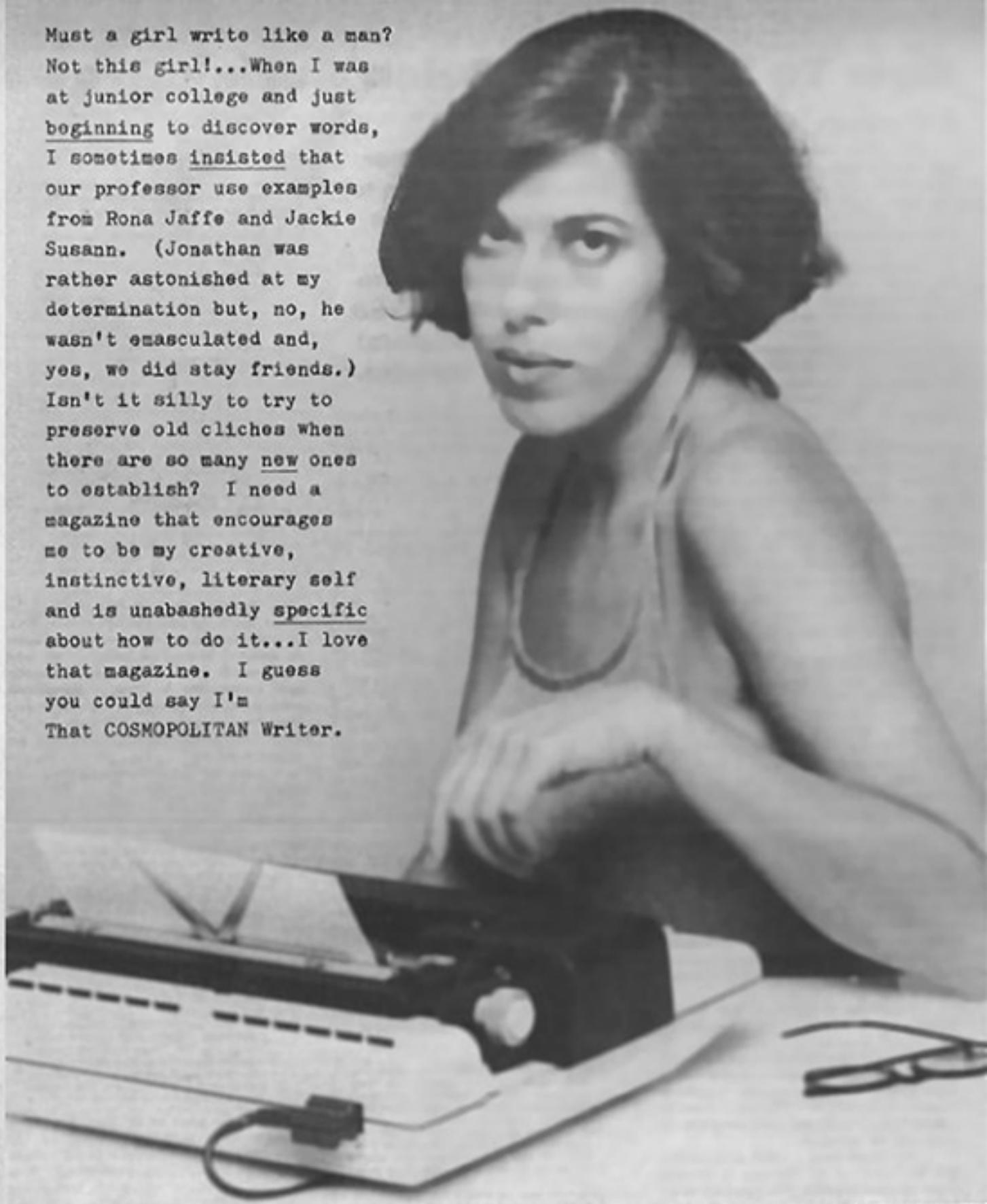


Must a girl write like a man?  
Not this girl!...When I was  
at junior college and just  
beginning to discover words,  
I sometimes insisted that  
our professor use examples  
from Rona Jaffe and Jackie  
Susann. (Jonathan was  
rather astonished at my  
determination but, no, he  
wasn't emasculated and,  
yes, we did stay friends.)  
Isn't it silly to try to  
preserve old cliches when  
there are so many new ones  
to establish? I need a  
magazine that encourages  
me to be my creative,  
instinctive, literary self  
and is unabashedly specific  
about how to do it...I love  
that magazine. I guess  
you could say I'm  
That COSMOPOLITAN Writer.



If you want to reach me you'll find me reading

**THE THESAURUS**

# How To Write For Helen Gurley Brown

BY HELEN EPSTEIN

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me say right off that mine is not the style of That Cosmopolitan Girl. I did think—briefly—that mine could be the style of That Cosmopolitan Writer, a more complex prototype that has absorbed such disparate personalities as I.B. Singer, Nat Hentoff and Dr. David Reuben. The reason I was thinking about *Cosmopolitan* at all had to do with money. I had written a long piece on the health and diet industry for *Harper's*. It had fallen through after a rewrite (also a question of style) and I was stuck with not only two articles but a drawer full of notes on dynabelts, yogurt, *anorexia nervosa*, Dr. Robert C. Atkins, Jack LaLanne, fat farms, the National Joggers Association and the Cyclamate Scandal of 1969. *Cosmo* was interested; I was amenable.

The style accosts you as soon as you step from the elevator into their reception hall: there are two enormous rattan (I asked) chairs that look borrowed from *Alice in Wonderland*, one couch artfully strewn with ruffled chintz pillows that looks borrowed from *Seventeen*, and six palm trees in pots assembled to suggest a desert oasis—all in an environment of blue and white wallpaper printed with little pagodas, little peacocks and little Chinese men astride exotic animals. It is an insinuating, all-pervasive style which reflects not only *Cosmo's* manner of advertising, lay-out, and choice of material but every facet of its being. Let's call it Feline Fake.

It was a surprise, given all that scenery, to find Articles Editor Roberta Ashley a warm, intelligent woman. She confirmed what I had heard before: that every single word in the magazine is considered and weighed before it goes to the printer. Even an article written by a veteran *Cosmo* writer is scrutinized by sub-editors, a senior editor and, finally, by Helen Gurley Brown herself. My subject was something Brown took very seriously. The main thing to keep in mind, Ashley said, was to be optimistic—to make an effort to adopt the attitude that everything in life can be made better. In other words, I was asked not to waste space by criticizing certain doctors, products or programs but instead to put together a compendium of techniques for losing weight and maintaining health that the *Cosmo Girl* could adopt. The *Cosmo Girl* was interested in improving the quality of her life and I, her agent, was to dig up ways to do this. That was okay with me. In fact, it seemed eminently fair.

To give me an idea of the slant involved, Ashley gave me reprints of five *Cosmo* articles illustrative of pragmatic optimism and a copy of "Editing (and Writing) Rules for *Cosmopolitan*," a sixteen-page, mimeographed pamphlet which would serve as my guide. Essentially, I would be recasting old material in a new style. I would be paid \$1,000 and I considered myself pretty lucky: it would take no time at all.

When I got home, I looked at the articles. One was titled: "If It's Chewy, It Must Be Gum!" Another was called "The Power of Touch." I can't remember the others, but I remember I was appalled. I got panicky. There seemed no way I could possibly write like that: it went beyond the mere question of style and into aspects of personal psychology, not to speak of politics. I wondered about the women who work at *Cosmopolitan*. Did

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## In which the author tries to sell a piece to *Cosmopolitan*, but can't summon up enough froth (not to mention ellipses and exclamation points) to play by the rules.

they have split personalities? Were they profoundly existential types? Did they really believe they were improving women's lives? Who knew? Nobody I knew.

I turned to the Rule Book. The title page read: "Following are the rules by which we painstakingly edit copy and the ones we often find broken (or ignored) by our writers. Nearly all are in *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. We hope you'll find them helpful."

**A** word about these people Strunk and White. William Strunk, Jr. was a professor of rhetoric at Cornell University who had *The Elements of Style* copyrighted in 1918. One of his students about that time was Elwyn Brooks White, who later went on to write *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. In 1957, White rediscovered Strunk and wrote an article about him for *The New Yorker*. The result was that MacMillan reissued *The Elements of Style*, including White's article, Strunk's original 43-page work, and a chapter on style by White. This last contains such practical advice as "Write in a way that comes naturally," "Don't use dialect unless your ear is good," and "Be clear." The examples set forth to illustrate points are drawn from proverbs, history and literature: *The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed today, as opposed to Modern readers have little esteem for the dramatists of the Restoration.* The tone is calm and elegant.

The *Cosmo* Rule Book contains 29 items, each describing a fault and proposing means for its correction. As I browsed through the first few pages of commands and interdictions, it became clear to me that Strunk and White had been kidnapped. By Point 2, their ideals of clarity and pithiness had both fallen by the wayside.

2. Don't use the same word (or derivative) too many times in one sentence or one paragraph. This rule applies to pronouns, conjunctions, and articles (you, he, and, the, a, etc.) as well as all other words.  
Bad: Be sure he doesn't fold his tent one night and decamp, leaving you unpaid! You may be paid on a commission basis, depending on how many sales result from your calls, or on an hourly basis.  
Better: Be sure he doesn't fold his tent one night and decamp, leaving you unpaid! You may work on a commission basis, the take depending on how many sales result from your calls, or at an hourly rate.

I had difficulty understanding what was being proposed; but, then, I have always had difficulty distinguishing one drawing from the next on intelligence tests. I pushed on. My first clear instructions came at Points 5-7, which straight-

forwardly forbid the use of certain words:

5. Root out clichés and words that are just slightly tired. A cliché is any phrase that is so familiar the writer uses it as a kind of shorthand, thus avoiding the trouble of having to think of something more original. These are clichés:  
Let's face it, it stands to reason, out of this world, everything but the kitchen sink, nitzy-gritty, green with envy, drew a complete blank, coming up roses, ulterior motive, fraught with danger, outraged dignity, kicking over the traces, handwriting on the wall, the unvarnished truth, spread like wildfire...  
Other tired words and phrases to avoid (most of the time): yummy, goodies, others (as in "he transferred his problems to others"), traipsing, things, type (as in athletic-type), trapping or snagging or snaring (a man), chances are, splurge, ran the gamut from (blank to blank), guy, no-nonsense, suddenly, wise (as in job-wise).
6. Avoid passe words (dated slang) just as you would clichés. Dated slang would include: groovy, swinging, all that jazz, up tight, freaked out, zonked, cat's meow.
7. Keep so-called "dirty words" to a minimum. Also avoid the vernacular in describing sexual activities or organs. Examples: Use "made love" or "had intercourse" not "balled," "screwed," "fucked," "laid," etc. Use "reached orgasm" or "climaxed" not "came."

Happily, I was not writing about sex for *Cosmo*; so this last point had little to do with me. On principle, though, I dislike editors who dictate my choice of words. Punctuation, on the other hand, seems to me a reasonable concern, especially since *Cosmopolitan* is awash in parentheses, italics, exclamation points and ellipses. In the Rule Book, I had thought to find guidelines: Was it a matter of random selection or was there any method in it?

There was no item regarding italics and no item regarding exclamation points. There was, however, an entire page devoted to the matter of the ellipse:

12. Break up long sentences, either by making two out of one or using ellipses or (more rarely) a semicolon.  
Bad: Bill spins a record and leans back, resplendent, glowing with a hip kind of energy, and you find it hard to believe that this celebrity, No. 1 disc jockey west of Chicago, was, only a month ago, some little bourgeois gnome you wouldn't recognize, just another hard-working grunt in suit and tie, and that a year ago he was just one of 420 deejays in the Los Angeles area, droning on down the years in chorus with the rest of them.  
Better: Bill spins a record and leans back, resplendent, glowing with a hip kind of energy. You find it hard to believe that this celebrity, No. 1 disc jockey west of Chicago, was, only a month ago, some little bourgeois gnome you wouldn't recognize...just another hard-working grunt in suit and tie.

No reason was given for the placement of this ellipse, which probably accounts for my speculating on the premises of Point 5. I thought: "spinning a record," "glowing with energy," "hard to believe," "hip" and "just another hard-working grunt" are clichés. "Only a month ago" and "No. 1 west of Chicago" sounded like rock songs. "Little bourgeois gnome" was not exactly a cliché, but it seemed harsh to me. I wouldn't even use it to describe Robert C. Atkins, the Doctor/Revolutionary. The reason I bring him up is to remind you that my proposed article for *Cosmo* dealt with the health and diet industry. Item 15 of the *Cosmo* Rule Book advises:

15. Stay with the specific subject the article is about, and remind the reader every so often what the subject is. In other words: keep the point of view and focus of the article clearly in mind. The theme will probably have something to do with the title of the article. That means everything in the piece—case histories, writer's own philosophy, statements by authorities, etc.—must tie into this original theme.

We are talking about the Cosmo Rule Book, which I was using as a guide to rewrite an article on the health and diet industry, about which both Helen Gurley Brown and myself feel serious, and we have come to Points 18 and 25, which stop beating around the bush and get right down to the nitty-gritty of Feline Fake.

25. Try to locate some of the buildings, restaurants, night clubs, parks, streets, as well as entire case histories in cities other than New York, even if you have to deliberately "plant" them elsewhere. Most writers live in New York; 92 per cent of our readers do not.
18. Unless you are a recognized authority on a subject, profound statements must be attributed to somebody appropriate, (even if the writer has to invent the authority).
- Bad: All psychiatrists are basically Freudians.  
Better: According to one practitioner who specializes in group therapy, "All psychiatrists are basically Freudians."

My problem was that I am basically honest. Besides, suppose I made up an authority and the FDA or AMA or FTC or even my mother asked me who it was? The health and diet industry is already filled with quacks, hypnotists, and charlatans of all kinds; I certainly did not need to invent any. I had spent several months collecting data, interviewing experts, experimenting with the different methods they advised and getting sick in the process. I had a couple of profound statements of my own to make and it seemed to me that making them was in the interests of the Cosmo Girl. There were rip-offs and instances of malpractice involved.

Enter the problems of Items 27 and 28.

27. Don't be relentlessly depressing. If subject matter of an article is downbeat per se (as in "Women in Prison") search out the positive efforts being made to improve the situation.
28. Avoid attacking advertisers (cosmetics, liquor, bra and girdle, etc.) and where convenient, mention advertised brands rather than non-advertised competition.

Well. Since I do not read *Cosmopolitan*, I had no idea who their advertisers were, even if I had cared to follow their suggestion. I decided the Rule Book would serve no additional purpose and set it aside. Then I tried to write my article. It took several weeks and a great deal of ingenuity—ingenuity in

coming up with cogent reasons for continuing with the project at all. I thought it was possible to compromise in the matter of style but not content. I threw in two dozen ellipses and more parentheses, italics and exclamation points. My last line was: "Remember—it's far better to look like a bonbon than to eat one."

I began to hope they would not take the piece and, sure enough, they didn't. My agent received the following letter from Articles Editor Ashley:

Sorry to say that the Helen Epstein diet article did not make it here. Actually I liked it and thought she did a well-researched piece...a little quiet but nicely written. However...however, despite admonitions, she did come out against Dr. Atkins somewhat and we've done a profile on him and excerpted his books. An overall partisan attitude in what should have been a sprightly report really didn't help Helen's cause. I would like to try her again if she is not too discouraged with us. I would trust her endlessly on research organization and yes good sentences...but for Cosmo we need a bit more fun...irreverence...a little more sardonic...livelier.

Could it be that chintz and rattan are more debilitating than kryptonite, and a daily dose of palm trees makes one really believe that Cosmo mirage?