

What Heinlein's Rules Mean to Me: A Short Series

This is a compilation of five posts comprising a would-be interview about Heinlein's Business Habits for Writers and why, as a professional fiction writer, I personally find them essential. This series was first published on my instructive almost-daily Journal from March 8 – March 12, 2021 at <https://hestanbrough.com>.

Topic: Awhile Back: An Introduction to a Series on Heinlein's Rules

Awhile back, I received a note from a writer who wanted to interview me about my adherence to Heinlein's Rules. The purpose was so the writer could put up a blog post on the topic.

Later, the writer decided the post would be too long for their format. I agreed.

But the questions the writer asked, and the incidental comments the writer made, were absolutely typical (usually even word for word) of the questions and comments I've heard from writers at conferences and conventions for the past thirty years.

So I decided to use that writer's questions and comments to post a series of topics here for the benefit of the few who read this Journal. Note: If the writer emails me to ask me to take this post down, I will do so. Then I will paraphrase the questions and comments and continue the series.

Some of this will hit home. Some of it might make you angry. Some of it will sound repetitious. I don't mean any harm. In fact, I've added a disclaimer to the very end of every post now to maybe help satisfy detractors.

In my own experience, I've often found I had to hear something more than once or hear it said in a different way before I finally got it. It is in that spirit that I offer this and the following few posts on Heinlein's Rules and Writing Into the Dark, which really do go hand in hand.

First, here are Heinlein's Rules so we're all starting from the same place. As I've said many times, you can download a free PDF copy of Heinlein's Rules (annotated) by clicking <https://harveystanbrough.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Heinleins-Business-Habits-Annotated-2.pdf>.

Heinlein first outlined his rules in [Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science Fiction Writing](#). Largely as an afterthought to his article, he wrote the following:

"I'm told that these articles are supposed to be some use to the reader. I have a guilty feeling that all of the above may have been more for my amusement than for your edification. Therefore I shall chuck in as a bonus a group of practical, tested rules, which, if followed meticulously, will prove rewarding to any writer."

Then he lists what he calls his Business Habits:

1. You must write.
2. You must finish what you start.
3. You must refrain from rewriting except to editorial order.
4. You must put it on the market.
5. You must keep it on the market until sold.”

Note: Heinlein also add that if you follow these rules, eventually you would find some editor (reader) somewhere who would buy your work. Nothing could be more spot-on the money.

Here are some excerpts from the rest of the writer’s introduction, which contain some of those “typical” questions and comments I alluded to earlier and my responses:

Q: “It stands to reason that if we, as writers, spend the bulk of our time writing, we’re only going to improve. And if, instead of hopping from unfinished project to unfinished project or obsessing over a work to the point of ridiculousness, we move on to the next story, we’re going to spend more time writing. Which is the one thing we all need to do a lot of to succeed.”

Harvey: I agree in principle with this point. Instead of “hopping from unfinished project to unfinished project or obsessing over a work” at all, we should write the current story (even the very first) to the best of our ability, then publish it and move on to the next story.

But this isn’t only so we’ll “spend more time” writing. Writing a lot without learning and practice will not help you succeed. Practice (vs. hovering via revisions and rewrites) is what will help you succeed. To practice, you learn and then apply what you learned in the next story.

Never look back. Always look forward to the next technique to learn and the next story to write.

Q: “I have a few concerns with some of the rules to the point that I’ve never been able to embrace the process. ... I’ve always wished I knew someone personally who follows Heinlein Rules so I could talk to them and see what they would say about my concerns.”

Harvey: You came to the right place. I was exactly the same way. Exactly. Which is to say I was filled with unreasoning fear. Unreasoning because there are no real consequences to writing a “bad” (in your opinion) story. The truth is, the world won’t stop if you write a “bad” story and not that much good will happen if you write a “good” (again, in your opinion) story. Your opinion of your work is still only one opinion.

To you, your original voice is boring because it’s with you 24/7. But to others, your original voice is unique and fresh. Given the chance to read your story, some will love it, some will hate it, and the majority will enjoy it—if you don’t polish your original voice off it.

Topic: Post 2 in the Heinlein’s Rules Series

Actually, more introductory stuff today, with some specifics on Heinlein’s Rules mixed in.

Q: To provide context, how long have you been using this process, how many books/stories have you been able to write, and what kind of success have you achieved?

Harvey: I first discovered Heinlein's Rules and a technique called Writing Into the Dark in February 2014. I made the conscious decision to pull up my big boy pants and give it an honest try. And frankly I was amazed. Since then I've written over 200 short stories, 8 novellas and 58 novels.

That's the real secret to Heinlein's Rules and Writing Into the Dark, if there is a secret: You have to dedicate yourself to pushing down your fears and really trying it for yourself. It helps to realize you have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain. You can always go back to writing the "old" way: outlining, revising, critique grouping, rewriting however many times, etc.

I started with short stories (one a week) and ended that streak with 72 short stories in 72 weeks, all written in accordance with Heinlein's Rules, all written into the dark.

If you look at a mean average, that's just over 8 novels per year for 7 years and just over 28 short stories per year in that same time period, plus 8 novellas scattered in.

But I expect to produce a lot more this year. I finished my 58th novel on March 2, but it was also the 4th novel I started and completed this year. So on average, I'm on track to write 20 novels this year alone. All because I found Heinlein's Rules and Writing Into the Dark, pushed my fears down and really tried them. The trust in the process came quickly after that.

My success is because I learn and then I write. I don't hover. I use a process called "cycling" as I write. Some call it revision, but revision is a conscious-mind process and cycling is a creative-mind process. That's the big difference, and it's all-important.

Q: And what is "cycling"?

Harvey: When I return for the next writing session, I read what I wrote during the previous session. But I read as a reader, just enjoying the story, not critically as a writer. And I allow myself and my characters to touch the story as I go. When I get back to the blank space, I'm back into the flow of the story and I just keep writing.

I mentioned that I finished my 58th novel on March 2. On March 3 I started my 59th. I'm not quite 27,000 words into that one. My daily word count goal is 4,000 words of publishable fiction per day, but that's only 4 hours out of the 24 that we are given in each day. In that regard, and measured against the old pulp writers (who wrote on manual typewriters) I am a total slacker.

Q: I've heard many (not all) writers who adhere religiously to Heinlein's Rules poo-poo the things writers often do to improve their craft, such as attending conferences, reading books and blogs, taking courses, etc. I understand, I think, the principle here, that if you spend too much time doing those things, you're not doing the actual writing. But there are some things that writing alone can't fix; sometimes we need direct instruction from people who've been there to

identify what's wrong and learn how to address those issues. What are your thoughts on continuing education as an author?

Harvey: Not to be contrary, but on this point I have to disagree. I've *never* heard a writer who adheres to Heinlein's Rules "poo-poo" doing anything to improve their craft. In fact, all of them stress learning as only a very close second in importance to actually writing.

That said, even a decade or so before the COVID panic, actual physical conferences were falling by the wayside, leaving only large, often unaffordable conferences. But I personally have always urged writers to attend conferences and even the much more affordable conventions that interested them, for networking opportunities if nothing else.

Today most of those opportunities are virtual, a concept I have trouble grasping. I need the physicality and the immediate back and forth between actual people. That said, I still recommend even virtual conferences if that's something the writer is interested in.

Re reading books and blogs on writing, of course I recommend those and I don't know of anyone who doesn't. In fact, I often provide links to other resources in my Journal. And my author website at HarveyStanbrough.com is rich with writer resources.

My own personal caveat is that the writer should exercise due caution and check out the author of the book or blog. For example, if that person doesn't write novels, s/he has no business teaching others how to write novels. Would you go to a car mechanic to learn the finer points of carpentry or medicine? And re taking courses, I urge writers to do so, again after investing the time to do due diligence.

The process I recommend is this: The aspiring or beginning or experienced fiction writer should

1. write every story to the best of their current ability, not revise and rewrite their original voice off it, then publish it.
2. take time to attend a class or lecture (online is fine) and then stick one technique they want to practice in the back of their mind when they start writing the next story and practice it as they write that story.
3. then write *that* story to the best of their current ability, not revise and rewrite their original voice off it, then publish it.

Q: How easy is it for you to follow the rules?

Harvey: I find it extremely easy to follow HR1, 2, and 3. I'm dedicated to a daily word count goal of 4,000 words of publishable fiction (no drivel). Re HR1 and 2, I'm a fiction writer, so I write as part of my daily routine.

Re HR3, I don't even allow my own critical, conscious mind into my work, so even the *thought* of allowing someone else to tell me how to "fix" the story that came out of my mind is ludicrous

to me. As I've alluded to before, Rule 4 is the most difficult for me to follow because I'd much rather be writing the next story.

Topic: Post 3 in the Heinlein's Rules Series

Today the topic is mostly about Rule 4: You must put it on the market.

Q: I want to dive right in to some of my questions about the rules, starting with #4: You must put it on market. I can see how this worked prior to self-publishing becoming so common because if your book stunk, you could send it to publishers but it wouldn't go anywhere. So no harm done.

Q (cont.) But we all have seen writers who self-publish before their stories are ready. And this hurts them because it turns readers off of future books by those authors. So how is it a good idea to publish all of our stories—especially the early ones—in today's publish-with-the-click-of-a-button world?

Harvey: Well, first, "put it on the market" means "submit it to readers." Back in 1948, the only readers a writer sent work to were publishers, primarily of magazines. Today, that means all readers. "Put it on the market" means "make it available" to publishers or everyday readers.

Second, re "if your book stunk": Stunk in whose opinion? There have been at least dozens and probably hundreds of manuscripts (including Harry Potter) that were turned down by multiple publishers before achieving incredible success.

So the thing to remember is that every opinion of a novel (for example) is just one opinion. That includes the author, the agent, the acquisitions editor, the publisher, and every other reader (because all of those are readers with only one opinion) who ever reads the novel.

What one person doesn't like, another will love. And of course, the reverse is true also. (More on this later.)

Third, re "No harm done," I constantly hear writers worried that if they turn out a "bad" work or one that "isn't ready," it will ruin their career. When those writers seem serious, open-minded, and likely to eventually overcome that fear, I take the time to ask them, "What career?" When they don't, I just smile and nod or say something like, "Yeah, it's rough out there," and go on my way.

Stephen King's wife Tabitha famously fished the manuscript for *Carrie* (if I remember right) out of the trash can into which he'd dropped it. If she hadn't, he might still be teaching high school English and working a second job as a janitor.

Closer to home, I wrote a short story titled "Old Suits." Frankly, I thought (my opinion) it was pretty much a piece of crap. But I'd written it so I published it anyway (Heinlein's Rule 4).

Maybe a month later, I received an email from a woman who compared it to Hemingway's works and said it was one of the best short stories she'd ever read. I still don't see what she saw

in it, but it goes to the point: most readers will enjoy your work if you haven't polished your original voice off it. That said, some few will hate it, and some few will love it.

The point is, writers shouldn't pre-judge their work (as King learned with *Carrie*) and decide nobody will like it. Our job as writers is to write. The reader's job (each individual reader) is to judge whether they like or don't like what they've just read. But nobody will read your work at all if you don't 1) put it on the market by mailing or emailing it to a magazine or 2) put it on the market by publishing it yourself.

Re "we all have seen writers who self-publish before their stories are ready": again, I say according to whom? According to whose opinion? I've never personally seen a writer self-publish before a story is ready, which basically means finished and proofed for typos.

I have, on the other hand, seen a lot of stories in which I knew well in advance how the story will end. That is most often a result of ignoring HR3 (refrain from rewriting).

In most cases, lifeless stories, those in which the writer "figures out" what will happen next, are the result of too much rewriting and polishing. If the writer can "figure out" what's going to happen next, so can the reader. To paraphrase Ray Bradbury, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."

And finally, to your big question: "So how is it a good idea to publish all of our stories—especially the early ones—in today's publish-with-the-click-of-a-button world?"

I'm not saying you have to self-publish every story. But you should either submit or publish every story. Don't prejudge the editor's taste at *Asimov's* or *Ellery Queen* or wherever. You wrote the story. Send it to them and let them judge for themselves. You won't ruin your chances for future success even with that one editor.

Magazine editors receive hundreds or thousands of submissions each month. They often don't remember the names of the authors from whom they buy manuscripts, much less the names of those in the Reject pile.

Editors usually read a story only until they believe they know how it will end. At that point, they set it on the Reject pile and go to the next story. Your first goal is to make an editor read to the end of your story. (The best way to do that is not polish your original voice off of it.) Your second goal is to have your story be just enough better (in the editor's estimation) to beat out another story they read all the way to the end.

And the only way to achieve those two goals is to write a story, send it off (or publish it) and write the next story. Instead of hovering over one story rewriting and polishing, write it to the best of your ability the first time through, then submit or publish it and move on to the next story.

I also recommend having one technique in mind—for example, pacing or dialogue or depth of description, etc.—in mind as you begin each story. That's how you improve. Practice and learning, learning and practice.

All of that being said, the rule I have the most trouble with is Rule 4. I fall off that one regularly because I'd rather be writing than designing covers and jumping through the hoops to put the stories and novels up. At the moment, I have 7 or 8 unpublished novels and probably a dozen or so unpublished short stories. I'll publish them when the writing calms down for awhile.

As a side note, I personally believe Rule 4 was to help writers overcome the fear of failure that keeps them from publishing their work and causes so many manuscripts to be tucked away into drawers (or dropped into Stephen King's trash can). If you don't publish it, nobody can read and reject it. Especially beginning writers never seem to understand if you don't publish it, nobody can read and enjoy it either.

Topic: Post 4 on Heinlein's Rules

A lot of this one is about the most controversial of Heinlein's Rules: Rule 3.

Q: Ok, my next question is about Rule #3: Refrain from rewriting except to editorial order. So, if a story is good enough to be accepted by a publisher, and they give you feedback on what needs to be changed, you should make those changes (within reason). But you shouldn't do revisions on your own.

Q (cont.): I agree with the spirit of this rule: instead of getting caught up in endless revisions, the best thing we can do to improve our craft is to write the next book (and the next one, and the next one...). But I can't see how this works for authors who self-publish, because it's entirely possible that they're publishing work that is sub-par and no one will want to read. I mean, every story needs some editing, right?

Harvey: First, Harlan Ellison added an addendum to HR3: "Refrain from rewriting except to editorial order." The addendum? "And only if you agree." So sure, make the changes your agent or editor or publisher recommend, but only if you agree with those changes.

Second, whether a story is "good enough" to be accepted by a publisher only means the acquisitions editor and/or publisher actually liked it, which means it suited the taste of that particular person at that particular moment in time. What that person likes, another person won't. What one person is in the mood for at this moment in time, another person isn't.

What one person sees as excellent and entertaining, another will see as "sub-par." I personally believe there is no story that "no one will want to read," unless the writer has revised and rewritten and polished until it reads exactly like everything else in the slush pile.

You wrote "I can't see how this works for authors who self-publish." It works for me through what I call "first readers." When I finish a work (remember, I cycle back as I write), I run an automated spell-checker. Then I save the work in a PDF format and email it to my first reader(s). Usually that happens within minutes of writing the last word of the novel. (I don't use first readers for short stories. I read those myself, aloud, make corrections, then submit or publish them.)

My first readers are not necessarily writers. A few are and a few aren't. But the only thing that matters is that they're avid readers. They don't "look for" anything as they read. They just read for entertainment, and if something pops out at them as they read, they make a note. Usually that's a misspelled word or a wrong word (waste for waist, for example) or an inconsistency (a character put on a blue jacket when he got dressed but at lunch an hour later he's suddenly in a brown jacket, or a character has brown eyes in one scene and blue eyes in another).

When I get input back from my first reader(s), I go through the story a final time and apply what I agree with. I ignore the rest. If one of my first readers who is also a writer decides to tell me how I "should" have written something or how they would have written it, I largely ignore that. Especially if that writer is much farther back on the writing road than I am.

As for every story needing an editor, that depends on the skill level and experience of the writer. I don't personally use a copyeditor, but I *do recommend* using one unless you have an excellent grounding in grammar, the appropriate use of punctuation (including when to purposefully break the "rules"), and the nuances of the language. But I also do recommend *everyone* let a good first reader see their finished work. And again, that means an avid reader, not a writer.

Never under any circumstances do I recommend a "story doctor" or "developmental editor" or any of that. A good copyeditor is worth his or her weight in gold, but all the rest is inviting someone else to change your story, and that's just wrong.

Q: To piggyback on that, what about stories that have major structural issues? This is especially common for new writers who are still figuring out how stories flow and should be structured. When I look back at my first attempts, they either required serious reworking or just needed to be filed quietly away never to be heard of again. The thought of publishing them makes me twitchy.

Harvey: Again, "major structural issues" according to whom? When you look back at your first attempts, in your opinion now they "required serious reworking" (yet you probably revised and rewrote those, didn't you?)

But if you keep learning and writing, one year or five years or ten years from now you'll look back on your most recent writings and believe they "require serious reworking." But if you had published those stories, some readers would have loved them.

This is true even if you follow Heinlein's Rules and write into the dark. Especially if you keep learning as you move forward through your writing career. If you look back at earlier works, even your previous novel, you can find something you could have done better.

So the choice is yours: revise, rewrite, etc. for weeks or months or years, or publish the thing and move on to practice more and improve with the next work.

A Brief Aside—A friend brought a truism home to me in an email yesterday when he wrote that he's enjoying the Heinlein's Rules posts but that he's also still trying to convince himself that writing is more fun than his favorite distractions.

That's something I tend to forget sometimes. See, for me, writing fiction IS my favorite distraction. I can't imagine doing anything that's more fun than discovering my characters' stories as they live them. I actually feel fortunate that I'm the guy they're willing to let into their world.

But when I'm talking with other writers, and especially when I'm writing this Journal, like most people I tend to assume those other writers (or you all) think along the same lines I do.

But the fact remains, for a lot of folks, my friend's thought hits the nail directly on the head. Writing fiction at a professional level isn't for everyone, whether following Heinlein's Rules or Writing Into the Dark or doing it in some other way.

If you're a hobby writer, that's fine. If you're into writing only haiku and senryu, or if you only want to write a memoir, or if you only write a short story now and then, that's fine. Seriously.

If I've said it once, I've said it at least a few hundred times: If you can find anything you enjoy doing more than writing fiction, chances are you should be doing that instead. Absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Just one caveat: If you really want to write fiction, be sure that nagging "other things are more fun" isn't just your critical mind shutting you down.

That caveat aside, in this Journal, I'll keep treating all of you as if you are already making your living as a writer or want to.

Topic: Post 5 on Heinlein's Rules: The Wrap-Up

Q: With regard to Heinlein's Rule 5, "Leave it on the market," do you (or did you) ever have to fight the urge to revise or pull a book off the market, etc.?

Harvey: No. I never have (and have never had) the urge to even go back and read what I wrote before. Not because the stories aren't good, but because I've already been there. I already know how it turns out, so for me it's boring.

I'd rather follow a new set of characters around as they live their story and see how that one turns out. (Or in the case of a series, I'd rather follow the same characters around as they live a new part of their story and see how that part of the story turns out.)

Note that I might pull a book down for one day to swap out a cover or change the sales copy, but then it goes right back up.

Q: And the biggie: What would an author need to give up or change (ideas, habits, mindsets, etc.) to fully adopt Heinlein's Rules?

Harvey: Fear. Nothing else. Just fear. And in every case, it's unreasoning fear.

For HR1, give up the fear-driven need to control everything from an authorial ivory tower. Come down from the tower, take off your authorial robes and slip on some jeans. Then roll off the parapet into the trenches of the story and race through the story with your characters.

For HR1 and 2, trust the characters to tell the story that they, not you, are living. That's key. When you get stuck, just write the next sentence.

One caveat on this one: Often, if a story "slows" or "bogs down," especially toward the end of a scene, you can often find the reason by scrolling up a few sentences or paragraphs. But again, don't consciously "look for" where things end. Just read. The characters will tell you where the scene ended or where you took a wrong turn.

Often you'll find you've written past the end of a scene or, sometimes, even the end of the story. This has happened to me on more than one occasion. It all boils down to trusting the characters.

For HR3, let go of three things, all fear-based:

1. Let go of the notion that the story is important. It isn't. It's only a few minutes' or hours' entertainment for eventual readers. Some will like it and some won't. It's no more important than that.
2. Literally for goodness' sake let go of the notion that someone else can tell your characters' story better than you can. I don't even allow my own critical, conscious mind to intrude on my stories. Much less would I allow anyone else and their conscious, critical mind to intrude. And
3. Let go of the fear that your work won't be perfect. Rest easy in the knowledge that it won't. If you strive to make it perfect, you will try to write like your favorite novelist writes.

But you *aren't* that novelist. You're you. You enjoy that novelist's work because of that novelist's unique, original voice. And others will enjoy *your* work because of *your* unique, original voice if you leave it alone (if you don't revise, rewrite, and critique your original voice off it because of your fear of being "imperfect.")

And for HR4, let go of the fear of judgement. Some few readers will love what you've written. Some few others will hate it. And the majority will enjoy it and the fact that you've written it in your own unique, original voice.

As J. A. Konrath famously wrote in "Six Things Writers Need To Stop Worrying About," "Someone else's opinion of you and your work is none of your business." He's absolutely right. Your job is to write the stories and put them out. It is the reader's job, not yours, to decide what s/he enjoys.

Q: Any final words, tips, or resources you can share with authors who might be considering Heinlein's Rules?

Harvey: First, I recommend they subscribe to my [almost-daily Journal](#). It's free, and it's pretty much the only blog today where writers can learn about writing with Heinlein's Rules and Writing Into the Dark. A lot of big-name writers do it, but very few talk about it, and nobody else talks about it regularly.

Second, there are dozens, maybe even hundreds, of resources on my author site at <https://harveystanbrough.com>. Hover over or click the tab labeled More For Writers. There are services there that I offer, but there are also Free Downloads and Other Resources for Writers. Check those.

Third, I would be remiss not to mention all the lectures and online classes available at WMG Publishing's Teachable page (Dean Wesley Smith). You can find that at <https://wmg-publishing-workshops-and-lectures.teachable.com/>.

And finally, look for Dean Wesley Smith's books on Heinlein's Rules and Writing Into the Dark. Both are available in both ebook and paper at Amazon and in other outlets.

Okay, that's it for the faux interview on Heinlein's Rules. I hope it helped in some way. More good stuff coming, so stay tuned. And if there are any topics you've wondered about and would like to see me address here, email me at harveystanbrough@gmail.com.