

WRITING FICTION

A Guide to Narrative Craft

Eighth Edition



JANET BURROWAY

Florida State University

with

ELIZABETH STUCKEY-FRENCH

Florida State University

NED STUCKEY-FRENCH

Florida State University

Longman

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1



WHATEVER WORKS

The Writing Process

- *Get Started*
- *Keep Going*
- *A Word About Theme*
- *Reading as Writers*
- *About the Writing Workshop*

You want to write. Why is it so hard?

There are a few lucky souls for whom the whole process of writing is easy, for whom the smell of fresh paper is better than air, who forget to eat, and who consider the world at large an intrusion on their good time at the keyboard. But you and I are not among them. We are in love with words except when we have to face them. We are caught in a guilty paradox in which we grumble over our lack of time, and when we have the time, we sharpen pencils, check e-mail, or clip the hedges.

Of course, there's also joy. We write for the satisfaction of having wrestled a sentence to the page, for the rush of discovering an image, for the excitement of seeing a character come alive. Even the most successful writers will sincerely say that these pleasures—not money, fame, or glamour—are the real rewards of writing. Fiction writer Alice Munro concedes:

It may not look like pleasure, because the difficulties can make me morose and distracted, but that's what it is—the pleasure of telling the

story I mean to tell as wholly as I can tell it, of finding out in fact what the story is, by working around the different ways of telling it.

Nevertheless, writers may forget what such pleasure feels like when confronting a blank page, like the heroine of Anita Brookner's novel *Look at Me*:

Sometimes it feels like a physical effort simply to sit down at the desk and pull out the notebook. . . . Sometimes the effort of putting pen to paper is so great that I literally feel a pain in my head. . . .

It helps to know that most writers share the paradox of at least wanting to do what we most want to do. It also helps to know some of the reasons for our reluctance. Fear of what could emerge on the page, and what it may reveal about our inner lives, can keep us from getting started.

There's another impediment to beginning, expressed by a writer character in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Durrell's Pursewarden broods over the illusory significance of what he is about to write, unwilling to begin in case he spoils it. Many of us do this: The idea, whatever it is, seems so luminous, whole, and fragile, that to begin to write about that idea is to commit it to rubble. "The paradox of writing," says screenwriter Stephen Fischer, "is that you're trying to use words to express what words can't express." Knowing in advance that words will never exactly capture what we mean or intend, we must gingerly and gradually work ourselves into a state of accepting what words can do instead. No matter how many times we find out that what words can do is quite all right, we still shy again from the next beginning. Against this wasteful impulse I have a motto over my desk that reads: "Don't Dread; Do." It's a fine motto, and I contemplated it for several weeks before I began writing this chapter.

The mundane daily habits of writers are apparently fascinating. No author offers to answer questions at the end of a public reading without being asked: *Do you write in the morning or at night? Do you write every day? Do you compose longhand or on a computer?* Sometimes such questions show a reverent interest in the workings of genius. More often, I think, they are a plea for practical help: *Is there something I can do to make this job less horrific? Is there a trick that will unlock my words?*

Get Started

The variety of authors' habits suggests that there is no magic to be found in any particular one. Donald Hall will tell you that he spends a dozen hours a day at his desk, moving back and forth between as many projects. Philip Larkin said that he wrote a poem only every eighteen months or so and never tried to write one that was not a gift. Gail Godwin goes to her workroom every day "because what if the angel came and I wasn't there?" Julia Alvarez begins the day by reading first poetry, then prose, by her favorite writers "to remind

me of the quality of writing I am aiming for." The late Andre Dubus recommended to students that they, like Hemingway, stop writing midsentence in order to begin the next day by completing the thought. Dickens could not deal with people when he was working: "The mere consciousness of an engagement will worry a whole day." Thomas Wolfe wrote standing up. Some writers can plop at the kitchen table without clearing the breakfast dishes; others need total seclusion, a beach, a cat, a string quartet.

There is something to be learned from all this, though. The question is not "How do you get it done?" but "How do *you* get it done?" Any discipline or indulgence that actually helps nudge you into position facing the page is acceptable and productive. If jogging after breakfast energizes your mind, then jog before you sit. If you have to pull an all-nighter on a coffee binge, do that. Some schedule, regularity, pattern in your writing day (or night) will always help, but only you can figure out what that pattern is for you.

JOURNAL KEEPING

There are, though, a number of tricks you can teach yourself in order to free the writing self, and the essence of these is to give yourself permission to fail. The best place for such permission is a private place, and for that reason a writer's journal is an essential, likely to be the source of originality, ideas, experimentation, and growth.

A journal is an intimate, a friend that will accept you as you are. Pick a notebook you like the look of, one you feel comfortable with, as you would pick a friend. I find a bound blank book too elegant to live up to, preferring instead a loose-leaf because I write my journal mainly at the computer and can stick anything in at the flip of a three-hole punch. But you can glue scribbled napkins into a spiral, too.

Keep the journal regularly, at least at first. It doesn't matter what you write and it doesn't matter very much how much, but it does matter that you make a steady habit of the writing. Keeping a journal regularly will put you in the habit of observing in words. If you know at dawn that you are committed to writing so many words before dusk, you will half-consciously tell the story of your day to yourself as you live it, finding a phrase to catch whatever catches your eye. When that habit is established, you'll begin to find that whatever invites your attention or sympathy, your anger or curiosity, may be the beginning of invention. *Whoever* catches your attention may be the beginning of a character.

Don't worry about being thorough. Your journal might consist of brief notes and bits of description only you can make sense of. F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*) used his journals to keep, among other things, snatches of overheard conversation and potential titles for short stories and novels. Many fiction writers use journals to jot down specific details about people, places, and things they observe and find intriguing. (See exercise 3 at the end of this

chapter.) Later, when you're writing fiction and attempting to bring to life a teenager or a city street or a tractor, it's useful to have a bank of striking details in your journal to draw on. Often one or two details about something will be enough to trigger a fuller memory about a place or a person or a situation.

But before the journal-keeping habit is developed, you may find that even a blank journal page has the awesome aspect of a void, and you may need some tricks of permission to let yourself start writing there. The playwright Maria Irene Fornes says that there are two of you: one who wants to write and one who doesn't. The one who wants to write had better keep tricking the one who doesn't. Or another way to think of this conflict is between right brain and left brain—the playful, detail-loving creator, and the linear critic. The critic is an absolutely essential part of the writing process. The trick is to shut him or her up until there is something to criticize.

THE GREAT JAPANESE FILM DIRECTOR AKIRA KUROSAWA said that to be an artist means never to avert your eyes. And that's the hardest thing, because we want to flinch. The artist must go into the white hot center of himself, and our impulse when we get there is to look away and avert our eyes.

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER

FREEWriting

Freewriting is a technique that allows you to take very literally the notion of getting something down on paper. It can be done whenever you want to write, or just to free up the writing self. The idea is to put

anything on paper and I mean anything, it doesn't matter as long as it's coming out of your head and the ends of your fingers, down onto the page. I wonder if, in improving, if this process gets me going better now than it did all those—however many years ago? I know my typing is getting worse, deteriorating even as we speak (are we speaking? to whom? IN what for? I love it when I hit the caps button by mistake, it makes me wonder whether there isn't something in the back or bottom of the brain that sez PAY ATTENTION now, which makes me think of a number of things, Freud and his slip of tongue, self-deception, the myriad way it operates in everybody's life, not everybody's but in my own exp. I like Aunt Ch. mourning for the dead cats whenever she hasn't got her way and can't disconnect one kind of sadness from another, I wonder if we ever disconnect kinds of sadness, if the first homesickness doesn't operate for everybody

the same way it does for me, grandma's house the site of it, the grass out the window and the dog rolling a tin pie plate under the willow tree, great heavy hunger in the belly, the empty weight of loss, loss, loss

That's freewriting. Its point is to keep going, and that is the only point. When the critic intrudes and tells you that what you're doing is awful, tell the critic to take a dive, or acknowledge her/him (*typing is getting worse*) and keep writing. If you work on a computer, try dimming the screen so you can't see what you're doing. At times, you might find it liberating to freewrite to music, random or selected. If you freewrite often, pretty soon you'll be bored with writing about how you don't feel like writing (though that is as good a subject as any; the subject is of no importance and neither is the quality of the writing) and you will find your mind and your phrases running on things that interest you. Fine. Freewriting is the literary equivalent of scales at the piano or a short gym workout. All that matters is that you do it. The verbal muscles will develop of their own accord.

Though freewriting is mere technique, it can affect the freedom of the content. Many writers feel themselves to be *an instrument through which*, rather than a *creator of*, and whether you think of this possibility as humble or holy, it is worth finding out what you say when you aren't monitoring yourself. Fiction is written not so much to inform as to find out, and if you force yourself into a mode of informing when you haven't yet found out, you're likely to end up pontificating or lying some other way.

In *Becoming a Writer*, a book that only half-facetiously claims to do what teachers of writing claim cannot be done—to teach genius—Dorothea Brande suggests that the way to begin is not with an idea or a form at all, but with an unlocking of your thoughts on paper. She advises that you rise each day and go directly to your desk (if you have to have coffee, put it in a thermos the night before) and begin writing whatever comes to mind, before you are quite awake, before you have read anything or talked to anyone, before reason has begun to take over from the dream-functioning of your brain. Write for twenty or thirty minutes and then put away what you have written without reading it over. After a week or two of this, pick an additional time during the day when you can salvage a half hour or so to write, and when that time arrives, write, even if you “must climb out over the heads of your friends” to do it. It doesn't matter what you write. What does matter is that you develop the habit of beginning to write the moment you sit down to do so.

If you haven't surprised yourself, you haven't written.

EUDORA WELTY

EXERCISES

The American Dairy Association used to use the tagline “You never outgrow your need for milk.” If you’re a writer, the same might be said of exercises. Exercises, or prompts as they are sometimes called, can be helpful for all writers. They help you get started, and they can give you focus—whether you are writing in your journal, doing those early morning pages Brande suggests, sneaking in a bit of freewriting during the day, or trying to get to that next scene in a story.

Exercises are a way to tap your unconscious. The process of writing does not proceed clearly and obviously from point A to point B, but if you’ve been thinking about your story—sleeping on it, puzzling over it, mulling about it, working on a draft—you may well have a solution waiting for you in your unconscious. Stories do not begin with ideas or themes or outlines, so much as with images and obsessions, and they continue to be built by exploring those images and obsessions. Seemingly unrelated prompts can help you break loose that next page. Need to find out what should happen next with Sebastian and Nelly? Here’s an exercise: Write two pages about the two of them trying to decide what television show to watch. Pretty soon Sebastian and Nelly are fighting about the remote control, but more than that they’re fighting about how Sebastian is remote and always wants control. Nelly is telling him that their relationship has got to change and he’s acting like he doesn’t have a clue. And you are off and running.

Exercises can be shared. Early in their careers, two young writers, JoAnn Beard and Mary Allen, were splitting a job editing a physics journal at the University of Iowa. One worked one day, one the next. They shared a desk, but were never there at the same time. They decided to start leaving each other a daily writing exercise in the top drawer. “For tomorrow, write a scene that takes place in a car.” Or, “Write a scene in which one character is lying.” The exercises kept them going, broke the isolation of writing, tapped them into the material they would have written about anyway, and before too terribly long they each had a first book—Allen’s *Rooms of Heaven* and Beard’s *The Boys of My Youth*.

Gymnasts practice. Pianists practice. Artists sketch. Why shouldn’t writers practice? Exercises are a way to exercise your skills, develop them, hone them, make them stronger. The novelist Stanley Elkin talked about sharing an office at the University of Illinois with his friend and fellow writer William H. Gass and being surprised to see Gass practicing sentences on the other side of the room.

Each chapter of *Writing Fiction* will end with some exercises designed to help you get started and move further into the issues discussed along the way. But don’t stop there. Go to a bookstore or library and look through exercise collections like *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter. Collect exercises as you might collect possible names for characters or words you like the sound of. Develop your own exercises. Ask writing friends what has worked for them. Note the ones that work for you and vary them and return to them again and again. Exercise. Exercise daily.

THE COMPUTER

I think it's important for a writer to try a pencil from time to time so as not to lose the knack of writing by hand, of jotting at the park or the beach without any source of energy but your own hand and mind.

But for most writers, a computer is a great aid to spontaneity. Freewriting flows more freely on a computer. The knowledge that you can so easily delete makes it easier to quiet the internal critic and put down whatever comes. Turn down the screen or ignore it, stare out the window into middle space. You can follow the thread of your thought without a pause.

However, when you're rereading what you've written, you might want to step away from the screen. Scrolling through your work on a computer screen is not the same as reading it on a printed page—it's too easy to overlook problems. Most writers print out hard copies of their drafts and go over them with pen in hand, taking notes and making changes. This allows them to read more carefully, to easily jump back and skip ahead, to get a better sense of the story's pacing, to notice clunky sentences and weak word choices. Many writers will also read their drafts aloud, either to themselves or to a helpful critic, a process that will make the story's weaknesses even clearer. These revision strategies—and more—will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

Computers are a wonderful tool, but they can't do everything.

THE CRITIC: A CAUTION

The cautionary note that needs to be sounded regarding all the techniques and technology that free you to write is that the critic is absolutely essential afterward. The revising process is continuous and begins as soon as you choose to let your critic in. Freedrafting allows you to create before you criticize, to do the essential play before the essential work. Don't forget the essential work. The computer lets you write a lot because you can so easily cut. Don't forget to do so.

I WANT HARD STORIES, I DEMAND THEM from myself. Hard stories are worth the difficulty. It seems to me the only way I have forgiven anything, understood anything, is through that process of opening up to my own terror and pain and reexamining it, re-creating it in the story, and making it something different, making it meaningful—even if the meaning is only in the act of the telling.

DOROTHY ALLISON

CHOOSING A SUBJECT

Some writers are lucky enough never to be faced with the problem of choosing a subject. The world presents itself to them in terms of conflict, crisis, and resolution. Ideas for stories pop into their heads day after day; their only difficulty is choosing among them. In fact, the habit of mind that produces stories is a habit and can be cultivated, so that the more and the longer you write, the less likely you are to run out of ideas.

But sooner or later you may find yourself faced with the desire (or the deadline necessity) to write a story when your mind is a blank. The sour and untrue impulse crosses your thoughts: Nothing has ever happened to me. The task you face then is to recognize among all the paraphernalia of your mind a situation, idea, perception, or character that you can turn into a story.

Some teachers and critics advise beginning writers to write only from their personal experience, but I feel that this is a misleading and demeaning rule. If your imagination never gets beyond your age group or off campus, never tackles issues larger than dormitory life, then you are severely underestimating the range of your imagination. It is certainly true that you must draw on your own experience (including your experience of the shape of sentences). But the trick is to identify what is interesting, unique, and original in that experience (including your experience of the shape of sentences) that will therefore surprise and attract the reader.

The kind of "writing what you know" that is *least* likely to produce good fiction is trying to tell just exactly what happened to you at such and such a time. Probably all good fiction is "autobiographical" in some way, but the awful or hilarious or tragic thing you went through may offer as many problems as possibilities when you start to turn it into fiction. To the extent you want to capture "what really happened," you remove your focus from what will work as narrative. Young writers, offended by being told that a piece is unconvincing, often defend themselves by declaring that *it really happened*. But credibility in words has almost nothing to do with fact. Aristotle went so far as to say that a "probable impossibility" made a better story than an "improbable possibility," meaning that a skillful author can sell us glass mountains, UFOs, and hobbits, whereas a less skilled writer may not be able to convince us that Mary Lou has a crush on Sam.

A SHORT STORY IS A WRITER'S WAY OF thinking through experience.... Journalism aims at accuracy, but fiction's aim is truth. The writer distorts reality in the interest of a larger truth.

JOHN L'HEUREUX

The first step toward using autobiography in fiction is to accept this: Words are not experience. Even the most factual account of a personal experience involves choices and interpretations—your sister’s recollection of the same event might be entirely different. If you are writing a memoir or personal essay, then it is important to maintain a basis in fact because, as Annie Dillard says, “that is the convention and the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader.” But between fiction writer and reader it is the revelation of meaning through the creation of character, the vividness of scene, the effect of action that take priority over ordinary veracity. The test of this other truth is at once spiritual and visceral; its validity has nothing to do with whether such things did, or could, occur. Lorrie Moore says:

... [T]he proper relationship of a writer to his or her own life is similar to a cook with a cupboard. What the cook makes from the cupboard is not the same thing as what’s in the cupboard...

Dorothy Allison strives to tell “the emotional truth of people’s lives, not necessarily the historical truth.”

Good. Now: What was it about this experience that made it matter to you? Try writing a *very* brief summary of what happened—no more than a hundred words. What kind of story might this be? Can the raw material of incident, accident, and choice be reshaped, plumped up, pared to the bone, refreshed, differently spiced? You experienced whatever it was chronologically—but is that the best way to bring its meaning out? Perhaps you experienced it over a period of months or years; what are the *fewest* scenes in the *least* amount of time that could contain the action? If “you” are at the center of the action, then “you” must be thoroughly characterized, and that may be difficult. Can you augment some revealing aspect of yourself, change yourself so you are forced to see anew, even make someone else altogether the central character? Use some of the suggestions in this chapter. Try freewriting moments from your memory in no particular order. Or freewrite the last scene first. Describe a place and exaggerate the description: if it’s cold, make it murderously cold; if messy, then a disastrous mess. Describe the central character and be at least partly unflattering. All of these are devices to put some distance between you and raw experience so you can begin to shape the different thing that fiction is.

Writer Eudora Welty has suggested writing what you *don’t* know about what you know—that is, exploring aspects of experience that remain puzzling or painful. In *Making Shapely Fiction*, Jerome Stern urges a broad interpretation of “writing what you know,” recognizing that “the idea of *you* is complex in itself... your self is made of many selves... not only persons you once were, but also persons you have tried to be, persons you have avoided being, and persons you fear you might be.” John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, argues that “nothing can be more limiting to the imagination” than the advice that you write about what you know. He suggests instead that you “write the kind of story you know and like best.”

This is a useful idea, because the kind of story you know and like best has also taught you something about the way such stories are told, how they are shaped, what kind of surprise, conflict, and change they involve. Many beginning writers who are not yet avid readers have learned from television more than they realize about structure, the way characters behave and talk, how a joke is arranged, how a lie is revealed, and so forth. The trouble is that if you learn fiction from television, or if the kind of story you know and like best is genre fiction—science fiction, fantasy, romance, mystery—you may have learned about technique without having learned anything about the unique contribution you can make to such a story. The result is that you end up writing imitation soap opera or space odyssey, second-rate somebody else instead of first-rate you.

The essential thing is that you write about something you really care about, and the first step is to find out what that is. Playwright Claudia Johnson advises her students to identify their real concerns by making a “menu” of them. Pick the big emotions and make lists in your journal: *What makes you angry? What are you afraid of? What do you want? What hurts?* Or consider the crucial turning points of your life: *What really changed you? Who really changed you?* Those will be the areas to look to for stories, whether or not those stories are autobiographical. Novelist Ron Carlson says, “I always write from my own experiences, whether I’ve had them or not.”

Another journal idea is to jot down the facts of the first seven years of your life under several categories: *Events, People, Your Self, Inner Life, Characteristic Things*. What from those first seven years still occupies your mind? Underline or highlight the items on your page(s) that you aren’t done with yet. Those items are clues to your concerns and a possible source of storytelling.

A related device for your journal might be borrowed from the *Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagun. A courtesan in tenth-century Japan, she kept a diary of the goings-on at court and concealed it in her wooden pillow—hence *pillow book*. Sei Shonagun made lists under various categories of specific, often quirky *Things*. This device is capable of endless variety and can reveal yourself to you as you find out what sort of things you want to list: *Things I wish had never been said. Red things. Things more embarrassing than nudity. Things to put off as long as possible. Things to die for. Acid things. Things that last only a day.*

Such devices may be necessary because identifying what we care about is not always easy. We are surrounded by a constant barrage of information, drama, ideas, and judgments offered to us live, printed, and electronically. It is so much easier to know what we ought to think and feel than what we actually do. Worthy authorities constantly exhort us to care about worthy causes, only a few of which really touch us, whereas what we care about at any given moment may seem trivial, self-conscious, or self-serving.

This, I think, is in large part the value of Brande’s first exercise, which forces you to write in the intuitively honest period of first light, when the half-sleeping brain is still dealing with its real concerns. Often what seems

unworthy is precisely the thing that contains a universal, and by catching it honestly, then stepping back from it, you may achieve the authorial distance that is an essential part of significance. (All you really care about this morning is how you'll look at the dance tonight? This is a trivial obsession that can hit anyone, at any age, anywhere. Write about it as honestly as you can. Now who else might have felt this way? Someone you hate? Someone remote in time from you? Look out: You're on your way to a story.)

FORGET *INSPIRATION*. HABIT IS MORE DEPENDABLE. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice.

OCTAVIA BUTLER

Eventually you will learn what sort of experience sparks ideas for your sort of story—and you may be astonished at how such experiences accumulate, as if your life were arranging itself to produce material for you. In the meantime, here are a half dozen suggestions for the kind of idea that may be fruitful.

The Dilemma, or Catch-22. You find yourself facing—or know someone who is facing—a situation that offers no solution. Any action taken would be painful and costly. You have no chance of solving this dilemma in real life, but you're a writer, and it costs nothing to explore it with imaginary people in an imaginary setting, even if the outcome is a tragic one. Some writers use newspaper stories to generate this sort of idea. The situation is there in the bland black and white of this morning's news. But who are these people, and how did they come to be in such a mess? Make it up, think it through.

The Incongruity. Something comes to your attention that is interesting precisely because you can't figure it out. It doesn't seem to make sense. Someone is breeding pigs in the backyard of a mansion. Who is it? Why is she doing it? Your inventing mind can find the motives and the meanings. An example from my own experience: Once when my phone was out of order, I went out very late at night to make a call from a public phone at a supermarket plaza. At something like two in the morning all the stores were closed but the plaza was not empty. There were three women there, one of them with a baby in a stroller. What were they doing there? It was several years before I figured out a possible answer, and that answer was a short story.

The Connection. You notice a striking similarity in two events, people, places, or periods that are fundamentally unlike. The more you explore the similarity, the more striking it becomes. My novel *The Buzzards* came from such a connection: The daughter of a famous politician was murdered, and I found myself in the position of comforting the dead girl's fiancé. At the same time I was writing lectures on the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. Two politicians, two murdered daughters—one in ancient Greece and one in contemporary America. The connection would not let go of me until I had thought it through and set it down.

The Memory. Certain people, places, and events stand out in your memory with an intensity beyond logic. There's no earthly reason you should remember the smell of Aunt K's rouge. It makes no sense that you still flush with shame at the thought of that ball you "borrowed" when you were in fourth grade. But for some reason these things are still vivid in your mind. That vividness can be explored, embellished, given form. Stephen Minot in *Three Genres* wisely advises, though, that if you are going to write from a memory, *it should be a memory more than a year old*. Otherwise you are likely to be unable to distinguish between what happened and what must happen in the story or between what is in your mind and what you have conveyed on the page.

The Transplant. You find yourself having to deal with a feeling that is either startlingly new to you or else obsessively old. You feel incapable of dealing with it. As a way of distancing yourself from that feeling and gaining some mastery over it, you write about the feeling as precisely as you can, but giving it to an imaginary someone in an imaginary situation. What situation other than your own would produce such a feeling? Who would be caught in that situation? Think it through.

The Revenge. An injustice has been done, and you are powerless to do anything about it. But you're not really, because you're a writer. Reproduce the situation with another set of characters, in other circumstances or another setting. Cast the outcome to suit yourself. Punish whomever you choose. Even if the story ends in a similar injustice, you have righted the wrong by enlisting your reader's sympathy on the side of right. (Dante was particularly good at this: He put his enemies in the inferno and his friends in paradise.) Remember too that as human beings we are intensely, sometimes obsessively, interested in our boredom, and you can take revenge against the things that bore you by making them absurd or funny on paper.

Keep Going

A story idea may come from any source at any time. You may not know you have an idea until you spot it in the random jottings of your journal. Once you've identified the idea, the process of thinking it through begins and doesn't end until you finish (or abandon) the story. Most writing is done between the mind and the hand, not between the hand and the page. It may take a fairly

competent typist about three hours to type a twelve-page story. It may take days or months to write it. It follows that, even when you are writing well, most of the time spent writing is not spent putting words on the page. If the story idea grabs hard hold of you, the process of thinking through may be involuntary, a gift. If not, you need to find the inner stillness that will allow you to develop your characters, get to know them, follow their actions in your mind—and it may take an effort of the will to find such stillness.

The metamorphosis of an idea into a story has many aspects, some deliberate and some mysterious. "Inspiration" is a real thing, a gift from the subconscious to the conscious mind. Still, perhaps influenced by the philosophy (although it was not always the practice) of the Beat authors, some new writers may feel that "forcing" words is aesthetically false—and yet few readers can tell which story "flowed" from the writer's pen and which was set down one hard-won word at a time. Toni Morrison has said that she will frequently rewrite a passage eight times, simply to create the impression of an unbroken, inspired flow; Cynthia Ozick often begins with "simple forcing" until the breakthrough comes, and so bears with the "fear and terror until I've pushed through to joy."

Over and over again, successful writers attest that unless they prepare the conscious mind with the habit of work, the gift does not come. Writing is mind-farming. You have to plow, plant, weed, and hope for growing weather. Why a seed turns into a plant is something you are never going to understand, and the only relevant response to it is gratitude. You may be proud, however, of having plowed.

Many writers besides Dorothea Brande have observed that it is ideal, having turned your story over in your mind, to write the first draft at one sitting, pushing on through the action to the conclusion, no matter how dissatisfied you are with this paragraph, that character, this phrasing, or that incident. There are two advantages to doing this. The first is that you are more likely to produce a coherent draft when you come to the desk in a single frame of mind, with a single vision of the whole, than when you write piecemeal, having altered ideas and moods. The second is that fast writing tends to make for fast pace in the story. It is always easier, later, to add and develop than it is to sharpen the pace. If you are the sort of writer who stays on page one for days, shoving commas around and combing the thesaurus for a word with slightly better connotations, then you should probably force yourself to try this method (more than once). A note of caution, though: If you write a draft at one sitting, it will not be the draft you want to show anyone, so schedule the sitting well in advance of whatever deadline you may have.

It may happen that as you write, the story will take off in some direction totally other than you intended. You thought you knew where you were going and now you don't. You may find that although you are doing precisely what you had in mind, it doesn't work—Brian Moore calls this "the place where the story gets sick," and often found he had to retrace his steps from an unlikely plot turn or unnatural character action. At such times, the story needs more imaginative mulching before it will bear fruit. Or you may find, simply, that your stamina gives out, and that though you have practiced every writerly virtue known, you're stuck. You have writer's block.

“Writer’s block” is not so popular a term as it was a few years ago—sometimes writers can be sensitive even to their own clichés. But it may also be that writers began to understand and accept their difficulties. Sometimes the process seems to require working yourself into a muddle and past the muddle to despair. When you’re writing, this feels terrible. You sit spinning your wheels, digging deeper and deeper into the mental muck. You decide you are going to trash the whole thing and walk away from it—only you can’t, and you keep going back to it like a tongue to an aching tooth. Or you decide you are going to sit there until you bludgeon it into shape—and as long as you sit there it remains recalcitrant. W. H. Auden observed that the hardest part of writing is not knowing whether you are procrastinating or must wait for the words to come.

“What’s called writer’s block,” claims novelist Tom Wolfe, “is almost always ordinary fear.” Indeed, whenever I ask a group of writers what they find most difficult, a significant number answer that they feel they aren’t good enough, that the empty page intimidates them, that they are in some way afraid. Many complain of their own laziness, but laziness, like money, doesn’t really exist except to represent something else—in this case fear, severe self-judgment, or what Natalie Goldberg calls “the cycle of guilt, avoidance, and pressure.”

I know a newspaper editor who says that writer’s block always represents a lack of information. I thought this inapplicable to fiction until I noticed that I was mainly frustrated when I didn’t know enough about my characters, the scene, or the action—when I had not gone to the imaginative depth where information lies.

Encouragement comes from the poet William Stafford, who advised his students always to write to their lowest standard. Somebody always corrected him: “You mean your highest standard.” No, he meant your lowest standard. Jean Cocteau’s editor gave him the same advice. “The thought of having to produce a masterpiece is giving you writer’s cramp. You’re paralysed at the sight of a blank sheet of paper. So begin any old way. Write: ‘One winter evening...’” In *On Writer’s Block: A New Approach to Creativity*, Victoria Nelson points out that “there is an almost mathematical ratio between soaring, grandiose ambition... and severe creative block.” More writers prostitute themselves “up” than “down”; more are false in the determination to write great literature than to throw off a romance.

A rough draft is rough; that’s its nature. Let it be rough. Think of it as making clay. The molding and the gloss come later.

And remember: Writing is easy. Not writing is hard.

A Word About Theme

The process of discovering, choosing, and revealing the theme of your story begins as early as a first freewrite and continues, probably, beyond publication. The theme is what your story is about and what you think about it, its core and the spin you put on it. John Gardner points out that theme “is not

imposed on the story but evoked from within it—initially an intuitive but finally an intellectual act on the part of the writer.”

What your story has to say will gradually reveal itself to you and to your reader through every choice you as a writer make—the actions, characters, setting, dialogue, objects, pace, metaphors and symbols, viewpoint, atmosphere, style, even syntax and punctuation, and even in some cases typography.

Because of the comprehensive nature of theme, I have placed the discussion of it in Chapter 9 (“Play It Again, Sam: Revision”) after the individual story elements have been addressed. But this is not entirely satisfactory, since each of those elements contributes to the theme as it unfolds. You may want to skip ahead and take a look at that chapter, or you may want to anticipate the issue by asking at every stage of your manuscript: What really interests me about this? How does this (image, character, dialogue, place, . . .) reveal what I care about? What connections do I see between one image and another? How can I strengthen those connections? Am I saying what I really mean, telling my truth about it?

Reading as Writers

Learning to read as a writer involves focusing on craft, the choices and the techniques of the author. In *On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner urges young writers to read “the way a young architect looks at a building, or a medical student watches an operation, both devotedly, hoping to learn from a master, and critically alert for any possible mistake.” “Bad poets imitate; good poets steal,” was T. S. Eliot’s advice.

Ask yourself as you read: What is memorable, effective, moving? Reread, if possible, watching for the techniques that produced those reactions in you. *Why did the author choose to begin at this point? Why did s/he make this choice of imagery, setting, ending? What gives this scene its tension; what makes me feel sympathetic?* You can also learn from stories that don’t personally move you—how would you have handled the same material, and what would have changed with that approach? Be greedy from your own viewpoint as an author: *What, from this story, can I learn/imitate/steal?*

About the Writing Workshop

At some point in the process of writing your story, you may find it useful to submit your story to a writing workshop to be critiqued, and if you are enrolled in a fiction-writing class, workshopping your stories may be required. These days nearly every higher learning institution in America offers some form of workshop-based creative writing course or program. The writer’s workshop is so commonplace now that it has given rise to a new verb—“to workshop.”

To workshop is much more than to discuss. It implies a commitment on the part of everyone concerned to give close attention to work that is embryonic.

The atmosphere of such a group is intense and personal in a way that other college classes are not, since a major text of the course is also the raw effort of its participants. At the same time, unlike the classic model of the artist's atelier or the music conservatory, the instruction is assumed to come largely from the group rather than from a single master of technical expertise. Thus the workshop represents a democratization of both the material for study and its teaching.

Although workshops inevitably vary, a basic pattern has evolved in which twelve to twenty students are led by an instructor who is also a published writer. The students take turns writing and distributing stories, which the others read and critique. What is sought in such a group is mutual goodwill—the desire to make the story under scrutiny the best that it can be—together with an agreed-to toughness on the part of writer and readers.

This sounds simple enough, but as with all democratization, the perceived danger is that the process will flatten out the story's edge and originality, and that the result will be a homogenized "revision by committee." The danger is partly real and deserves attention. Partly, such fear masks protectiveness toward the image—solitary, remote, romantic—of the writer's life.

But those who have taken part in the process tend to champion it. John Gardner asserted that not only could writing be taught but that "writing ability is mainly a product of good teaching supported by a deep-down love of writing." John Irving says of his instructors, "They clearly saved me valuable time... [and] time is precious for a young writer." Isabel Allende says, "The process is lonely, but the response connects you with the world."

There are, I think, three questions about the workshop endeavor that have to be asked: Is it good for the most startlingly talented, those who will go on to "become" published professional writers? Is it good for the majority who will not publish but will instead become (as some of my most gifted students have) restaurateurs, photographers, technical writers, high school teachers? And is it good for literature and literacy generally to have students of all fields struggle toward this play and this craft? My answer must in all cases be a vigorous *yes*. The workshop aids both the vocation and the avocation. Writing is a solitary struggle, and from the beginning, writers have sought relief in the company and understanding of other writers. At its best the workshop provides an intellectual, emotional, and social (and some argue a spiritual) discipline. For the potential professionals there is the important focus on craft; course credit is a form of early pay-for-writing; deadlines help you find the time and discipline to do what you really want to; and above all, the workshop offers attention in an area where attention is hard to command. For those who will not be professional writers, a course in writing fiction can be a valuable part of a liberal arts education, making for better readers, better letters home, better company reports, and better private memoirs. For everyone, the workshop can help develop critical thinking, a respect for craft, and important social skills.

There are also some pitfalls in the process: that students will develop unrealistic expectations of their chances in a chancy profession; that they will

dull or provincialize their talents by trying to please the teacher or the group; that they will be buoyed into self-satisfaction by too-lavish praise or that they will be crushed by too-harsh criticism. On the other hand, workshop peers recognize and revere originality, vividness, and truth at least as often as professional critics. Hard work counts for more than anyone but writers realize, and facility with the language can be learned out of obsessive attention to it. The driven desire is no guarantee of talent, but it is an annealing force. And amazing transformations can and do occur in the creative writing class. Sometimes young writers who exhibit only a propensity for cliché and the most hackneyed initial efforts make sudden, breathtaking progress. Sometimes the leap of imaginative capacity is inexplicable, like a sport of nature.

The appropriate atmosphere in which to foster this metamorphosis is a balance constructed of right-brain creative play and left-brain crafted language, and of obligations among readers, writers, and teachers. Of these obligations, a few seem to me worth noting.

HOW WORKSHOPS WORK

The most basic expectation is that the manuscript itself should be professionally presented—that is, double-spaced, with generous margins, proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In most workshops the content is left entirely to the writer, with no censorship of subject. The reader's obligation is to read the story twice, once for its sense and story, a second time to make marginal comments, observations, suggestions. A summarizing end note is usual and helpful. This should be done with the understanding—on the parts of both writer and reader—that the work at hand is by definition a work in progress. If it were finished, then there would be no reason to bring it into workshop. Workshop readers should school themselves to identify the successes that are in every story: the potential strength, the interesting subject matter, the pleasing shape, or the vivid detail.

It's my experience that the workshop itself proceeds most usefully to the writer if each discussion begins with a critically neutral description and interpretation of the story. This is important because workshoping can descend into a litany of *I like, I don't like*, and it's the responsibility of the first speaker to provide a coherent reading as a basis for discussion. It's often a good idea to begin with a detailed summary of the narrative action—useful because if class members understand the events of the story differently, or are unclear about what happens, this is important information for the author, a signal that she has not revealed what, or all, she meant. The interpretation might then address such questions as: *What kind of story is this? What defining choices do the characters face? What is its conflict-crisis-resolution structure? What is it about? What does it say about what it is about? How sympathetic should the reader feel with the main character? How does its imagery relate to its theme?*

Only after some such questions are addressed should the critique begin to deal with whether the story is successful in its effects. The first speaker should try to close with two or three questions that, in his/her opinion, the story raises, and invite the class to consider these. Most of the questions will be technical: *Is the point of view consistent, are the characters fully drawn, is the imagery vivid and specific?* But now and again it is well to pause and return to more substantive matters: *What's the spirit of this story, what is it trying to say, what does it make me feel?*

THE WRITER'S ROLE

For the writer, the obligations are more emotionally strenuous, but the rewards are great. The hardest part of being a writer in a workshop is to learn this: Be still, be greedy for suggestions, take everything in, and don't defend.

This is difficult because the story under discussion is still new and may feel highly personal. The author has a strong impulse to explain and plead. If the criticism is "This isn't clear," it's hard not to feel "You didn't read it right"—even if you understand that it is not up to the workshop to "get it" but up to the author to be clear. If the reader's complaint is "This isn't credible," it's very hard not to respond "But it really happened!"—even though you know perfectly well that credibility is a different sort of fish than fact, and that autobiography is irrelevant. There is also a self-preservative impulse to keep from changing the core of what you've done: "Don't they realize how much time and effort I've already put in?"

But only the author's attempt at complete receptivity will make the workshop work. The chances are that your first draft really does not say the most meaningful thing inherent in the story, and that most meaningful thing may announce itself sideways, in a detail, within parentheses, an afterthought, a slip. Somebody else may see the design before you do. Sometimes the best advice comes from the most surprising source. The thing you resist the hardest may be exactly what you need.

After the workshop, the writer's obligation alters slightly. It's important to take the written critiques and take them seriously, let them sink in with as good a will as you brought to the workshop. But part of the obligation is also not to let them sink in too far. Reject without regret whatever seems on reflection wrongheaded, dull, destructive, or irrelevant to your vision. It's just as important to be able to discriminate between helpful and unhelpful criticism as it is to be able to write. More often than not, the most useful criticism will simply confirm what you already suspected yourself. So listen to everything and receive all criticism as if it were golden. Then listen to yourself and toss the dross.

(For further discussion of giving and receiving workshop feedback, please see Chapter 9.)



Writing Exercises

Keep a journal for two weeks. Decide on a comfortable amount to write daily, and then determine not to let a day slide. To get started, refer to the journal suggestions in this chapter—freewriting, pages 4–5; the Dorothea Brande exercise, page 5; a menu of concerns, page 10; a review of your first seven years, page 10; and a set of *Pillow Book* lists, page 10. At the end of the two weeks, assess your efforts and decide what habit of journal keeping you can develop and stick to. A page a day? A paragraph a day? Three pages a week? Then do it. Probably at least once a day you have a thought worth putting into words, and sometimes it's better to write one sentence a day than to let the habit slide. Like exercise and piano practice, a journal is most useful when it's kept up regularly and frequently. If you pick an hour during which you write each day, no matter how much or how little, you may find yourself looking forward to, and saving things up for, that time.

In addition to keeping a journal, you might try some of these story triggers:

1. Sketch a floor plan of the first house or apartment, or a map of the first neighborhood, you remember. Place an X on the spots in the plan where significant events happened to you—the tree house from which you used to look into the neighbors' window, the kitchen in which you found out that your parents were going to divorce, and so forth. Write a tour of the house as if you were a guide, pointing out its features and its history. If a story starts to emerge from one of the settings, go with it.
2. Identify the kernel of a short story from your experience of one of the following:
 - ◆ an early memory
 - ◆ an unfounded fear
 - ◆ a scar
 - ◆ a bad haircut
 - ◆ yesterday
 - ◆ a sudden change in a relationship
 - ◆ the loss of a small object
 - ◆ conflict over a lesson you were taught or never taught
 - ◆ an experience you still do not fully understand

Freedraft a passage about it; then write the first page of the story.
3. Take your notebook and go to a place where you can observe people—a library, restaurant, bus station, wherever. Choose a few people and describe them in detail in your notebook. What are they wearing? What are they doing and why do you think they're doing it? If they are talking, can you overhear (or guess) what they're saying? What are they thinking?

Next, choose one character and invent a life for him or her. Write at least two pages. Where does s/he live? Work? What relationships does s/he have? Worries? Fears? Desires? Pleasures? Does this character have a secret? Do you find yourself beginning a story?

4. Have you ever worked as a carpenter, cabdriver, janitor, dentist, bar pianist, waiter, actor, film critic, drummer, teacher, coach, stockbroker, therapist, librarian, or mail carrier? Or maybe you have the inside dope on a job that a close friend or family member has had. Make a list of jobs you've had or of which you have secondhand knowledge of—no matter how odd or how mundane. Now list some incidents that happened at one or another of those jobs, then pick one incident and begin describing it. Don't limit yourself to what actually happened.
5. Everyone in class brings in a photograph, art print, postcard, or advertisement that suggests an intriguing situation. Put all the pictures on a table and have each class member choose one. Write for ten minutes through a pictured character's viewpoint, allowing yourself to discover the thread of a story. In small groups, show the picture, read your writing back to your small group, and together brainstorm possible directions for the story.