You’re a Genius All the Time
You’re a Genius
All the Time

Belief and Technique for Modern Prose

Jack Kerouac
Foreword by Regina Weinreich

Only a genius could reinvent the English sentence, make it long, looped, grammatically suspicious, and become a revered master of the writer’s art. A true American original on a quest for an authentic language, Jack Kerouac had this gift, scribbling poetry and journals in handy pocket notebooks and famously typing his “true-life” novels in wild blasts of ecstasy, as his legend goes. *On the Road*, the novel on which his literary reputation still rests, was composed on a scroll like the road itself, a nonstop journey, the destination secondary to the joyride of creation. A stylistic departure from his first novel, the more conventionally structured, Wolfean *The Town and the City*, *On the Road* became the next step in a convention-defying progression through book after book, even while the unusual *Road* manuscript languished, unpublished.

Kerouac’s insistence upon “first thought, best thought,” his refusal to revise, was controversial, but essential to his artistic release: “If you don’t stick to what you first thought, and to the words the thoughts brought, what’s the sense of bothering with it anyway, what’s the sense of foisting your little lies on others? What I find

“I got sick and tired of the conventional English sentence, so ironbound in its rules . . .”

Jack Kerouac, Escapade Magazine, 1959
to be really ‘stupefying in its unreadability’ is this laborious and dreary lying called craft and revision by writers, and recognized by psychologists as sheer blockage of the mental spontaneous process known 2500 years ago as ‘The Seven Streams of Swiftness.’”

Revision being the artist’s chief control, Kerouac’s anti-craft stance was seen as a rebellion against language itself. But, as Seymour Krim pointed out introducing Desolation Angels (1965), his revolt was against “the critical straightjacket of post–T. S. Eliot letters” that was shutting new writers out of literary existence. While critics called him unschooled, Kerouac saw himself in the mainstream American tradition going back to Whitman and Melville. In the lull between the writing of Road in 1951 and its publication in 1957, and fully aware of the seventy-two hour feat of his composing The Subterraneans in 1953, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs were so impressed they wanted to know how his work was in fact crafted. Kerouac explained in the essays first published in the literary magazine originated and edited by Barney Rosset and Donald Allen, Evergreen Review: “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” (Summer 1958)* and “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose” (Spring 1959) were printed alongside poetry and plays by iconic authors, Samuel Beckett, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, John Ashbery, James Merrill, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and the then LeRoi Jones among them.

On the grammatically irreverent sentences, Kerouac extolled a “METHOD” eschewing conventional punctuation in favor of dashes. In “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” he recommended the “vigorouse space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)”; the dash allowed Kerouac to deal with time differently, making it less prosaic and linear, and more poetic. He also described his manner of developing an image beginning with the “jewel center,” from which he writes in a “semi-trance,” “without consciousness,” his language governed by sound, by the poetic affect of alliteration and assonance until he reaches a plateau, initiating a new ‘jewel center,’ stronger than the first and spiraling out as he riffs (in an analogy with a jazz musician). He saw himself as a horn player blowing one long note, as he later told his interviewers for The Paris Review. His technique explains the unusual organization
of his writing, which was not haphazard or sloppy, but systematic, disciplined, individualized. His “spontaneity” allowed him to develop his distinct voice, his bop prosody, paradoxically revising (though “never afterthink”) as he repeated “his true story of the world in interior monolog.” Seeking visual possibilities, Kerouac combined spontaneous prose with sketching, as suggested by Ed White, a friend from his Columbia University days: Sketch “like a painter, but with words.” Hence, Visions of Cody, a variation of On the Road, utilized “sketching language: undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words.”

These essays are valuable as road map, how-to manual, and manifesto, a fresh take on composition, and inspiration. Kerouac’s step-by-step approach allows you to analyze his process, offers constructive advice in whimsical, dead-on description (“sea of language,” “outfanning,” “mindflow”), and more: Kerouac dons the Whitmanesque mantle becoming the old courage-teacher, emboldening: Be a dumbsaint! A Yeatsian visionary. Take control and let loose. Discard pretense. Make speakable the unspeakable. Throw away the misthought that you have nothing to say. Defy fear. Like Proust unlock time and sense. Find your madeleine. Or like Alice eat the mushroom. If you tell a true story, you cannot be wrong. Lose inhibition, grammatical, syntactical, and all other straitjackets. Make love to your life. Experience IT, the radiant orgasmic highest high/lowest low of consciousness (“bottomless from bottom of the mind” to “relaxed and said”) so admired in his jazzmen, mad beats, and fast-talking (“Angeled in Heaven”) savants.

Now, fifty years after he articulated his craft, these essays retain their verve, humor, and relevance. Artists in all fields continue to invoke Kerouac’s spirit. But take note: While many imitators have tried the seeming ease of his crafted craftlessness, Kerouac remains unique. Track his genius—not to write as he did, but to open up, find your own voice. You, yes you. Go for IT!

*The hand-written Ur-version of “Essentials” dating back to 1953 is housed at the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection. Significantly, Kerouac does not use the word “spontaneous” in the title.
Belief and Technique for Modern Prose
Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for your own joy
Submissive to everything, open, listening
TRY NEVER GET DRUNK OUTSIDE YOUR OWN HOUSE
Be in love with your life
Something that you feel will find its own form
Be crazy dumb saint of the mind
Blow as deep as you want to blow
Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
The unspeakable visions of the individual
No time for poetry but exactly what is
VISIONARY
TICS
SHIVERING IN THE CHEST
IN TRANCED FIXATION DREAMING UPON OBJECT BEFORE YOU
Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
LIKE PROUST
BE AN
OLD TEAHEAD
OF TIME
Telling the true story of the world in interior monologues
The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
Accept loss forever
Believe in the holy contour of life
Struggle to sketch the flow that exists intact in mind.
DON'T THINK OF WORDS WHEN YOU STOP
BUT TO SEE PICTURE BETTER
Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in your morning
No fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language & knowledge.
WRITE FOR THE WORLD TO READ

AND SEE

YOUR EXACT PICTURES OF IT
Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
In Praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
COMPOSING
WILD,
UNDISCIPLINED,
PURE, COMING
IN FROM UNDER,
CRAZIER THE
BETTER
Writer-Director of Earthly movies
Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven
YOU’RE A GENIUS ALL THE TIME
Essentials of Spontaneous Prose
**SET-UP** The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.
PROCEDURE Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.
METHOD

No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases) “measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech”—“divisions of the sounds we hear”—“time and how to note it down.”
SCOPING Not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash)—Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.
LAG IN PROCEDURE  No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with the Great Law of Timing.
TIMING Nothing is muddy that runs in time and to laws of time—Shakespearian stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue—no revisions (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or calculated insertions in act of not writing but inserting).
CENTER OF INTEREST  Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion—
Do not afterthink except for poetic or P. S. reasons. Never afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions, as the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind—tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is your only way—“good”—or “bad”—always honest. (“ludicrous”) spontaneous, ‘confessional’ interesting, because not ‘crafted.’ Craft is craft.
STRUCTURE OF WORK

Modern bizarre structures (science fiction, etc.) arise from language being dead, “different” themes give illusion of “new” life. Follow roughly outlines in outfanning movement over subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your mind over it, once) arriving at pivot, where what was dim formed “beginning” becomes sharp-necessitating “ending” and language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle—Night is The End.
MENTAL STATE  If possible write “without consciousness in semi-trance” (as Yeats’ later “trance writing”), allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so “modern” language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich’s “beclouding of consciousness.” Come from within, out—to relaxed and said.
Photo captions:

Page 5: Jack Kerouac and friend. Origin unknown.


Page 47, top: Kerouac, his sister Caroline, mother Gabrielle, and father Leo. New York City, 1944.

Page 47, middle: Kerouac on Salisbury beach, MA, with high school friends. 1938.


Page 57: Kerouac and his cats. Origin unknown.

Page 62: Kerouac and his friend, Henri Cru, from his Horace Mann School days.


Page 69: Kerouac “passing as an immigrant refugee” in North Carolina at his sister Caroline’s home. 1946.

Page 95: Kerouac goofing around. 1957.

Page 96: Reverse side of the photo on page 62.
Life without travel is only half living.