

Guidelines for Writing Practice

In *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, Natalie Goldberg outlines her ideas on how to use a timed exercise as the “basic unit of writing practice” (8). What does she mean by this? Very simply— sit down for five minutes, or ten, or twenty, and write. Once you choose your time period, commit to it fully. In her next book, *Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life*, Goldberg delineates more fully what she calls “The Rules of Writing Practice.” And here they are:

1. Keep your hand moving. No matter what. This allows us to push past the editor, the voice that squeaks in our mind. If you don’t know what to say, then keep writing “I don’t know what to say” until the next phrase or word appears. Write the words buzzing in your head until you get back to the prompt.
2. Lose control. No need to follow formalities or consider any kind of etiquette, social or literary.
3. Be specific. A sacred rule for any kind of writing—let all six senses help you out here. Example: “My best friend drives me crazy!” → “My best friend, Gina, talks during movies, snaps her gum when she chews, and smells like a cheap perfume factory.” BUT, as Goldberg points out, as you’re doing your writing practice or freewriting, be gentle with yourself and don’t worry if you can’t always be specific.
4. Don’t think. No, don’t check your brain at the door. Just let yourself honor “first thoughts,” as Goldberg calls them, rather than spiraling out into “second thoughts” or “thoughts on thoughts,” the space where the squeaky editor hangs out. In other words, go with the first thought.
5. Don’t worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Goldberg gives no further explanation for this one. The rebel in me loves rule #5 almost as much as rule #6.
6. You are free to write the worst junk in America. I always substitute “galaxy” or “universe” for “America” (alternatives that Goldberg also suggests). I need that cosmos-sized permission to stumble around and write badly.
7. Go for the jugular. Goldberg’s explanation: “If something scary comes up, go for it. That’s where the energy is. Otherwise, you’ll spend all your time writing around whatever makes you nervous. It will probably be abstract, bland writing because you’re avoiding the truth. ... Don’t avoid it. It has all the energy. Don’t worry, no one ever died of it. You might cry or laugh, but not die.”