



How Writers Teach Writing

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Why Isaac Bashevis Singer, Truman Capote, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf (Among Others) Were Having a Bad Morning

And so I begin:

"I sit down religiously every morning. I sit down for eight hours and the sitting down is all. In the course of that working day I write three sentences which I erase before leaving the table in despair. Sometimes it takes all my resolution and power of self-control to refrain from butting my head against the wall. After such cries of despair I doze for hours still conscious that I am unable to write. Then I wake up, try again, and at last go to bed completely done up. In the morning I get up with that horror of the powerlessness . . . The ideas and words creep about my head and have to be caught and tortured into shape." (Olsen, 156)

It's that final sentence that always does it. Not a single yawn; not a pair of eyelids fluttering asleep in the overheated lecture hall. The faces stare in recognition. Undergraduate misery. It's all there in those words: the heroic self-despair, the frustration, the well-intentioned effort doomed to failure. The quotation, I tell them, isn't from a sleep-deprived student, but Joseph Conrad.

As the collective gasp settles I'm reminded of what it was really like to be in college: the intellectual excitement of discovering Conrad, the dull panicked despair of having to write a *paper* on him. The horror. The horror. Yet, like these students, college presented its own obstacle course for me. How in a seminar on image systems in George Eliot or moral imperatives in Mill could I ask the real questions that nagged me term after term: Why is

writing so hard? Why does it take me so long? Why do I need to do so many drafts? Why can't I do them faster? Will the process ever be less agonizing?

I never figured these out as a student. Like the Furies, these questions haunted me from college to graduate work to my first job. This was particularly inconvenient as my first job was as a writer. In print. Often. My first editor was no help at all. She had sold her first short story at 16, her first novel at 21. She was 71 when I met her: novelist, biographer, woman of letters. I could no more ask her than my college professors. My luck, though, was soon about to change. Together we devised a series on creativity, profiled interviews with famous writers, which she called "Artists and Their Inspiration," and I, *sotto voce*, "Artists and Their Perspiration." Writing was still very hard work for me. I'd come to agree with Thomas Mann that "a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." (Plimpton, vi). I longed for and dreaded this series. I knew that while the interview with Elizabeth Bishop or John Fowles would take only four hours, crafting the finished piece could take me weeks.

My first interview was with novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer. I had barely arrived at his apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side when Singer himself opened the door. The face, of course, I knew. It was the expression that startled me, one I recognized instantly: Isaac Bashevis Singer hadn't had a good morning writing. His face was like a crumpled piece of paper. I followed him into the living room where he writes. The wastebasket was full, the Yiddish typewriter covered. Was it possible that Singer, six months away from winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, wasn't immune to these same questions? Apparently. Singer, I soon learned, wasn't wearing a coat and tie just for the interview. He wears them daily as if when writing he's preparing himself for a strenuous job interview or a difficult dinner guest. I'd found my man. "Mr. Singer," I began, "on days when writing isn't going, say, perfectly well . . ."

In that series and elsewhere I discovered what I had suspected intuitively: writers have some very odd work habits to help with the exacting business of writing, of getting ideas on paper. Saul Bellow, for example, writes on two typewriters: one for fiction, the other, nonfiction. John Updike writes in four rooms, each corresponding to a different genre (fiction, reviewing, nonfiction, letters), with different writing implements (typewriter, legal pad, computer). Anne Tyler writes only on one end of the same sofa. Fay Weldon writes in her kitchen; Singer in his living room with the telephone constantly ringing.

Of all the stories of writers coping with the vagaries of the writing process, my favorite is Truman Capote's from *The Paris Review's* series *Writers at Work*. Capote, it seems, had stern ritualistic prohibitions about where and when he could (and couldn't) write best. Other people's homes were most problematic. "I have to add up all the numbers. There are some

people I never telephone because their number adds up to an unlucky number. Or I will not tolerate the presence of yellow roses which is sad as they're my favorite flowers. I can't allow three cigarette butts in the same ashtray. Won't travel on a plane with two nuns. Won't begin or end anything on a Friday. It's endless, the things I can't and won't. But I derive some curious comfort from obeying these primitive concepts" (Cowley, 298).

In over *eight* years' teaching at Harvard, I've discovered that undergraduates have superstitions that rival these. Among the most sacred:

I can only write well just before the paper is due.

If I start early, the paper loses all its life.

There's not enough time for more than one solid draft.

Anyway, I can't undo my first draft once it's done. That's it.

I can only work at 2 a.m. with my radio on and my roommate out.

My favorite scenario, though, goes something like this: the student sits down at his desk, hands poised on the keyboard. The moment he touches the keys (as it's described), someone else inhabits his body, a kind of literary poltergeist: dimwitted but determinedly strong-willed. Incapable of original thought. Who else was responsible for writing this badly? Obviously someone else. This is confirmed the following week when the tutor, holding up the offending essay, asks: "Who wrote this?" With total candor the student replies: "I dunno."

Flannery O'Connor was once asked if she thought writing courses stifled college students. "Not enough," she replied. (Hersey, 56) The question, it seems to me, isn't how to stifle students so much as how to prevent them from doing it to themselves. When we tell students "just write . . .," it's not ourselves that we're opening up to a chaos of incoherent writing, but them. Those two words, so deceptively simple, self-evident in their very command, are often a kind of Pandora's box for students. We tell them "just write," but have we shown them how? We assume they know how to work, but do they? Too often are we guilty of the very error they make: stressing writing as a product, not a process? Writing as a seven-page paper rather than a two- or three-stage process, multifaceted, richly creative, strewn with frustration, full of false starts, ultimate solutions, unexpected connections? Writing.

At some point every writer inevitably grapples with the vagaries of how she works. As I learned from Singer, it is often a lifelong process, one that shifts with each new level of writing and expertise. Yet while there is everything deeply mysterious about the creative process, there is less so about the actual stages of writing itself. (Here I'm addressing nonfiction exclusively. Fiction is its own kingdom, its path requiring its own compass.) This, then, is an essay about process, creative and structural. It's a step-by-step look at the writing process itself: from the moment a student learns she

has to write something till the moment it's handed in. It is *not* intended to be prescriptive. Rather, it's a way to reflect on the writing process, specifically, the creativity of thinking, of connections, that happen in those early stages. Call it making peace with those questions, mine and those I hear each term. I want to honor those questions—confessed rather than asked, it seems—questions strategically timed at the end of conference or when shuffling out of class, questions disguised as spontaneous afterthoughts, questions that invariably follow: "I know this sounds stupid but . . ." It shouldn't take me so long. I write too many drafts. I'm smart, so why is writing still so hard?

Unlike most students, I now know that these questions simply don't disappear after graduation (or publication). The questions seem to be an integral part of the writing process. My favorite definition of writing, in fact, comes from a colleague, Doug Bauer, who says you know that writing is starting to happen the moment you start feeling the resistance to it. Indeed, don't be misled by the anthology you now hold. These essays, full of wit and insight, were not effortless. Or quick. I'd wager that at some point every single author here, to varying degrees, experienced frustration, boredom, panic; loathing: a collective *Why* did I ever agree to do this? (Why? Our editors blithely said, "Just write . . .") And so, like Forster's Adela Quested in the Marabar Caves, we, just like *all* writers, entered fresh with hope, began groping in the increasing darkness, only somewhere in the process to find our minds ricocheting with panic and emptiness, panic and emptiness.

As writers we often forget how long it took to formulate our own ways of working. I certainly did. I spent the first two years of my teaching wondering why students' shoulders would bunch up around their earlobes everytime I announced a new assignment. I never made a connection between "just write . . ." and the often miserable "products" I got. Nor had I made the connection that I spent all term telling them what they weren't doing rather than how, possibly, they might write.

That changed one spring term. After a particularly long weekend of my own writing, I introduced them to the voices that, like some deranged *cappella* group, had vied for my attention as I worked. Voices, no doubt, that echoed within them. I introduced them to my internal board of directors, so-called as, historically, mine have had such endless funding and resources it could only be corporate sponsorship. These, I told them, were the real poltergeists homesteading in their bodies as they tried to write. These were the culprits who were forever carping and interfering, whispering the most dubious advice. If you were to write, you had to wrest control back from them. I'd narrowed the worst perpetrators to four: the internal critic, the saboteur, the procrastinator, the perfectionist. I then asked students—and have been asking them ever since—if they recognized the following situations.

———— The Internal Critic ————

Scene: Two days before a paper is due the student sits down to work. He stares at his computer but does nothing yet. He is haunted by a small voice inside that tells him his idea isn't original, that, somewhere, there's a "right" answer to the essay.

IC: "And you, idiot, don't have it. Everyone else in the class does, but, of course, they're *smart*."

Undeterred, the student starts with the idea he has. He's halfway through the first sentence when he hears:

IC: "Wrong word!!! Number four, the verb. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Stop and cross it out. Look up a better word. *Yes*, better means bigger. Of course it's okay to interrupt yourself here. Go on, go on."

The student obeys, thumbs through a worn thesaurus and inserts "contraindicated" for "opposed." He finishes the sentence and rereads it immediately.

IC: "Let's face it, it doesn't have the ring of 'Call me Ishmael' or 'In mid-journey along the path of our life, I found myself in a dark wood and the true way was lost.'"

The student heaves a small sigh.

IC: "Scrap the sentence. It sounds too studenty. Go on. You've got to sound intelligent. Imitate what writing should sound like. Try to get 'the writer's voice.' Imitate James Joyce. Orwell. Kafka, even. Anyone but *you*."

Subtext: A belief that, like some Platonic ideal, there's only one right answer to any given assignment. A belief that the "original" (and final) idea automatically comes in the first draft. A belief that it's productive to interrupt yourself constantly, writing and editing simultaneously. A belief that making a sentence different is always the same as making it better. A belief that your own voice has to be airbrushed out of any piece of writing in favor of that nebulous "writer's voice." (We all know those papers where students have opted for some imagined writer's tone. It's like Muzak in prose: distorted, eerily distanced from the original source, annoyingly ever-present.)

———— The Saboteur ————

Scene: 10 p.m. The student has just returned from the library. All the books on his subject have already been checked out. Maybe he should have gone earlier. Not the night before the paper is due.

S: "You know, you're probably a journalist. You thrive on deadlines! Nah, don't worry. You do your best work right before a paper is due. You *need* deadline pressure. Can you feel that tension? Whoa, it's going to be some paper."

10:30 p.m.

S: Okay, big deal. So you knew you were meeting friends at 10:30 for a pizza. You deserve a break. You'll pick up right where you left off. It's no easy thing what you've just done. And it is a great title."

12 a.m.

S: "Is it your fault that place is so criminally slow?"

The student rereads his class notes and pulls out a sheet of paper.

S: "An outline?? What are you doing!! Do you realize what *time* it is? Who has time to organize? Relax. You've got all the ideas in your head. No prob. It's a cinch to get them out."

1:30 a.m.

S: "A quick nap always helps. I mean you've got the first page out of the way. The other six will flow better when you're not so sleepy. Better order a medium next time. Without onions."

7:30 a.m.

S: "Damn. Numero uno today: get a new alarm clock."

9:30 a.m.

S: "So the main idea is on page four—at the bottom. What are they going to do, *sue you*? The argument does skip around and you could use a bit more evidence. Don't worry, they'll get the basic idea. They only read the first and last pages anyway. Proofread? No time. Turn it in like it is. Anyway, professors don't mind a few typos. They probably don't know how to spell Madagascar either."

Subtext: The first-as-final draft syndrome, that hothoused all-night assault, which mistakes deadline pressure for inspiration, a single-night effort for efficiency. Since he's never worked any other way, the student has yet to find anything to contradict his experience that writing is agonizing, something to be gotten over as quickly as possible. Writing as product, never as process. Seeing that he got a C-, the student rationalizes: "I could have gotten an A if I'd had more time." (How many times have you suspected that you've spent more time correcting an essay than the student spent writing it?)

———— The Procrastinator ————

Scene: a room so neat that a passerby suddenly wonders if it's Parent's Week already. In June? Oh, the history paper is due . . .

Pro: "There's so much to do!!!"

Variation One

"Clean out the closet. Again. Alphabetize the medicine chest. Make a fresh cup of coffee. This time you can grind the beans with your desk stapler. Iron your shoelaces . . ."

Variation Two

"You have a whole week before the paper's due!"

"You have three whole days before it's due!"

"You can get a lot done the night before it's due!"

"You can set your alarm for 3:30. That's enough time!"

"You can ask for an extension!"

Subtext: If only any of us could harness the creativity we expend avoiding writing on actually writing, we would all be in great shape.

———— The Perfectionist ————

Scene: The student knows she has a week to write the paper. That's good. A brittle voice inside tells her she's going to need every single minute of it. She's been through this before. As she faces her computer she wears an expression seen only on PhD candidates, nuclear fission experts, and test pilots.

Per: "You know the rules: you cannot possibly go on to the second sentence until the first is perfect. Perfect idea, word choice, style, grammar. You can't go on to sentence three until number two is perfect. You can't go on to . . ."

The student tenses and hazards her first sentence.

Per: "Let's get this right. The *whole* paper hangs on it. And what do we mean by right, missy? Perfect, perfect, perfect. Polish, polish, polish. Make that sentence shine. It doesn't sound like a Pascalian epigram to me yet."

The student stops. The voice is oddly familiar. Somehow the tight, practiced smile of her sixth-grade teacher comes to mind, the one who taught how to do outlines that looked like Bauhaus models.

Per: "Of course it's normal to spend four hours getting the first paragraph absolutely right. And, yes, it *was* necessary to retype the entire paragraph every time there was one of those very nasty, messy little typos."

The student rereads the paragraph and groans. It doesn't sound like Pascal. It sounds disturbingly like her. It must be wrong.

Per: "Odious, dull, trite, banal. Horrid. This definitely won't do. *Imagine* if they chose to read this in front of the entire class. All your peers laughing. Just like in 'Dumbo.'"

Silence. And then, a small thudding sound, remarkably similar to someone hitting her head against a computer screen. Silence. The student narrows her eyes. The perfectionist, correctly guessing her thoughts, shrieks:

Per: "SHOW this to someone? ARE YOU CRAZY? And reveal yourself? No one has these problems. No one. Let's start again. Yes, from the top, literally. Sentence one. Practice makes perfect."

Subtext: Perfect makes paralysis. The student is crippled by unrealistic standards (wanting to write just like Proust) and unrealistic expectations (writing like Proust in *her first draft*). Unfortunately, "first" and "draft" aren't taken literally. The perfectionist is the internal critic gone wild. A belief that everything in the first draft must be tightly locked into place: thinking, writing, style. A mistaken emphasis on polishing style rather than loosening thinking. The polishing not only flattens the writing but inhibits the creative connections in thinking. Failing to live up to some preconceived (and self-imposed) standard, the draft(s) is usually abandoned. The perfectionist usually has five versions, all unfinished, littering the desk. When such a student finally turns in the paper, I'm always surprised to see it's typed. It feels as if it should be chiseled in marble with that strange Roman lettering you see over post offices or federal buildings.

For Gail Godwin all these voices coalesce into one ogre: the watcher. "My watcher," she writes, "has a wasteful penchant for 20-pound bond paper above and below the carbon of the first draft. 'What's the good of writing out a whole page,' he whispers begrudgingly, 'if you have to write it over again later? Get it perfect the first time!' My watcher adores stopping in the middle of a morning's work to drive down to the library to check on the name of a flower or a World War II battle or a line of metaphysical poetry. 'You can't possibly go on till you've got this right!' he admonishes. I go and get the car keys. On a very bad day I wrote my watcher a letter. 'What is it you're so afraid I'll do?' Then I held his pen for him and he replied instantly and with a candor that has kept me from truly despising him. 'Fail,' he wrote back" (Godwin, 1977, 31).

Let me confess. I have often misjudged students' failures. One example from this last term. Reading a student's first essay I muttered, "All the telltale signs: repetitions, poor evidence, even poorer writing. Obviously a charter member of the saboteur-procrastinator club." He wasn't. He had tried hard. He simply didn't know how to write. Or work. He had gone to a school where writing was minimal, revision nonexistent. He simply needed someone to show him the writing process. I did. But I never would have known any of this had I not questioned him about how he worked. Oddly, he was far easier to work with than his classmate who, potentially, ranked among the top three in the class. Her problem was perfectionism. (She was a walking embodiment of Gene Fowler's quip: "Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead." (Metcalfe, 1987, 273)) Her work suffered from a tight, overconstricted focus. Learning to loosen her grip, to break up the writing process and experiment was probably the most invaluable part of the course for her.

Like Godwin, I tell my students to write their watchers a letter. Some send telegrams, others pink slips. One wrote a parody of a Raymond Chandler murder where the very dead bullet-ridden corpse was the late internal critic. Another student wrote a lengthy Rothian dialogue between

procrastinator patient and analyst who advised: "Ya vell, so perhaps, *now* we begin?" The assignment, while creative, isn't an exorcism so much as an exercise in self-awareness: of how their habits aid or abet work. Above all, that they are responsible for the act of writing. I then ask them to draw up a list of ten (or so) writing resolutions, a kind of Martin Luther edict of dubious habits, that will glare from their desk. ("Thou shalt not sit down to work at 10 knowing thou art hotfooting it out for pizza at 10:30 . . .")

But, of course, even the best resolutions are born to be broken. At some point we all get lazy and once again the board members are loitering in the hall. They gang up. The result? After "just write," the *other* two most dreaded words: writer's block. The classic symptoms we all know: the page or screen as white as our knuckles. Terror. Boredom. A carpet worn in a crescent pattern from pacing. Yet there are more subtle versions: the stalled second paragraph rewritten for the tenth time; five variants of the same essay on the desk; the essay that changes its idea page after page, orbiting its subject in some ghastly Flying Dutchman nightmare. Writer's block.

In my lecture "Inspiration and Procrastination: Everything You Wanted to Know About Writing, but, Like Me, Were Too Embarrassed to Ask in College," I ask students if they know why they get this. They do. Like drowning sailors, the hands go up one by one: *fearing you have the wrong thesis* ("I just know it has to be more complicated than this"); *terror of grades* ("If I don't get an A, I'll never get into med. school"); *boredom* ("Who cares about Tamil linguistic theory?"). *Audience.* Oh yes, I sigh. I tell them about my college history professor, a horrid, illustrious man who would spasm a smile every time I came to conference. "I have your latest effort here," he'd say wearily, stressing effort—his not mine. He was my internal critic externalized. Made manifest. Writ large. It took me years to get him and his thin smile of toleration out of my mind as I sat down to work. Whoever our own version is—professor, parent, peer—it has to be exorcised if we are to work well.

While all these contribute to writer's block, there are four real reasons it occurs. One is purely mechanical: writing and editing simultaneously, compulsively. I liken it to driving with a hand brake on. You can move—but not very fast. Writing: one inch forward; editing: two inches back. The constant push-pull is fatiguing. As a consequence, the writer gives up sooner. The three most common reasons for writer's block, though, are:

- Not understanding or having a full grasp of the subject yet
- Not generating out enough material on that subject to begin writing
- Not sufficiently organizing the material at hand

Whenever I get stuck I try to identify which of these is the culprit. However perversely, the mind here is doing the writer a favor. Heed it. It's trying to tell us that we're not prepared to write yet, that if we start now we'll invariably do draft after draft after draft. Why? Because we're still using writing to find out what we think about a subject. This seems to make

a lot of sense to students. They always copy it into their notebooks. So, too, when I mention that we all do so many drafts to refine the *thinking*, not the writing. Indeed, the hardest part of writing isn't writing *per se*, but the thinking behind it, the exacting business of making ideas and words and images concrete. And the hardest, most agonizing, least efficient way to write is first-as-final draft. Students never copy that down in their notebooks. It's sacred, the college credo: I first-draft, therefore I write. If it's so effective, I always ask the sea of faces in the lecture hall, why did you all petition to get into this writing class? The pens tilt back to full mast again.

Yet the question still looms: How to get the thinking out? It took me years of trial and error to learn the obvious: writing is best and most satisfyingly done in stages. Like Truman Capote's not writing on Fridays or Singer's working in a coat and tie, I have learned to obey my own writing process faithfully. It has helped me do what my student have signed up to learn: to write faster, do fewer drafts. I now know and trust completely that writing happens long before I ever type a word; that my best thinking and writing will happen before and after the first draft but not necessarily during it; that by seeing writing as a process, I now know the pleasure of making connections: ruminating on a subject, seeing patterns emerge, watching an argument evolve, evidence cohere. In short, that glorious territoriality of staking and claiming a subject as my own.

Just as a writer makes a subject his own, so must he with his own writing process. It is as individual as writers themselves. The following five-stage process works for me. It is not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, it's more of a working guideline, a way of breaking down the writing process, a way of respecting that each stage has a unique and powerful purpose. Moreover, each has simple methods to facilitate writing to its next stage. (The following steps are spread over a week, the normal span a student has between hearing of an assignment and having to turn it in. The days alter according to individual process.)

———— Stage One: Ruminare (Day 1) ————

We have all had the experience: while taking a shower or on an afternoon walk the very idea that eluded us all morning at our desk suddenly looms: vivid, concrete. There. Virginia Woolf captured this phenomenon in her journal: "I walk, making up phrases, sit contriving scenes; am, in short, in the thick of the greatest rapture known to me." (Olsen, 173) Like so many writers, Woolf had long discovered a secret to her own work process: it was on walks or while writing in her journal—not at her desk—that inspiration often struck. The axiom is simple: when the critical guard is relaxed, the mind is more apt to produce a great tumble of ideas and fresh phrasing. As Rebecca West once noted: "My memory is certainly in my hands. I can remember things only if I have a pencil and I can write with it and play with it. I think your hand concentrates for you" (Plimpton, 64).

26: Copy of First Draft, p. 16

copy with
~~As I write the steps on the board I always say—~~
~~the way a writer, it seems to me, is to~~
~~Process, like a subject, claim as your own. Process is~~
 an individual as writers themselves. As I write steps, not
 intended to be prescriptive but a working guideline, a way of
 breaking writing into stages, each with its own, simple exercises
 to facilitate each stage. *The steps have come out there. I want to be. Must be. Must be. Must be.*
 Stage One: Ruminare *the same as ruminate, by 4th grade have adapted.*
 ("Day 1")
 "I walk, making up phrases, sit, contriving scenes; am, in short,
 in the thick of the greatest rapture known to me." When Virginia
 Woolf recorded this in her journal she had long since discovered
 a secret to her own work process. Her best ideas and phrases often
 happened not while sitting at her desk but on her daily walks or
 when the critical guard is relaxed
 when writing in her journal: a great tumble of ideas.
 We have all had the experience: while taking a shower or on
 a walk the very idea that had eluded us all morning at our desk
 suddenly looms up: vivid, concrete. There. Virginia Woolf captured
 this wrote in her journal: "I walk, making up phrases, sit, contriving
 scenes; am, in short, in the thick of the greatest rapture known to
 me." *(she had long discovered)* when the critical guard is relaxed,
 the mind produced a great tumble of ideas or images.
 Do not wait till the night before a paper's due to introduce yr mind to
 The moment you hear you have to write something walk away from it.
 Students underestimate this stage.
 from it, sleep on it. Make procrastination work for you. (Anne Tyler
 has notecards house so when idea Write it down. It will have
 How first phrasing idea was correct. *all things. 3:00 PM.* Don't wait to introduce your
 mind to your subject the night before a paper is due. Even in later
 stages—especially revision—ruminare. Finger it like worry eads.
 Start the moment you hear it's due. The satisfaction of tucking
 found money into a savings account.

The secret is keeping the internal critic out. (If you jot ideas on the back of an old Visa slip, you can fool him into thinking you're not working, which, of course, you are.) The real point is letting the mind work creatively *for* you. Do not wait till the night before a paper's due, I always tell students, to introduce your mind to a subject. Make "procrastination" work for you: sleep on it, walk away from it. Literally. Gail Godwin keeps note cards all over her house. She knows that it is often while she's doing something else—cooking, reading, exercising—that ideas surface from the subconscious. They're usually the ones that are still there in the final draft. Write them down immediately when they come. It's the satisfaction of tucking found money into a savings account.

———— Stage Two: Generate (Day 2) ————

While reading Schiller's letters Freud came across a sentence that fascinated him. Advising a frustrated young writer, Schiller observed: "You reject too soon, you discriminate too severely." For Freud it identified the root of literary paralysis. Yet it is precisely what most students do before ridding themselves of their watchers. No wonder writing is allotted only one night. It helps stem the chaos, the frustration. The judgment.

Ironically, it's that so-called chaos, the having to sit with inchoate, unstructured material, that needs to be tapped. The process is generating. By suspending critical judgment, ideas are allowed to pour out and connections to be made before ever writing a single sentence. The problem Schiller cites isn't what to alter in the writing process so much as *when*. By going straight from vague ideas to first draft, students reverse the natural order of work: trying to write logically before they've thought intuitively about their material. Again, without knowing it, they are using draft(s) to find out what they think.

Draft ideas, not sentences. This is the key to generating. Use the freedom of the legal pad—not the formality of a first draft—to get the initial thinking out. Generate first, write second. Unfortunately, in the rush "to get writing" (mistaking typing as writing), it is the step most often skipped over. Ten minutes of freewriting saves literally hours of false starts in drafts. By concentrating on ideas—not on how they're expressed or spelled—generating not only silences the watchers but sparks the material that allows the writer to begin properly.

The easiest way to generate is freewriting. Da Vinci did a similar exercise every morning upon rising, writing thought after thought to limber up his mind. Many writers, notably Gide, Woolf, Chekhov, Tolstoy, have used journals for the same purpose. Relieved of the burden of correct phrasing, the mind concentrates on ideas instead. One idea triggers another and another again. It is what Woolf called finding "diamonds" amid "the dustheap." (234)

If you work on a computer, simply turn off the brightness light and begin freewriting on your topic. Many people prefer working on a legal pad first. Once you get going—and it will happen quite quickly—don't stop. The temptation is to break off the moment the first plausible idea occurs and start the first draft. Don't. Probe the connections further, push the associations. When the topic is exhausted, print out or go back over the material, highlighting the good ideas (and phrasing) with a yellow marker.

Listing is my version of freewriting. I dispense with sentences altogether. I usually begin with something concrete from my subject: a fact, a quotation, a source comment, something that my mind can work like a worry bead. I then jot the ideas in respective groupings. At the end, the page looks like a map of ancient Egypt: small pyramids of material over what had once been a wasteland of white paper.

Generating is the one step I insist students do before starting a first draft. (Almost invariably, the paper without solid connections or clear argument has skipped this stage or done it only briefly.) The real dividend, of course, is a sense of confidence and control. Seeing how much material they've generated, and how, in the process, a pattern has emerged from it, they can begin the first draft with a degree of control.

———— Stage Three: Organize (Day 2) ————

Nothing makes me more nervous than hearing a student say, "The ideas are all in my head." Writing is that problematic physics of getting ideas from gray matter to white paper. The single most important change in my own writing since undergraduate days is the amount of time I spend organizing material before writing. So too my students. By the end of the term, they spend more time organizing for the simple reason that it saves them unnecessary drafts. Organization techniques vary greatly. I simply number my freewriting pyramids in logical sequence, jotting support or evidence under each heading. John McPhee prefers notecards for both his freewriting and organizing stages. Each idea is allotted an individual card. He merely orders them according to the shape he wants a project to take. Whether you use these or a traditional outline (now available in software packages), organizing safeguards against interruption while writing. If you have to stop, when you return you can pick up directly where you left off—an impossibility if the material is still free-floating in your mind.

———— Stage Four: First Draft (Late Day 2; Early Day 3) ————

During college years this is usually step one. No wonder so many students get stuck and frustrated. Why is writer's block so common at this point? Look at what's being asked: to think, write, organize, *and* make connections about the material simultaneously. Four separate activities,

each challenging in and of itself. To work effectively, the writing process needs to be broken up into manageable stages.

What should one expect from the first draft? A controlling idea. Period. The most common misconception is that the first draft is about writing *per se*. It's not. It's about thinking. If you've managed to turn out felicitous phrasing, I always tell students, it's icing on the cake. The real concern is how your idea evolves and sharpens, how its deeper structure emerges. To help this process along, don't agonize over word choice. Underline a word or simply leave a space and go back in the revision stage to get it right. Use momentum. Gag your internal critic and perfectionist when they report, correctly, that the draft seems sketchy. That's why it's called a first draft. Don't be too wedded to getting it "perfect" since it will inevitably change and deepen in revision. (See page 167 for a sample copy of my first draft of pages 166–169.)

———— Stage Five: Revision (Day 5 on) ————

In terms of the writing process, revision is where the best work—specifically, the writing—gets done. If the previous steps are the foundation and framing work, revision is the interior completion. The intricate wiring; the connection of loose ends; the completion of circuits. It is where process finally yields to product.

As the term goes on, most students shift their work habits by doing quicker first drafts and more serious revisions. They see that when they write they tend to memorize. What had sounded wonderful was merely familiar. A day later the same material suddenly has obvious and needed angles to rework. Here, at last, is where the internal critic has his place. If the creative, intuitive work has been done beforehand, let the internal critic loose with his gleaming machete.

Yet even with this guideline and the miracle of computers, writing can still be sabotaged. Often it is not the writer's fault. One of the great ironies of educational life is that a college environment isn't always conducive to writing. Stereos blare, printers crank out, roommates distract, telephones ring. A writer's nightmare. I've often suspected that the reason so many students work in the dead of night is that it is the only time it's quiet and concentration is possible.

I advise students to draw up a positive corollary to their Martin Luther edict of poor work habits. The premise is obvious: Where do you work best? A quiet nook in the library? In your own room with the telephone turned off? To this I add the questions an English friend of mine asks fellow writers: Are you a morning or a night writer? A window or a wall writer? An at-home or office writer? (I am, unrepentantly, a morning writer who insists on a window. Skylights will not do. It's as if I want my sentences to shimmer with that hard shiny concreteness of the world just outside my window.) And my colleagues? Victor Burg didn't begin writing in his new

study until it looked as though he'd been there for years. Linda Simon and I spent a sultry July afternoon painting her study a satisfying lavender. Nancy Kline, our nearest to the John Updike paradigm, has two separate studies (fiction/nonfiction) and is thinking of colonizing a third. Judith Beth Cohen, by contrast, leaves home altogether, preferring to work in writers' colonies.

At the end of my lecture on writing I always pass on some of the more theatrical props writers have used to get themselves working. Balzac worked in a white monk's robe with a pair of gold scissors (for editing?) suspended from his neck. Conrad *asked* his wife to lock him in his study and ignore his shouts to get out. Colette, unsolicited, was locked *in* her study by her first (read: ex) husband.

However strange these habits, they helped the work. They conferred, as Capote suggested, some "curious comfort." These—and our own—personal idiosyncracies reveal a deeper literary truth: the habit of writing requires a comforting uniformity, what Flaubert meant when he suggested that to write well one must think like a radical and live like a bourgeois. Or as my first editor reductively put it "Same desk, same time, same you."

Let me be clear. Despite the guidelines here, despite knowing if you're a wall or a window writer, despite living like a bourgeois with or without lavender walls, writing can still be a very difficult business. No one thing magically makes it easier. Listen:

I have never produced anything good except by a long succession of slight efforts. No one has more deeply meditated or better understood than I Buffon's remark about patience ["Genius is but a greater aptitude for patience."] I bring it not only to my work but also to the silent waiting that precedes good work. André Gide (207)

If only I can *concentrate* myself: this is the great lesson of life. I have hours of unspeakable reaction against the smallness of my production; my wretched habits of work—or unwork; my levity, my vagueness of mind, my perpetual failure to focus my attention, to absorb myself, to look things in the face, to invent, to produce, in a word. Henry James (40–41)

Distractedness, weak memory, stupidity. Days passed in futility. Kafka (Olsen, 17)

One reason I always insist students read writer's journals is to see that inner perceptions and outer reality don't always match. When each of the writers above recorded these entries in his journals, he had produced great work. And would produce greater still. So too Virginia Woolf when she wrestled with the problem of pleasing others, the strenuous accommodation of the self and the time one doesn't have. She resolved this deeper question of writing and vocation, writing *as* vocation, in her essay "Professions for Women." She writes:

"It was she (the watcher) who used to come between me and my paper . . . who bothered and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her . . . or she would have plucked my heart out as a writer. She died hard. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when

I thought I had despatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe" (Barrett 59-60).

I used to end my lecture with this quotation. With a kind of evangelical urgency, I'd exhort students to be patient with themselves and with the writing process. Several years ago as I was gathering my notes, a student who had been very attentive throughout the lecture raised his hand and, utterly without guile, asked: "If writing is so difficult why do any of you do it?" It was a stunningly obvious, maddeningly logical question. I looked at my two colleagues for help. The satisfaction of doing something difficult, of doing it well, Carl Nagin said. Making connections in thought and language, Nancy Kline replied.

I answered something similar. But now I would read that student a passage by Gail Godwin that I came across only recently. She observes:

Once I begin the act of writing, it all falls away—the view from the window, the tools, the talismans, even the snoring cat—and I am unconscious of myself and my surroundings while I fuse language with idea, make a specific image visible or audible through the discovery of the right words. . . . One's carping inner critics are silenced for a time, and, as a result, what is produced is a little bit different from anything I had planned. There is always a surprise, a revelation. During the act of writing I have told myself something that I didn't know I knew. (Godwin, 1987, 18)

It's that final line that, for me, is the essence. I'll incorporate it into my lecture. Next time that's how I'm going to end.

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