

Heinlein's Rules, 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 some younger writers.

Introduction

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

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

On October 19, 2014 I started following his 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.

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 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 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.

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 a sap who is still absolutely yearning to give some
traditional publisher your copyright for the rest of your life plus 70 years (ahem)*

Well, there is *almost* no editorial demand.

If 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 you might have some editor request that you make some changes to your manuscript. In that case, you have a choice to make.

As Harlan Ellison said, "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.

I write, I finish what I write, I send what I've written to a first reader for proofing, and then I 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.

As I said, I'm following Heinlein's Rules.
I write. I finish what I write. I do not rewrite.
On my computer screen, I have a sign. It reads

*Write the next scene.
Then write the next sentence.
Keep the story moving forward.
Writers Write.*

Rule 4. You must put it (your writing) 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, SOME readers will love it, SOME will think it's all right, and SOME will think it's the worst piece of garbage they've ever seen.

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

And what do you do when you get a horrible review? Say thanks and then Write The Next Story. Then submit it or publish it.

Rule 5. You must keep it (your work) on the market until it sells.

Again, back in the day, this meant once you wrote, finished what you wrote, did NOT rewrite, and mailed it out, if it came back with a rejection slip, you would take it out of the envelope, dust it off, retype any coffee-stained pages, put it into another envelope addressed to a different editor or publisher, and mail it right back out.

Today, in our wonderful world of indie publishing, it means either of two things:

- if you submitted it and it comes back, resubmit elsewhere. Remember, DO NOT rewrite it. Just submit it again. What one editor dislikes, another editor will love.
- if you published it, it means leave it up there so more readers can find it and buy it.

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