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**Sifting Through the Nonsense**

What if I told you that you could master writing in just 7 easy steps? Would you believe me? Probably not, but if the title of this article was “7 Steps to Master Writing,” I bet I’d earn your click regardless. You’d likely humor me by reading the first step, partly because the idea is so ridiculous, but partly hoping that it elicits some minor revelation. The first few ideas seem reasonable enough: “Sure, I can journal for five minutes every morning and commit to learning one new word each day.” By step 4, you’re starting to think that you are probably just more inclined than the author since the steps seem unusually easy. And, whether out of genuine curiosity or just to laugh at my folly, you may even make it to step 7. Now, maybe this really *did* kickstart some writing revelation for you, but my hunch is that you’re more familiar with the outcome where you throw in the towel after less than a week. Don’t worry, it happens to us all. But why?

I first experienced this when I was starting out as a jazz pianist. I was in high school, maybe 15 or 16, when an article akin to “3 Techniques You Can Use to Perfect Your Jazz Piano” found me. *Perfect*, I thought, with no concept of the depth of study required to learn jazz. After reading the article and seeing no immediate results, I decided that I was more or less doomed as a musician.

Of course, if it were that easy to master jazz piano, everyone would do it. So why are there so many articles like this? The answer is simple: people read them. The thought of having minimal effort yield a wealth of knowledge is, understandably, attractive. However, if an article guarantees improvement, readers are setting themselves up for disappointment when they, inevitably, do not improve. These articles are often written in what George Hillocks would call “presentational mode.” Hillocks, a noted voice in the field of writing composition theory and emeritus professor at the University of Chicago, defines this mode as one that involves laying out specific exercises or tasks as a means of achieving a goal. This modality is overstated in articles that offer *x* steps for *y* result, as they are usually insinuating that these steps are the *only* means of achieving a goal: “If I just give you the right advice, everything will be easy, and writing will take care of itself.”

My goal in writing this is not to condemn articles like this, as they often do have helpful tips. Instead, I want to caution you against taking them as law. Understand that mastering something in a series of finite steps is nearly impossible. If you can read these articles keeping this in mind—and simply look out for techniques and practices that may work for you—then you will be better equipped to sift through the nonsense.

If you want to *truly* master something, I’ll give you one step: become obsessed. If you want to be a musician, start by listening to a lot of music. If you want to be a writer, start by reading a lot more. Figure out what you love about your interest, and find other people who love it too. Find role models in your field and study them. Practicing your craft should excite you, and it’s much easier to do that when you want to be doing it. Now, you don’t need to be in a perennial state of enchantment, and you can certainly expect apathy, but understand that developing a deep relationship with anything takes time, and cannot be reduced to 7 steps. If you aren’t in it for the long run, then you really aren’t in it at all.

Bibliography

Hillocks, George. “What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies.” *American Journal of Education* 93, no. 1 (1984): 133–70.