

A SHORT COURSE ON HOW TO TIC

Introduction.

The good girl is praised for keeping her room neat.
Her butterfly collection is pinned tight and orderly.
Her science fiction paperbacks are all in a straight row.
Her crayons arranged by color, following the spectrum.
Her little hands are always busy at the piano—scales,
five-finger exercises, arpeggi—Czerny, Hanon, Bach.
She plays with her calculator in bed at night, its green
eyes gaze serene into hers after everyone else is sleeping.

Marianne Moore said, “Poetry is little more
than the instinct towards tidiness.”

1. If bits of blue glass are sprinkled on the sidewalk
 or in the gutter where you see them walking down the street,
 pick them up. If you're can't, repeat
 blue glass blue glass to yourself while
 looking right straight at a piece of it.

2. All forks, knives, spoons,
 plates, bowls, and saucers
 must match when food
 is being served, or
 someone will get sick.
 If there is an odd plate or
 piece of cutlery, give it bravely to yourself.

3. All discrete food units (such as
 ice cubes, baked potatoes, fish sticks,
 sausages, croquettes, and ears of corn)
 should be served in good numbers
 according to the Table of Increments.

4. *Table of Increments.*

 1 is okay; 2 is bad.
 3 is good; 4 is pretty bad.
 5 is very good; 6 is the worst.
 7 is good; 8 is nearly okay.
 9 is extremely good; 10 is acceptable.

 Zero is, of course, perfect.

5. Everything that can be, must be recycled.

6. All price tags must be immediately removed upon purchase of the item.
7. Objects should be arranged in groups of three where possible, in groups of five where not.
8. Books, when placed on an end table or nightstand, should be stacked in groups of three or five only, with the largest on bottom and the smallest on top.
9. The checkbook must be balanced after each transaction, calling the bank's 24-hour automated teller if necessary. Reconcile to the penny. No cheating.
10. T-shirts should be folded in the correct squares (as should underpants, socks, and for that matter everything else) and sorted and stacked by color.
11. Eleven is an okay number. Twelve really isn't.
12. Shower only every three or every five days. Spend at least two hours in the bathroom: pre-condition, shampoo, condition; exfoliate, dry thoroughly, moisturize; clip nails, trim cuticles, clean ears; and do not omit a single procedure.
13. *Bonus:* Don't shower at all because, who has time to do all of this stuff?
14. All paperclips must be sorted by color, shape, size, and age.
15. Look in the drawers of everyone else in the office after they have gone home. Sort out all of their paperclips, and their pens and rubber bands (see 20).
16. The computer hard drive, its folders and desktop, must be hierarchically arranged. Folders should be created in the seven colors of the spectrum and contents inserted accordingly.
17. Rearrange folders and files, both computer and paper, constantly, as well as any photographs, photocopies, lecture notes, correspondence

from long-ended love affairs,
documents, artwork, newspaper
clippings, magazine articles,
old library cards, business cards,
restaurant menus, transit maps,
cancelled checks, and other papers.

18. Save all papers.
Do not throw away any papers.
19. All pens must be in cups at all times.
Corollary: If pens are not in cups,
they must be in drawers, in a rubber-banded bundle
arranged by color.
20. If it is possible to have one representative
from each kind of colored item or thing,
you must do so. For example:
Three rubber bands: blue, beige, red.
Four ballpoint pens: black, blue, green, red.
Five boiled sweets: grape, lime, lemon, orange, cherry.
21. When eating french fries or green beans,
eat the smallest ones first and line up
those remaining in order of increasing size.
22. Anything that can be arranged by color
in the order of the spectrum,
should be.
23. Before doing any kind of work
professional or academic in nature,
the medicine cabinet must be in
perfect order, as must be the
refrigerator, cupboards, pantry,
closets, dresser drawers, bookshelves,
shower caddy, and, needless to say,
the desktop.
24. When lost or confused, or in a social situation where
you know no one but need to seem calm,
spell out to yourself the deaf alphabet, rapidly,
with the right hand. You may count this way, as well.
25. *Optional:* Spell out words or phrases stuck in your head,
or which have just been uttered by you or anyone near:
“which way do I go now which way do I go now”
“randomizing fascinators randomizing fascinators”
“Albuquerque Albuquerque Albuquerque Albuquerque”
“what lovely sandwiches! what lovely sandwiches!”

26. *Advanced level:* Touch-type, not with your fingers but in your head, every sentence that you read or say.
27. *Extra credit:* Fail to realize you are doing this rather than studying until you've been on the same paragraph or page for at least an hour.
28. Spend all day folding, stacking, squaring, and rearranging everything from the linen drawers to your boyfriend's papers (guiltily, helplessly); only stop once exhausted, once the sun is going down, wondering why you can't turn all this energy toward something useful, like writing book reviews. Be baffled by why your compulsions don't extend to writing highly formal rhyming and metered poetry. Go to bed in tears and read something inane like *Jurassic Park* until aforementioned boyfriend comes home and looks worried but doesn't say anything. Sigh with guilt and relief and lapse into the familiar and comforting escape of dinner, talk, and TV until it's time for sleep, and hope for the next day.
29. Try to stay away from e-mail and the Internet. Fail utterly. Give up your account routinely, succumbing to pressure from normal people and reinstating it every time. Tell friends firmly that you can't let yourself spend your best writing time sending e-mail. Offend them deeply. Then do it anyway.
30. *Bonus:* Spend several hours a day making sure that there are exactly as many sent-mails as there are saved-messages. Do not log out until all messages are answered, archived, or deleted. When you finally let yourself get up to pee, make sure you're shaky and weak from hunger.
31. Rearrange the decorations in your office, carrel, or on the door of your college dorm room at least once a day, remembering the Table of Increments and the importance of color coordination.
32. Be unable to do anything else as long as there is an unanswered postcard, unpaid bill, or scrap of paper anywhere near your workplace.
33. Don't just write; do layout! There must be no widows, no orphans, no poorly hyphenated words, no scraggly looking or uneven paragraphs. Desktop-publish even first drafts,

journal entries, and letters home.
All handwritten text must end
exactly at the bottom of the page.

34. Stay up all night in college laying out
the newspaper, and scare the rest of the staff off
so you won't have to put up with their sloppiness
and inaccuracies. Be the best copyeditor. The best
proofreader. Drive everyone else insane
until they throw up their hands and leave.
It's lonely, but at least everything's perfect now.
35. Make sure that every word you write
is, needless to say, perfect, too.
36. Do not throw up. Ever. It is preferable (if
not always possible) to have arms and legs
cut off rather than throw up. If there is the least
chance that you may be sick, eat nothing.
If you must eat something, eat only
safe foods. (See Table of Safe Foods.)
37. *Table of Safe Foods.*
- White foods are best.
Brown foods are worst.
When in doubt, don't eat anything
that you aren't prepared to see again later.
The only truly safe foods are:
ginger ale, cream soda, madeleines,
plain yogurt, butter crackers,
tea biscuits, and mashed potatoes.
All meat is very bad.
Anything vanilla is good.
38. If making a list and the items in it
do not add up to an appropriate number,
keep adding items until such a number is reached.
39. Never tell anyone any of this.
40. Be utterly unable to stop.