Do You Really Have to Know the Rules to Break Them?

On teaching creative writing to injured servicepeople

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1. Can You Use the Word 'Hope'?—Paul

Michael: Can you use the word, 'hope'?

Paul: I'm sorry?

Michael: Is it all right to use the word, 'hope'?

Paul: In your writing?

Michael: Yeah. Is it okay if we use the word, 'hope'?

Paul: Oh, you mean in a story or something.

Michael: Yeah. We're not allowed to use it.

Paul: In your reports?

Michael: Yes. Anywhere really.

Paul: Oh, okay, well sure, you can use any word in creative writing. [*Pause*]. Well, but it's not always the best word, is it? [*Thinks*]. No, but any word is fine…I mean, I guess it depends on the context. Ummm…

Michael: We get told off if we use it.

Paul: Oh, no, no, use it, sure. Use any word you want. Ummm.

It is November, 2019, and we are three days into an *Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills* (ARRTS) workshop at the University of Canberra. Owen and I are here to teach storytelling and poetry writing, Michael (name changed) is one of the seven injured servicepeople here from the army, navy or air force—he's wearing civvies because this is a non-ranked space—and we are in a room with writeable walls that already have a fair amount of scrawl on them: drafts of poems, little sketches, jokes, quotes from songs. We will be full-time in each other's company for the next four weeks. These first few days always involve a bit of testing out the. . . well, they're not really boundaries; it's hard to find the word for the possibilities that develop in this extraordinary teaching space. Certainly a great deal of writing will emerge.

I was hesitating in response to Michael's question about the permissibility of hope because I've never quite managed to get Spinoza's ferocious critique of that emotion out of my mind. I spent a month travelling through Greece, by myself, back at the turn of the century, with nothing to read but his *Ethics* and a burning grief to forget, and I followed through every one of Spinoza's propositions and definitions and scholia and corollaries and lemmas.

> *P47. Affects of hope and fear cannot be good of themselves.*
>
> Dem: There are no affects of hope and fear without sadness. For fear is sadness (by Def. Aff. XIII), and there is no hope without fear (see the explanation following Def. Aff. XII and XIII). Therefore (by P41) hope and fear cannot be good of themselves, but only insofar as they can restrain an excess of joy (by P43), q.e.d. (Spinoza 141)

To take the last part of this first (we are in Part IV of the *Ethics*, 'Of Human Bondage'), Proposition 43 (P43) holds that one can feel such an excess of joy that it 'surpasses the other actions of the body'. Joy, in such cases, 'becomes stubbornly fixed in the body, and so prevents the body from being capable of being affected in a great many other ways' (139). A case in point would be the anaesthetising effects of addiction, for all the joy it brings. Spinoza is indicating through the third of the above sentences that one might usefully maintain an attitude of fear towards any such 'excess of joy', so as to avoid it. Conversely one might maintain an attitude of hope that a better way of using one's time will appear, to that same end. But hope 'cannot be good' of itself. After all, and this is the point of the first two sentences, hope is inseparable from fear. It is inseparable from fear because it involves staking out the future. Who has not encountered

those true believers whose expressions of hope so control their utterance and behaviour as to amount to a kind of sad paranoia? Locking down the future in that way certainly has no place in art, which is all about opening up capacities to be affected and to act in as many ways as possible.

So part of me was inclined, I said, as I tried to stammer out something of Spinoza's argument against hope off the top of my head, to agree with those military authorities in their insisting that all such emotions be stripped from one's reports of what one has just witnessed and done in combat. Of course, you could always have a dramatic context in which it was perfectly fine for the word 'hope' to arise, I added, for instance in dramatic dialogue, or to give a strange edge to the word. But generally, no, hope is not a big part of what we do as creative writers.

Thus I satisfied my teacherly desire always to tell what seems to me to be the truth about whatever art we are discussing, whether it be the student's, or anyone else's.

Which was probably to miss the point of Michael's utterance.

Thinking back on it, it seems to me now that he wasn't asking permission to use the word 'hope' in this creative context, so much as trying to convey to me and Owen the very strange world he was coming from. You are not allowed to hope. We would have been like the first people you talk to on emerging from a highly closed community, revelling in your new-found freedom from it.

No-one in the room knows anyone else's rank, or even service, from the outset. A subordinate might be chatting critically with a warrant officer about what adjective the latter should use in this line of a limerick and neither be any the wiser as to the hierarchy they would in any other context be breaching. It can feel like a similar freedom with words is in the air, and of course it in many ways is.

But here I come to another example of these same, strange parallels between military and creative writing practices. At our very first encounter with the participants, we ask them about their experience with writing. People will regularly reply that they often write as part of their jobs, and then add, 'But it's not creative at all. We're told not to use adjectives.'

The military ban on adjectives has come up a number of times in this context.

I have found myself over the years answering that actually, we tend to tell our undergraduate students to avoid adjectives too. The South Australian poet Jan Owen even puts their use at the level of a creative writing crime. This is from her work, 'Parts of Speech':

enrol, arrive in force
for the WEA creative writing class.
They don't like
Lesson 3: Prefer the Noun.
Lesson 4: Pruning,
                              most drop out.
This week's theme is Gardens
ADJECTIVES WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Our Major Mitchell nipped
off every poppy once—
50 stems to nowhere.
I forget the scent of roses,
every thorn's in silhouette,
it's suddenly winter.

(Strange).
(20)

I have also found myself adding at this point that actually, the training they have received in stripping back superfluous words gives them a real advantage over our undergraduate creative writing students, who often have to be taught that even when they are writing about themselves, *it's not about you.*

If that comment seems a little cryptic, let me leave it that way for the moment, to hone in on the issue I am trying to tackle. Do we teach rules in creative writing, or not? Is there not something a bit military about the whole affair? It can feel a bit like that when one hears yet another instructor thunder out *Show, don't tell*, blithely ignoring the fact, as Wayne Booth acutely points out, that storytellers of all stamps tell people how things are in their storyworlds on almost every page, if for no other reason than to save on the huge amount of time they would have to spend if every single element of a scene had to be left to inference (8–16).

Then again, surely creative writing is a space of freedom as well. To this end I would like, in my own fashion, to declare war on the phrase heading this writing: *You have to know the rules to break the rules*. I have always found the idea irksome. For a start, there's the way it premises the creative act upon knowledge.

On the other hand, what is so wrong with knowing one's way about? Isn't it just what I was affirming to Michael, in suggesting that he should only use the word 'hope' after thinking a bit about what an impoverished emotion hope actually is?

That might have been a bit insensitive, in context, given the extreme trauma so many of the servicepeople we work with have undergone. Or is it rather just the lesson they need to hear from us, and the very reason working with artists is so therapeutic for so many of them? Arts practice puts them back in the present.

But are there rules there?

2. 'Not so Much Rules as Guidelines!'—Owen

So says Captain Barbosa in the first of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise.

I sometimes keep in touch with participants of the *Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills* (ARRTS) programme for a long while afterwards. A participant of the first programme for which I was a creative writing mentor emailed me some weeks later and asked for a list of writing rules. I had some notes that I dipped into and wrote him a list. Shortly after this, an undergraduate student asked me for something very similar and I was able to pass it on. These and other experiences impressed on me the fact that some new writers want this kind of guidance, some rules that they can work to.

I realised the items in my list were issues that cropped up regularly, especially for the new writer. In consultations with participants, especially at the editing stage, I often refer to these issues in organic ways, as they emerge as elements in the writing that need wrestling with. I don't necessarily need to produce my list, but occasionally I do, when the desire to grasp editing tools in the abstract seems to be strong enough. I have, however, offered my list regularly in my undergraduate teaching, to alert students to common pitfalls, and because their work is graded, whereas our work in ARRTS is less outcome-focussed. But, as I'll explain below, I often refer to these guidelines in the ARRTS context.

The list was first put together with poetry in mind, but I've found over time that they are relevant to prose writing and screenwriting, too, and some more so (e.g. the tenth point). Readers will recognise similarities with Ezra Pound's '"A Retrospect" and "A Few Don'ts"' (np), especially Pound's 'go in fear of abstractions' injunction—which, of course, includes words like 'hope'. Here they are:

Writing / Editing Guidelines

Surprise the reader.

Use detail: describe the world we see, hear, feel, smell and taste.

Use active verbs, e.g. not 'She *moves* through the forest', but 'She *scampers* through the forest.' Suggest action and character.

Avoid abstract nouns, like 'beauty', 'fidelity', 'anger', 'confusion', 'joy', 'history', 'memory'—show these qualities and phenomena through the things people do and through specific examples.

Prefer concrete nouns, for the objects we encounter in the world, for example, 'tree', 'road', 'button'.

Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly—if you nail the active verbs and concrete nouns you're much less likely to need them.

Avoid cliché—this is 'allowing someone else to speak for you', Simon Armitage (np). Find your own way of saying it—it's a challenge but there is another way.

Consider using contractions, such as 'can't'—no-one says 'I cannot' except for special emphasis; take your cue from the spoken word, it's direct and accessible.

Avoid constructions that set up passive voice, especially those featuring the verb 'to be', i.e. 'is', 'was', 'were' 'are' and 'am'. For example, 'The room was searched by him' is passive, whereas, 'He searched the room' allows the active verb to shine.

Avoid overuse of the past perfect tense with 'had', especially early on in stories and screenplays; ground the reader first in the present (or past simple) and then go back—this tends to be a common failing with new writers.

Avoid modifiers, such as 'so', 'only', 'just', 'really', 'very', 'quite'—they are performative words which work better in speech (and in first person writing, to some extent), but add little to the printed page.

Use 'emphatics' sparingly—words such as 'all', 'always', 'never', 'ever' are rarely true.

The last three points are each less of an issue in first person writing, using the personal pronoun, 'I', or in any writing where there is a strong sense of a personal voice. They're more of a problem in third person writing where they make the descriptions flat. I'd also like to stress that most of these points concern over-use—so it's really about becoming conscious of what you're doing, and noticing your use of language, especially in the editing stage.

I don't think any of these guidelines will surprise an experienced creative writing teacher. As I say, they are particularly relevant to the traps that new writers fall into, who handle certain parts of speech less adeptly than the experienced writer. Sylvia Plath, for example, uses numerous passive verbs in a poem like 'The Bee Meeting' in ways that assist our understanding of the voice of the poem suffering from a lack of agency, being led here and there, and the general received state of things (211–212). Similarly, in a poem like 'Convicts', contemporary Australian poet Maria Takolander shows her subjects at the mercy of poverty and colonial powers, assisted by passive constructions:

> Only a couple of hundred years ago, grown men and women
> were child-small. Around England, everyone mattered less.
> When people were hungry, they grabbed at bread made by
>   bakers
> with stubby fingers. When people died, planks were nailed
>   together.
> At all times, earth was easy to come by. (41)

But new writers often don't use passive verbs in this way. They use them instead of more active verbs, when active verbs are badly needed to lift the vividness, energy and tension of the writing.

Even experienced writers can get lazy, though, and I've often been frustrated reading contemporary writing which overuses passive verbs and uses abstractions like 'memory' and 'history' in a way that suggests the reader should grasp some immense expanse of time. I switch off when I see such uses, which for me are a euphemism for 'poet not doing their work'. Rather than the generalised 'memory', an example of a specific memory is far more likely to bring an experience to a reader's mind.

Recently, I discovered a particularly close cousin to my guidelines after speaking with award-winning Canadian poet Christian Bök about his '10 Rules for Writing Lyric Poetry'. His passion for these ideas was such that I went home and looked over a selection of poems I'd been working on and with great chagrin found many uses of the verb 'to be', which he describes as the most passive verb, as well as several aimless abstractions. In one

poem, I re-wrote five uses of the verb 'to be' by foregrounding or adding a more active verb to great effect. For example, in one poem, 'the sea was rocking,' became, 'the sea surged rocking.' The phrase already included the active verb 'rocking', but this formulation is flat; I needed to keep 'rocking' (because it was a sestina) and so subbed in the more active verb 'surged'. Subsequently, I interviewed Christian about his 10 rules, and podcasted it on my *Poetry in Process* website (Bök np). I also wrote a summary/ commentary on his rules ('Christian Bök's Process' np), which I have used as a worksheet in teaching.

Christian's rules are further nuanced with concerns such as choosing verbs which make a noun do something it doesn't normally do, such as the phrase, 'the chainsaw stencils the silence' (from Canadian poet Al Purdy); or choosing an adjective that adds an attribute to a noun that it doesn't usually have, such as 'the peppermint sun'. As such, they tend to be more generative than my guidelines.

I've already highlighted abstractions and passive verbs as particularly common issues, and I've found that getting participants to identify abstract nouns in their writing and replace them with more concrete ones, and noting uses of the verb to be and replacing them with more active verbs (as I did) is a great starting point for any editing strategy. But we should always take the word 'rules' with a grain of salt. Learn what we can from them and move on.

I've also made a haiku checklist, which I put together whilst teaching haiku for ARRTS ('Haiku for Recovery' np). This needs to be balanced, as Paul suggests, with a need for a sense of freedom when you sit down to write. I'm drawn to Ginsberg's idea that a poet must be feeling some sense of freedom to be able to compose anything original (343–344).

The issue of free verse is a moot one for me. We sometimes receive requests on the ARRTS programme to teach traditional forms, and because our programme is so student-centred, I then offer mini-workshops—these have included working on ballads, villanelles, limericks and haibun. I'm a bit of a 'form junkie' myself, so I've been happy to develop lesson plans for these forms. In practice, when faced with the demands of metre and structure, participants sometimes lose interest quickly. They need a form that is more accessible and that offers a way of expressing themselves freely and quickly. This is where expressive writing in general makes its entrance. Even with freer forms we still teach techniques, it's just that they tend to be communicated through reading examples and particular concerns that emerge from participants' writing. So, in the poetry component, free verse is useful, even though I point out that the term is a bit of an oxymoron: it is not totally free because the

poet needs to create some structure that acts as a vehicle for the content. This is where exercises based on simple movements in poems by William Carlos Williams come in handy—I've documented the use of some of our exercises elsewhere ('Poetry and Trauma' np). The structure in such examples are generated in reaction to the content of the work—Olson's form follows content 'rule' (338).

3. The Words for When There's no More Words—Paul

I agree, Owen, but I want to add that those guidelines should be *guidelines to nowhere*.

I am thinking of that crucial day, when we first meet the programme participants. The thirty-odd participants form in four groups and in those groups rotate between the different rooms, spending forty-five minutes in each, to get a feel for the types of instruction on offer. There is the visual arts space, the acting room, the space given over to music and our smaller creative writing studio. In this first meeting, we ask participants about their experience of writing, chat about ours, and then put them through some exercises. At the end of the day they will decide which artform they want to dedicate this month of Defence-funded rehabilitation training to pursuing.

Chatting is good, but the thing that really raises the stakes, it seems to me, is when we get them to do an exercise that involves writing down as many words as they can think of in any one of the following three categories: *river*, *mountain*, *ocean*. So a participant choosing *ocean* might write 'water, salt, beach, waves, sky, sunshine, fish, drowning, float, swim, boat, pier, ice cream, lungs, waving, surfing. . .' You see hands unused to using pens take to them once more, hear the slight scratching on the paper, sense that some participants are taking a certain enjoyment in allowing a list to form. After two minutes we introduce the second part of the task. They now have ten minutes to write something on the topic for which they have just come up with all this vocabulary. Only they are not to use a single one of the words they have just written down. *I'll have to think of something other than drowning*. No 'waves' or 'boat' either. Faces fall and some laugh. Others get annoyed.

The thing about working with people from the services is that they invariably perform the task given.

We have pre-empted things by telling them beforehand that writing exercises sometimes involve little tricks. That a boundary has been transgressed is all the same evident.

Some are excited afterwards, have clearly loved the challenge of not having the familiar as a railing. I write 'the familiar' but I think it's more

intense than that, because what we are really doing is editing out people's chains of association, i.e. their direct thoughts, and demanding they find fresher ones.

Often discussion comes back to this exercise weeks later, and I have regularly heard that this was the point which decided participants one way or the other whether to be in the writing programme. My reading of the exercise is that it serves in the ARRTS context as a kind of homeopathy, a safe enough way of putting people right back in the space where prior rules no longer hold and the world is in free fall. I say 'right back' because that's generally why people are on sick leave in the first place. Art provides a means to work with the anxious nowhere. To me that is what our work with the wounded makes clearest. People are excited by the tiny break in trust our exercise involves. The exercise is a guideline to nowhere.

What pours out through it and over the following weeks are the stories that are going to be told whatever way they can, whether or not participants have the words 'water', 'salt', 'beach', 'waves', 'sky', 'sunshine' at their disposal or not, the things that insist come through to the page.

Your guideline on cliché, with that resonant Armitage quotation ('Avoid cliché—this is "allowing someone else to speak for you," Simon Armitage') sharpens this issue for me. It is a kind of guideline to nowhere as well. What I mean is that if one were to carry out this rule consistently there would be very little of the language left. I would make the same point of George Orwell's first rule of writing: 'Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print' (139). As linguists are increasingly arguing, the composition of speech and writing alike is much more a matter of stringing together familiar phrases—i.e. clichés—than any item-by-item processing of vocabulary by grammatical rule. We reach for chunks like 'As linguists are increasingly arguing', or 'much more a matter of', or 'item-by-item' and add them to the chain. Paul Hopper accordingly describes language in use as 'a kind of pastiche, pasted together in an improvised way out of ready-made elements' (145). The massive corpora of spoken and written language which have accreted since Hopper's noting this in the late '80s overwhelmingly confirm his thesis that patterns of usage in speaking and writing alike are highly formulaic (Wray; Hoey). Speaking *is* largely a matter of 'allowing someone else to speak for you,' writing too. It is about drawing on that whole crowd of past speakers embedded in each everyday usage, cliché by cliché. We reach for chunks like '*is* largely a matter of', 'drawing on that whole crowd of', 'in many ways' and 'as well'. In many ways, that is what we are as thinkers as well: someone else speaking through us. In

sum, it is ultimately not clear how much is left, once you strip away the pre-fabricated expressions Armitage and Orwell take issue with. A tone of voice perhaps. A look.

But also, when people have a story that's living through them regardless of their will in the matter, that very constraint on received usage—on one's received self—seems to help the story, and perhaps some new version of its author, find a way out. Guidelines to where we do not yet know.

Occasionally the participants follow those 'Guidelines to Nowhere' into the realm of my own anxieties. I have alluded to the writable walls in our teaching space, that become successively populated with quotations, sketches, slogans and whatever else the participants feel like inscribing there. The following disturbed me:

FORCE THE READER TO IMAGINE

The word 'FORCE', used in this imperative way, triggered all my qualms about the kind of cross-overs between creative writing teaching and military practice evoked above. Another slogan, perhaps a little softer, was somewhat to the right of it:

Don't tell the reader how to feel

I was actually delighted by both of these when not confronted by the first because they suggested to me that participants were taking from our teaching the idea that good writing acts as something of a productive constraint on the reader's imagination. That is to say, it channels readers into a specific dramatic space and then, by not swamping that space in ideas and directives, provides impetus for those readers to work out what to make of it all, I suppose by falling back on whatever story is driving through them in turn, seeking its way out.

You can see who has written the various slogans and notes and drafts that start to populate the walls over the four weeks of the intensive, but these writings on the wall also have a public air to them, and rather like graffiti you realise it's there after having lived with it for a while. Force the reader to imagine. I think it is about leading the reader to nowhere.

It certainly left me flummoxed, as one of the people who I suppose taught it.

4. Freedom in Constraint—Owen
What you say, Paul, about our *river, mountain, ocean* exercise, resonates with me in terms of the guideline about passive verbs. The way you describe 'editing out chains of association', and demanding fresher ones

is akin to the fact that new writers often use a form of the verb 'to be', such as 'was', as a default, so that the insistence on a more active verb signals a similar desire for what's fresh. Clichés, too, can simply represent what is easiest, but where to draw the line and how far to take the idea of cliché in relation to lexical clusters is moot. Your discussion of constraint, and how productive it can be, begins to answer the quandary.

As mentioned above, I'm drawn to Ginsberg's idea about writing with a sense of freedom, but, in practice, constraint is peculiarly liberating, in spite of how it might seem on first sight, as in the *river, mountain, ocean* reveal. Other poets I have interviewed for my *Poetry in Process* project have offered insights into working with purposeful limitations. For example, Indigenous poet Alison Whittaker explains that her process consisted largely of employing what she calls poetic restraint. She eliminates some choices to be able to make others more fully, and she claims that these poems resonate most with readers (in Bullock 2020 'Alison Whittaker's Process' np).

Christian Bök made his reputation with the remarkable collection *Eunoia* (2001). The title sequence comprises a series of prose poems, in which each 'chapter' can employ only one of the five vowels in any word. This extreme constraint (and there are others less visible) nevertheless results in vivid, rhythmic, imaginative and often hilarious writing.

Canberra-based poet Melinda Smith utilises trigrams, a tool used in Google search engine optimisation, in poems like 'Ernie Ecob as a bare-bellied yoe', which takes examples of misogynistic language from the Australian union leader prominent in the 1980s and renders them into lines ('Ernie Ecob' np). Alison Whittaker uses the same technique in poems such as 'Skeleton of the common law', which takes the 50 commonest three-word phrases from the court proceedings in the Mabo trial as a way of commenting on what the law holds most important (101–103). Smith says that she adopts such techniques when she gets tired of her own voice ('Melinda Smith's Process' np), which, for me, recalls Paul's comment about undergraduate students and self-reference, and acts as a radical counterpoint to it.

Whether writing freely or with the constraint that any writer has to negotiate in respect to the reader, our ARRTS participants meet several challenges at once in our work together. They are there to learn to express themselves artistically, which, as Paul has stressed, may be quite unfamiliar ground. For some, four weeks of intensive work is enough to set up a regular writing practice, and many have persevered and flourished creatively. They are also learning new skills, whilst being taken seriously as writers, which, the literature tells us, is beneficial, even in a

therapeutic context (Murphy & Neilsen np). This being taken seriously includes learning techniques and is an element of the programme that participants clearly appreciate. As writing mentors, we sometimes ask awkward questions. And I guess if a participant I was working with were to use an abstraction such as 'hope' in a piece of writing—notwithstanding Paul's argument about its impoverished status—I would probably ask, 'What's an example'?

Note

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