believe somehow that they pertain only to SF or fantasy or some other specific genre, you should not be writing. You should be doing something you enjoy.

Heinlein's Rules

Rule 1. You must write.

What can I say other than Duh?

If you want to be a writer, you must write. Is there more to this, some hidden meaning? No. It's simple.

If you want to be a car mechanic, you have to fix cars. If you want to be a painter, you have to paint. If you want to be a carpenter, you have to work with wood.

And if you want to be a writer, you must write.

Now, Thinking About writing is not writing. Talking About writing is not writing. Getting Ready to write is not writing. Buying a new writer's chair is not writing. And you know what? Attending meetings of writer's groups or critique groups is not writing. While we're at it, researching is not writing. And Rewriting is most definitely not writing.

Writing is putting new words on the page. Period. All that other stuff (and more) is your conscious mind talking you into thinking you're writing.

If you want to be a writer, you must write. Rule 1.

Rule 2. You must finish what you write.

Same thing. Duh.

It's probably safe to say that all aspiring writers have stacks or file folders or file cabinets or drawers or notebooks chock full of "really great ideas" that they started and never finished. Maybe you have some of those too.

Some of those are pieces that someone else said they didn't like so you didn't see them as worthy of finishing. Some of them are critique group rejects. Some of them, you've looked at so many times you're sick of them. And some of them you just never started.

Most often, the most common but unspoken reason you didn't finish is Fear. After all, if you finish something, you might have to send it off and risk rejection.

So what? Ask yourself, what if they (editors, readers) don't like it? What's the worst that will happen? Will they come knocking on your door? Will they hunt you down and beat you?

No. They'll just stop reading and find something else to do. If it's an editor, he'll stop reading and (probably) slip a form rejection note into your SASE and send it back to you.

Oh no! What do you do then?

Write the next story and send it off. That's what you do.

If you want to be a writer, you must write and you must finish what you write.

Rule 3. You must not rewrite except to editorial demand.

Harlan Ellison added "And then only if you agree."

Now remember, Heinlein first published these business habits back in 1947. That was actually the dawn of what today we call "traditional" publishing. So contracts were still legitimate, and publishers weren't looking to screw you twelve ways from center.

News flash: In today's wonderful new world of publishing, There Is No Editorial Demand.

(ahem) unless you're still absolutely dying to give some traditional publisher your copyright for

the rest of your life plus 70 years (ahem)

Well, unless you choose to submit your shorter work to magazines and journals to try to make a quick few hundred dollars before you indie publish. Then an editor might request that you make some changes to your manuscript.

In that case, you have a choice to make. As Harlan Ellison wrote, “Only if you agree.” Let your conscience, not your billfold, be your guide.

Okay, but a lot of us don’t even bother with magazine markets. A lot of us go straight to press, so to speak. That’s me, actually, most of the time.

Write, finish what you write, send it to a first reader for proofing or read it aloud to a friend, and then submit it or publish it. Period.

The important thing for you to notice is that nowhere in that process did I mention the word “rewrite” or “revise” or any of those other backward-looking words.

On my computer screen, I have a sign. It reads

*Write the next sentence.
Keep the story moving forward.
Writers Write.*

Rule 4. You must put it on the market.

Okay. Back in the day, when you finished a manuscript, you had only one option if you wanted to seek publication: you mailed it off. Heinlein’s reasoning here is transparent. If you don’t “put it on the market” (mail it), no possible way will it be published. And you won’t have to worry about rejection.

Updated for today’s wonderful new world of indie publishing, this rule would read either “You must submit it” OR “You must publish it.” I most often opt for “You must publish it.”

But whether you ascribe to submitting it or publishing it, if you don’t do one or the other, your work won’t be published.

This rule actually stops a lot of writers who would otherwise have a shot at being professionals.

They succumb to the fear of rejection. If they don’t submit their work to readers (either by mailing it to an editor or by publishing it), they don’t risk someone telling them it’s no good.

Here, let me get that out of the way for you right now.

No matter how wonderful your mom said your story is, the truth is that some readers will hate it. Some will think it's all right. And others will love it.

It's all a matter of individual reader taste.

So what do you do when you get a great review? Say thanks, Write The Next Story, then submit it or publish it.

Ah, but what do you do when you get a horrible review? Say thanks, Write The Next Story, then submit it or publish it.

Rule 5. You must keep it on the market until it sells.

Again, back in the day, this meant you wrote, finished what you wrote, did not rewrite, and mailed out your work. Then, if it came back with a rejection slip, you would take it out of the envelope, dust it off and mail it right back out to a different editor or publisher.

In other words, you'd keep it on the market until it sold.

Today, in our wonderful world of indie publishing, "keep it on the market" means either of two things:

1. If you submitted it and it comes back, resubmit elsewhere. Remember, don't rewrite it. Just submit it again. Editors are just readers. What one editor dislikes, another editor will love.
2. If you published it, it means leave it up there so more readers can find it and buy it.

A lot of new writers will indie publish a novel, and if it doesn't sell a billion copies in the first month or quarter or year, they take it down.

Why? What harm does it do to leave it up? Taking it down is just insane. Leave it up there so readers can find it.

And you know what you do then, right?

Write the next story. Then write the next story. Then write the next story.

Wrapping Up

As I update this paper (early morning, August 27, 2016) I've been following Heinlein's Rules and what I call Bradbury's Unwritten Corollary (put your fingers on the keyboard and write whatever comes) for almost two years now. I started my first novel on October 19, 2014.

In that time I've written 18 novels (I'll finish number 19 in the next few days), one novella, and 147 short stories. I'll write number 148 this week.

One quick note from me to you: I am almost 64 years old. I'm not complaining. Obviously I'm glad I found Heinlein's Rules when I did. Today is sooner than tomorrow. That sort of thing.

But had I found them when I was 20 or 30 or 40, they would have had the same effect on me. I would have been a professional writer from that time on.

The point is this: If you want to write "but" you're waiting until you retire (or whatever), Stop Waiting. Go back and read Rule One above. Then sit down and write.

When I'm forced to take a "day off" (why take a day off from doing something fun?) I miss writing. I miss my characters.

I miss the excitement of running through a scene with them, pen and notepad in hand, waiting wide-eyed to see what they're going to do or say next.

I am not kidding. When I'm away from my current story for any length of time, I almost suffer separation anxiety.

And when I finish a novel, whether it's 35,000 words or 97,000 words, I don't celebrate. I almost mourn.

The only "good thing" for me about finishing a story is that I can start the next one. I celebrate starting a new story. I celebrate the excitement and the sheer joy that I know will come to me as I trust my subconscious and my characters.

And all of that — all of it — is because of Heinlein's Rules.

I wish you the same great joy.

Harvey Stanbrough