

## Rules for Writers

### *Jack Henry Abbott's Ten Tips for Writing in a World That Won't Give You the Key to the Restroom*

1. Know that what you put on the page isn't reality. What you put on the page is an artifact you hope your reader will accept as real for awhile. But the story ends. The book is put down, and only your reader is able to say whether it was worth the time to read it.
2. Embrace the conventions of photography. Use frames, focus, lenses, shutter speeds, slow-motion, camera angles, strobe-lights, studio backdrops, negative space, and Photoshop. Take the time to compose images. Remember that some images are more interesting than others. A series of still shots can be put together in sequence to form narrative.
3. If a part of your story doesn't puncture or betray another part, you haven't finished the story.
4. What you think the world is or want the world to be can overwhelm your perceptions of the Now. Don't let it. Your perceptions are all you have that are truly your own. One crystal-clear vision is worth more to your reader than a dozen brilliant conclusions. Let your reader draw the brilliant conclusions from your vision. You'll both be happier.
5. It's okay to have a savage sense of irony. A sense of irony is an awareness of the difference between the way things are and the way things are supposed to be. The bigger the difference, the more savage the irony.

6. Don't let your reader have a more developed sense of irony than you do. Other ways to put this: don't take anything for granted that your reader doesn't take for granted. Don't be sappy stern about something your reader finds funny.
7. Don't be afraid to be a criminal at the keyboard. You wouldn't want to write if you didn't have criminal tendencies. Writing is rebellion, a defiance of the order of the universe. If Zeus's punishment for your defiance seems not to fit the crime, just remember that your liver will be as good as new tomorrow.
8. Much rewriting and editing is simply improving the signal-to-noise ratio of a story until a reader can stand to listen. Static comes in many forms, among them vagueness, wordiness, avoiding conflict, dialog that doesn't carry the story, and self-indulgent authorial intrusion. You can never get rid of it completely, but over a number of drafts you can give your reader an idea of what distinct thing you are witnessing.
9. Read people whose ability to perceive hasn't been undermined by cultural Photoshop, who understand the violence of the mundane. Four books that help to perceive the violence of everyday life are:
  - R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience*
  - Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*
  - Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*
  - Peter Hoeg's *Borderliners*

These books will help you with your Promethean Rebellion.

10. Remember that for 250,000 years of human history, unruly children were tossed out of the cave to play with the bears and wolves and lions. Writing will run into taboos that are deep in your genes. When two of your characters are about to say things to each other that will destroy their friendships and marriages and lives, you'll feel like you're about to be tossed out of the cave. But your readers will be just as scared. They'll be paying serious attention to the story you're telling. That's a good thing. That's the best part of telling a story.