

FICTION |

The Deer

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It was that time of year again. I woke up to a furry snout nudging my hand. Lhyelthing the wolf was eagerly trying to get me up; so I pulled off the cover and then immediately went under them as a cold breeze blasted my body.
But the wolf wasn't having any of that and just snatched the blanket with his jaws. I grumbled, getting my jacket

me and gestured at us to follow him. "Ah, okay, Lhyelthing. Yes, we follow."
The door was open and outside the ground was covered in a thin blanket of white snow. Little flakes fell from the sky like a crystal rain.
There was bread on the table and we ate quickly.
"Gonna be a long journey today,

that could be fixed with a simple wash. Wrapping his scarf a little tighter, he called us. He loaded the bucket onto our small sled and patted Lhyelthing tenderly while he fastened the leash on him.
"Ride on, beast, ride on!" he said as he clapped his hands and the wolf obeyed, carrying the sled while we walked alongside him. We walked in silence for about an hour just looking around at the trees and listening to the soft crunch of snow beneath our boots. And then we came to an open spot where a few deer were roaming. Father signaled for us to be absolutely quiet and we hid behind a few trees.

Slowly, he crawled up to the deer with his deer mask and the animals did not suspect him fortunately. Quickly, Lhyelthing, who now had the sled detached from his body, ran up and pinned the animal by biting its ankle. With his knife, Father swiftly got up and stabbed the deer right in the flank. The animal struggled for a few moments while father stabbed the deer again, this time right in the neck. It fell right there and probably died in a second. Maybe a few seconds.
Father called for us to come. We brought the sled and Father took something from it to collect the blood spilling from the deer's flank. The blood flowed into a bottle and as he collected it, he spoke to us.

"So that's how you kill them. One stab at the heart might not do it so a deep stab in the head or neck will do so. Or of course, just wait for them to bleed to death. But," he paused as the blood filled one bottle and he took another one. "But then you would lose a lot of the precious blood."
"Fu..." I groaned along with Brother.

"It smells disgusting... I know we do this every year. But it's still disgusting."
"Be quiet, ungrateful child," he grumbled as he filled another bottle and loaded the carcass onto the sled. I shivered at his stern tone. "Ah, you'll understand someday. Now help me."
Brother just ignored my reaction.

Lhyelthing already was chewing the leg he bit off. Father smiled and stroked our furry brother's head and reattached the sled. He pulled with all his might and we walked slowly until we came home.

The blood had frozen in the cold as all the warmth had drained out of the deer's body. Father got out his large dagger and began carving out the deer. Brother followed father's order to gather the firewood to make a huge bonfire. I helped too. That was called the "Ngellhiilh"- the open space where all rituals take place.

After an hour, he was able to carve out the head with the antlers. He moved the head onto the wood we prepared and poured one bottle of the blood on it.

He wore his deer mask and threw off his jacket. He was standing with a deer mask, his chest bare and just standing in his pants. Almost immediately, he lit up the torch and lit up the firewood with it.

"Let the Lhopno Dzhalhong begin!"
He let the fire blaze and the bloody deer head blackened in the flames.

"Timelkholhaa, accept this head, let us be blessed this winter! Don't let the cold destroy us this year and let this deer feed us! Let the Khuzhye be happy with us and protect us in this forest!"

We watched Father dance around the fire while the head burnt. This happened every year and every year, Father would dance that mesmerising trance around the large flames as they burned away at those bones.

The antlers cracked and easily split under the heat of the flames. Even though it was winter, I could feel the heat of the flames creating its own sphere of summer, making me take off my jacket. I watched on as the skull that was blacker than the night slowly became milk white.

Father kept on dancing, moving his legs quickly over the barren ground and we felt the air around us change. Gusts of air blew towards the fire, making it

grow bigger as the skull cracked more and more. We felt it. The Khuzhye had arrived. Like a thin light, glowing a soft colour like the sky, I saw the shadow of a deer in the fire. Father's eyes lit up in joy as he saw the shape of the guardian spirit. Now he danced with even more energy and this continued for a few more minutes. Finally, he stopped and then bowed down to the Khuzhye. The Khuzhye bowed down to him in return. Then it disappeared into the smoke, the fire also burning out with it.

Slowly, father gathered his things as the winter weather began to return. As he got his jacket, he began digging with a spade into the soil, stopping as the metal met the permafrost, which was close to the surface in this winter weather. Fortunately, the hole was big enough for the skull to be buried. Who knew how many skulls were buried in this Ngellhiilh, our own sacred field in the forest of the Khuzhye.

I wore my jacket too and ran up to Father to embrace him since the ritual was a success. He hugged both me and Brother.

"Hmph... can we eat now? I'm hungry," Brother asked, gazing at the dead deer with desire in his eyes.

Father sighed. "You insatiable dwarfs," he said. "Okay, let's get some firewood from the house. I'll help Mashunya carry the big pot." And we did just that.

Brother got the wood, I got the pots and pans and Father returned to the deer, cutting away at it with his knives and daggers.

We cooked some of the deer that morning. After that, Father spent the entire afternoon with us, chopping away more meat for later. We preserved some of it in the underground freezer and some of it was smoked over an open fire.

This is my family's story of the Lhopno Dzhalhong, our yearly winter celebration.

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and another pair of socks. Then I followed the irritated wolf.
Brother was yawning, already falling asleep on a chair. The wolf got mad and nipped his ankles. "Aahh! Okay, Lhyelthing! I'm up, I'm not asleep!" He fell onto the floor in surprise.
I laughed. Then the wolf growled at

huh?" Brother asked. Yes, a long journey, just like every year.
Father was putting on his boots and then he put on his deer shaped mask. It was made with the head of a real deer, treated and preserved to maintain its natural shape, even having the antlers intact. The fur was a little matted but

Some Writing Instruction Re-considered

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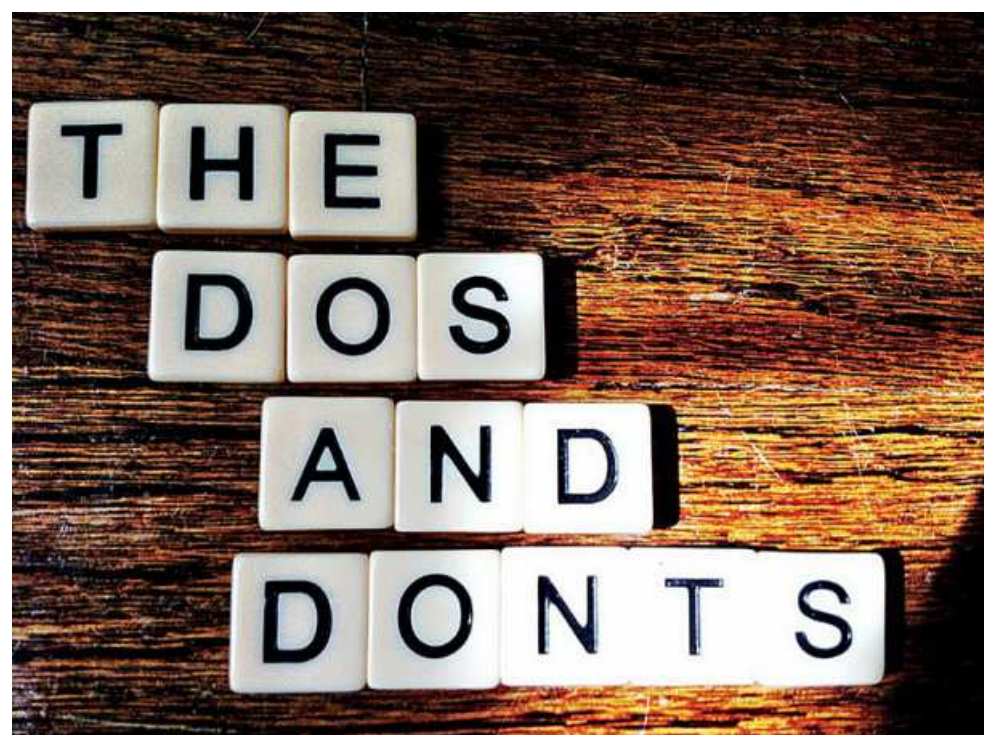
Writing is not an art suddenly discovered. It's a craft gradually developed. Writing—both creative and critical— is formulaic, the way math is. If this sounds like an awkward analogy, remember that such writers as Lewis Carroll, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace had strong backgrounds in mathematics. The sentences they constructed and the stories they created stand the test of time. Mathematics is essentially a learned skill, though there are self-learned math mavens. Likewise, writing is a learned skill despite the fact that self-learned writers abound. These days, a self-learned writer is becoming a rarity. Almost all the influential writers—both creative (J. M. Coetzee, for example) and critical (Steven Pinker, for example)—are the beneficiaries of sustained academic training and mentoring. Under such a circumstance, the acquisition of writing skill presupposes instruction and education. Unfortunately, however, the history of writing education is porous and spotty across contexts, and because writing instruction is mired in myths and misunderstanding, teaching writing often resembles preaching. Writing instruction sounds like commandment and violation risks eternal damnation. For example—

Never opt for a long sentence if a short one is possible: This suggestion assumes that a long sentence is a complex one. The complexity of sentence, however, doesn't depend on the length of sentence; it, instead, depends on the craft of a sentence. A carelessly crafted short sentence might be confusing. On the other hand, a carefully crafted long sentence can be lucid and compelling. This suggestion also reduces writing to an exercise of excision. It persuades writers to cut off words. But words are there to be spent. Joe Moran in *First You Write a Sentence* claims that in the seventeenth century, the average length of a sentence was forty-five words. The length held steady in the 18th century. In the 19th century, the average was in the 30s, and now it's in the 20s. We're losing about 10 words each century. If sentences continue to shrink this way, it's likely that a good sentence will not be a sentence after two centuries, because there will be no words there. This apprehension merits consideration. These days, words are consistently competing with emojis, icons, and contractions for space in written com-

munication. This portends a disaster for all alphabetic languages. Under such a circumstance, words need champions and advocates. The ideal instruction is, "Construct well-crafted sentences, long or short."

Never use a passive voice sentence if an active voice is possible: This is on its surface a good suggestion, for a passive voice often makes a sentence complex and cumbersome. It also flips the structure of a sentence to re-orient readers for meaning and memory. Consequently, a passive voice sentence is usually a bit turgid and opaque. Avoiding a passive voice sentence, however, should not be a tick. It, instead, should be an informed decision. Passive voice shifts the focus of a sentence from the agent to the action. For example, "The fire is contained." Readers don't need to know how many firefighters, civilians, animals, and contraptions were involved in containing the fire. All they need to know whether the fire still rages or not. In a situation such as this, an active voice sentence is unwieldy and inept. Research in writing studies reveal that novice writers rarely opt for passive voice sentences. Advanced writers do. When they do, they consider aesthetics, ethics, and economy in writing. Steven Pinker in *The Sense of Style* claims that this rule has been invoked for 1500 years, so suggesting that writers avoid passive voice is a bad suggestion. Think also of the irony of a suggestion in William Strunk's and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*: "A lot of tame sentences can be made--." They were advising against passive voice with a passive voice sentence. Proscribing passive voice sentences deprives a writer of her freedom and limits her options of communication.

Never use a long word when a short word is possible: The length of a word doesn't determine its suitability in a sentence. Its meaning does. Words are either right or wrong, or suitable or unsuitable. If a right or a suitable word is a long one, it's still the right word and it has to be used. Substituting a long suitable word for an unsuitable or nearly-suitable short word perhaps eases communication but can compromise on the purpose and objective of writing. As writers, our purpose is presentation and our objective is disinterested truth. Using a short or avoiding a long word is neither the purpose, nor the objective of



writing. And where are all these short words coming from in the English language? John McWhorter claims in *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue* that "the pathway from Old English to Modern English has been a matter of taking on a great big bunch of words" from Danish and Norwegian, French, and Latin. Words emerging out of these foreign languages—about 80 percent of the entries in any English dictionary— are long and complex. Suggesting writers to search for short words denies them access to approximately 80 percent of the lexical resources. That's crippling! The best suggestion is "Use the right word, short or long."

Never use jargon when an easy equivalent is available: Jargon is technical terms coined by and for professionals in any particular field. Anyone who values transparent and accessible writing—and speaking— will find jargon incomprehensible and exclusive, unable to communicate with people who are linguistically otherwise competent. Jargon essentially splits a language community into various discourses and disciplines to create and reinforce linguistic barriers among them. Some writing scholars caution against using

any jargon in writing. Jargon, however, is deeply meaningful to people who use it. Jargon is precious nuggets of information for people who relish concision in language. Jargon add to our intellectual depth and diversity. Colleen Glenney Boggs, for example, in her article "In Defense of Jargon" claims, "Jargon can force us to pause, to ponder, to question." It does! Jargon is also transitory, for there's no such thing as permanent jargon. Today's jargon becomes tomorrow's vernacular. Such words as gene, clone, and DNA were jargon a decade back, but these are now part of our everyday lexicon. Jargon is not inherently bad; overusing or misusing it is. Telling writers to avoid jargon altogether, therefore, is misleading.

Never use figurative language, when plain language is possible: While figurative language such as metaphor, simile, and synecdoche breaks into our speech and writing often unconsciously, they can potentially make language elusive and indirect—even incomprehensible. Metaphor, for example, makes language ornate and inflated if a writer is not skilled enough to use it aptly. Also, stale metaphors frequently found in

print are too stilted to be recycled, as George Orwell cautions in his essay "Politics and the English Language." Despite all these objections against figurative language, though, abandoning it altogether diminishes a writer's freedom of expression. Metaphor is a literary technique that adds to the tone, tenor, and texture of a piece of writing to affect the comprehension and psychology of readers the way a writer wants to affect them. A metaphor makes an otherwise dry text lively by converting something abstract into something concrete. In *On Writing*, Stephen King notes that metaphors enable people to "see an old thing in a new and vivid way." He maintains as well that metaphors are a kind of miracle that occurs between writer and reader that allows them to live in and expand each other's world. Metaphor – and any figurative language, for that matter – is deeply implicated in human cognition, psychology, and speech, as breath is to our body. Plain language is never an excuse to abandoning figurative language.

Ideally, no one can tell or teach anyone how to write. Every authentic writer is unique who writes out of her own intuition, experience, and observation. When writers make their subjective ideas and habits of writing public, others idealize and generalize them. This is how the commandments about writing proliferate. I just mentioned a few of these commandments out of an infinite number of them. Learn all of these commandments, but remember that these commandments reduce the complexities of writing to a dichotomy of NEVER or ALWAYS. In writing, there are no abiding restrictions or ready-made options. As a writer gets down to writing, she discovers her restrictions and options. Composition scholar Sondra Pearl claims in her essay "Understanding Composing" that in writing, content and meaning can't be discovered the way we discover an object on an archeological dig. In writing, meaning is crafted and constructed. When writing is the outcome of preconceived options and restrictions, it misses out on discovery. It's not writing. It's just typing. Don't type. Write!

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