

This central act of giving is curiously neglected in most writing instruction. Otherwise people would have shared their writing—just given it to another human being for the sake of mutual pleasure—as often as they gave it to a teacher for evaluation and advice. For most people, however, the experience of just sharing what they have written is rare.

I'm embarrassed that it took me so long not just to understand the importance of sharing, but even to see it—to realize that there was something else useful you could do with a piece of writing besides getting feedback on it, namely just to give it: for your pleasure in giving and for their pleasure in reading. The reason it took me so long, I suspect, is that I am primarily an English teacher, and the reason I am beginning to notice sharing is that I am beginning to be a writer. Writers are more apt to understand writing as giving: "Here. Take it. Enjoy it. Thank me. (Pay me, if possible.) But I'm not interested right now in evaluation or criticism." English teachers, on the other hand, usually can't think of anything to do with a set of words except to formulate criticism of one sort or another—high criticism for works of great literature, low criticism for works of student writing. I suspect this is why English teachers so seldom write.

Before I could see the importance of just giving writing, I had to satisfy two earlier itches: the itch for more *safety* in writing; that is, to find more ways to write without giving it to any reader at all; and the itch for more *empiricism* in writing; that is, to find more ways to learn what really happens in real readers, not just get evaluation and advice from only one authority. With these itches satisfied, I could finally feel that deeper itch just to share.

Many pieces of weak writing suffer more from the writer's not having really consented, deep down, to *give* her meaning than from whatever lack of skill she may have. That same person can write with considerable power and skill when she doesn't hold back at all, when she isn't ambivalent about yielding, handing it over for free. When I think back over much of my writing—especially in college and graduate school—I can understand what was going on much more clearly now in terms of giving. At the time I simply experienced myself struggling to write well—and mostly not succeeding. Teachers could see that I tried hard—"tying yourself in knots" was how one teacher put it—and they could see that I had interesting insights I was trying to communicate, but

neither they nor I could figure out why it always came out so unclear. I remember one teacher who said, "Why do you have to complicate it? Why not write it down the way you first thought of it?" But it didn't seem to me that I was complicating things at all. Now, however, I can see—indeed I can go back and almost feel it—that my writing really was the product of a kind of complexifying process: a tug of war between my aboveboard eagerness to be a good student and my belowboard reluctance to *put out*—to give it to them. This ambivalence made a terrible wringer for my poor words and thoughts to go through before they got on paper. My writing didn't begin to escape from this maze till I finally tried to write a couple of articles for publication. I was no longer reluctant to give to my audience; in fact, I was driven by a considerable desire to make them take it whether they wanted to or not.

There are many ways to share. But unless you have an arena designated for it (or can easily publish what you write, for sharing is really a way to publish), sharing takes courage and assertiveness. It means going up to someone and saying, "Can I read you something I've written? I don't want feedback. I just want you to hear it." Sometimes that's not easy, no matter how good the friendship is. Perhaps you forgot to include it in the marriage vows: "To love, honor, and faithfully listen to all writing." Sharing is easiest if you can meet regularly with a group of three or more others for the purpose. It's a kind of celebration. You will find it a great relief, when you get used to it, not to worry about their reactions or think about feedback. Of course, you will get a few stray spontaneous reactions, as at a poetry reading or performance: a chuckle at one passage, hushed silence at another, yawns when your writing is opaque for too long. But the reactions aren't the point. The point is that you are heard. It opens up a door for you and somehow helps you think of more things to write.

Sharing also means sending off copies to friends who live far away, but there's a special power that comes from meeting face to face and reading out loud what you have written. You may find the reading out loud frightening, but it is crucial. For there is a deep and essential relationship between writing and the speaking voice. It's complex and mysterious, but one thing is clear: to write with clarity and power requires an essential act of taking full responsibility for your words—not hedging, holding back, being ambivalent. Reading your words out loud is a vivid outward act that

amplifies your sensation of responsibility for your words. That's why oaths and promises must be spoken out loud to work best. "Repeat after me. . . ." When you only make marks silently on paper and don't make noises with your throat, it is possible to withhold some piece of your self, to keep your fingers crossed behind your back.

Reading your words out loud is scary, and many people invariably mumble or read too softly or too fast. We shrink from such blatant showing of our wares. But that is just what helps most. Therefore when you share your writing, you need to give your listeners permission to interrupt and tell you if they cannot comfortably hear and understand your words—permission to make you *give* your words. Reading your words out loud is push-ups for the specific muscle used in taking responsibility for your words.

Here are some additional benefits of sharing. It's an easy way to learn about writing. When you hear someone read a piece every week or two, someone no better than you, and you see her come up with a passage that is terrific—but she's using the same old ingredients that she and you have been struggling with week after week—sometimes you learn more about how to improve your writing than you learn from clear explanations of what is wrong with it or good advice about how to fix it, or inspiring lectures on the seven essentials of good writing. And you don't have to talk about it. You are just listening and learning by ear. Matters of tone and voice are particularly hard to talk about or teach. They are best learned through hearing what you like and imitating it, and hearing what you don't like and getting rid of it.

Sometimes the sense of feasibility you get from sharing does more good than anything else. For what's been holding you back most is a deep sense that you couldn't possibly write something that actually *affected* someone. But then along comes that really good passage written by someone like you. It's not unbelievably good, indeed what's special is its believability: it's mixed in with other passages that are quite ordinary; it even has some obvious weaknesses. But it is so good that it makes you positively hungry to hear more, makes you wish you had written it, and then, finally, makes you realize that you *could* have written it. I love the bluntness with which I once heard this feeling privately expressed: "If that *nerd* can write something like that, so can I!"

Finally, sharing is perfect practice for giving and getting feed-

back. One of the main reasons readers find it difficult to give good feedback is that they worry too much about what feedback to give. They can't really hear or concentrate on the words. But sharing gives readers painless practice in just listening and enjoying what they hear and learning gradually to be confident of their reactions.

One of the main reasons writers find it difficult to benefit from feedback is that they are so nervous about giving to readers that they can't really hear or accept the feedback they get. But sharing helps them to learn to give their writing—scarey enough in itself—without the added burden of dealing with feedback. (I suspect that the fear you experience in reading your words out loud hinders your writing even when you are writing alone in a room and not feeling any fear.)

But if I talk too solemnly about fear, learning, and taking responsibility for your words, I will overshadow the main thing about sharing: that it is essentially social and enjoyable. It functions as a relief from the solitariness and effort of writing. People get to know each other and their ways of writing.

"Oh dear," you may say, "perhaps listeners in a sharing group will *like* something that's not good writing." If that worries you, you better watch out because it does happen. But I think about my two-year-old son Benjy who says "seep" for *sleep* and "pill" for *spill* and other such forms that make him unintelligible to most listeners. We understand him because we hear him constantly and therefore we hear *through* the externals of his language to the meanings and intentions that lie behind. Surely it is a help and not a hindrance in his learning to communicate better that he has one audience, anyway, where his words work.

For improving your writing you need at least some readers to be allies, persons who wholly *cooperate* in the communicative transaction. When you pass them the potatoes they don't just sit there and look at you holding the bowl with a look that says, "If I had wanted the potatoes I would have *asked* you for them." They take the bowl and thank you for it.

This chapter and the previous one on freewriting are two of this book's shorter chapters. They are short because the procedures they describe are so simple. But I believe you will improve your writing more through freewriting and sharing than through any other activities described in this book.

### **Dialogue in My Head**

"Do you want your reader to have to struggle to figure out what you are saying?"

"Damn right! I had to struggle to figure it out. Why shouldn't he? Besides, if it's too easy for him, he won't appreciate it."

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## The Direct Writing Process for Getting Words on Paper

The direct writing process is most useful if you don't have much time or if you have plenty to say about your topic. It's a kind of let's-get-this-thing-over-with writing process. I think of it for tasks like memos, reports, somewhat difficult letters, or essays where I don't want to engage in much new thinking. It's also a good approach if you are inexperienced or nervous about writing because it is simple and doesn't make as much of a mess as the other ways of getting words on paper I describe in Section II.

Unfortunately, its most common use will be for those situations that aren't supposed to happen but do: when you have to write something you *don't* yet understand, but you also don't have much time. The direct writing process may not always lead to a satisfactory piece of writing when you are in this fix, but it's the best approach I know.

The process is very simple. Just divide your available time in half. The first half is for fast writing without worrying about organization, language, correctness, or precision. The second half is for revising.

Start off by thinking carefully about the audience (if there is one) and the purpose for this piece of writing. Doing so may help you figure out exactly what you need to say. But if it doesn't, then let yourself put them out of mind. You may find that you get the most benefit from ignoring your audience and purpose at this early stage of the writing process. (See Section IV for more about dealing with your audience.)

In any event spend the first half of your time making yourself

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## Quick Revising

The point of quick revising is to turn out a clean, clear, professional final draft without taking as much time as you would need for major rethinking and reorganizing. It is a clean-and-polish operation, not a growing-and-transforming one. You specifically refrain from meddling with any deeper problems of organization or reconceptualization.

The best time to use quick revising is when the results don't matter too much. Perhaps you are not preparing a final, finished product but rather a draft for friends. It has to be clear, easy to read—if possible even a pleasure to read. But it needn't be your best work or your final thinking. Perhaps it's a draft for discussion or perhaps just a chance for people to learn your thinking about some matter as though you were writing a letter to them. Or perhaps you are just writing for yourself but you want to clean up your draft so that it will be easier and more productive to read when you come back to it.

But there is another situation when you can use quick revising and unfortunately it is the one when you are most likely to use it: an occasion that is *very* important when the writing *has* to work for an important audience, but you lack time. You can't afford to re-see, re-think, and re-write completely your raw writing in the amount of time you have left. Maybe it was your fault and now you are kicking yourself; maybe it was unavoidable. But either way you are stuck. It is 10:30 P.M. now and you have only ten pages of helter-skelter thinking on paper, you need an excellent, polished, full report by tomorrow morning, and you care very much how the

- Don't let yourself repeat or digress or get lost, but don't worry about the order of what you write, the wording, or about crossing out what you decide is wrong.
- Make sure you stop when your time is half gone and change to revising, even if you are not done.
- The direct writing process is most helpful when you don't have difficulty coming up with material or when you are working under a tight deadline.



you prove to yourself that you *can* get things written quickly and acceptably. The results may not be the very best you can do, but they work, they get you by. Once you've proved you can get the job done you will be more willing to use other processes for getting words down on paper and for revising—processes that make greater demands on your time and energy and emotions. And if writing is usually a great struggle, you have probably been thrown off balance many times by getting into too much chaos. The direct writing process is a way to allow a limited amount of chaos to occur in a very controlled fashion.

It's easiest to explain the direct writing process in terms of pragmatic writing: you are in a hurry, you know most of what you want to say, you aren't trying for much creativity or brilliance. But I also want to stress that the direct writing process can work well for very important pieces of writing and ones where you haven't yet worked out your thinking at all. But one condition is crucial: you must be confident that you'll have no trouble finding lots to say once you start writing. (Otherwise, use the open-ended or loop writing processes described in Section II.)

As I wrote many parts of this book, for example, I didn't have my thinking clear or worked out by any means, I couldn't have made an outline at gunpoint, and I cared deeply about the results. But I knew that there was lots of *stuff* there swirling around in my head ready to go down on paper. I used the direct process. I just wrote down everything that came to mind and went on to revise.

But if you want to use the direct writing process for important pieces of writing, you need plenty of time. You probably won't be able to get them the way you want them with just quick revising. You'll need thorough revising or revising with feedback (see Section III). For important writing I invariably spend more time revising than I do getting my thoughts down on paper the first time.

### **Main Steps in the Direct Writing Process**

- If you have a deadline, divide your total available time: half for raw writing, half for revising.
- Bring to mind your audience and purpose in writing but then go on to ignore them if that helps your raw writing.
- Write down as quickly as you can everything you can think of that pertains to your topic or theme.

into a better draft. It turns out I can just trundle through that pile of ingredients, slash out some words and sections, rearrange some bits, and end up with something quite usable. And quite often I discover in retrospect that my original "mistaken phrase" is really better than what I replaced it with: more lively or closer to what I end up saying.

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If you only have half an hour to write a memo, you have now forced yourself in fifteen minutes to cram down every hunch, insight, and train of thought that you think might belong in it. If you have only this evening to write a substantial report or paper, it is now 10:30 P.M., you have used up two or two and a half hours putting down as much as you can, and you only have two more hours to give to this thing. You must stop your raw writing now, even if you feel frustrated at not having written enough or figured out yet exactly what you mean to say. If you started out with no real understanding of your topic, you certainly won't feel satisfied with what is probably a complete mess at this point. You'll just have to accept the fact that of course you will do a poor job compared to what you could have done if you'd started yesterday. But what's more to the point now is to recognize that you'll do an even crummier job if you steal any of your revising time for more raw writing. Besides, you will have an opportunity during the revising process to figure out what you want to say—what all these ingredients add up to—and to add a few missing pieces. It's important to note that when I talk about revising in this book I mean something much more substantial than just tidying up your sentences.

So if your total time is half gone, stop now no matter how frustrated you are and change to the revising process. That means changing gears into an entirely different consciousness. You must transform yourself from a fast-and-loose-thinking person who is open to every whim and feeling into a ruthless, toughminded, rigorously logical editor. Since you are working under time pressure, you will probably use quick revising or cut-and-paste revising. (See the next chapter and Chapter 14.)

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Direct writing and quick revising are probably good processes to start with if you have an especially hard time writing. They help

times I jot the reminder on a separate piece of paper. When I write at the typewriter I often just put the reminder in caps inside double parentheses ((LIKE THIS)) in the middle of my sentence. Or I simply start a new line

#### LIKE THIS

and then start another new line to continue my old train of thought. But sometimes the intruding idea seems so important or fragile that I really want to go to work on it right away so I don't lose it. If so, I drop what I'm engaged in and start working on the new item. I know I can later recapture the original thought because I've already written part of it. The important point here is that what you produce during this first half of the writing cycle can be very fragmented and incoherent without any damage at all.

There is a small detail about the physical process of writing down words that I have found important. Gradually I have learned not to stop and cross out something I've just written when I change my mind. I just leave it there and write my new word or phrase on a new line. So my page is likely to have lots of passages that look like

Many of my pages

Still I don't mean that you should stop and rewrite every passage till you are happy with it.

This kind of appearance.

What is involved here is developing an increased tolerance for letting mistakes show. If you find yourself crumpling up your sheet of paper and throwing it away and starting with a new one every time you change your mind, you are really saying, "I must destroy all evidence of mistakes." Not quite so extreme is the person who scribbles over every mistake so avidly that not even the tail of the "y" is visible. Stopping to cross out mistakes doesn't just waste psychic energy, it distracts you from full concentration on what you are trying to say.

What's more, I've found that leaving mistakes uncrossed out somehow makes it easier for me to revise. When I cross out all my mistakes I end up with a *draft*. And a draft is hard to revise because it is a complete whole. But when I leave my first choices there littering my page along with some second and third choices, I don't have a draft, I just have a succession of ingredients. Often it is easier to whip that succession of ingredients into something usable than, as it were, to *undo* that completed draft and turn it

write down everything you can think of that might belong or pertain to your writing task: incidents that come to mind for your story, images for your poem, ideas and facts for your essay or report. Write fast. Don't waste any time or energy on how to organize it, what to start with, paragraphing, wording, spelling, grammar, or any other matters of presentation. Just get things down helter-skelter. If you can't find the right word just leave a blank. If you can't say it the way you want to say it, say it the wrong way. (If it makes you feel better, put a wavy line under those wrong bits to remind you to fix them.)\*

I'm not saying you must never pause in this writing. No need to make this a frantic process. Sometimes it is very fruitful to pause and return in your mind to some productive feeling or idea that you've lost. But don't stop to worry or criticize or correct what you've already written.

While doing this helter-skelter writing, don't allow too much digression. Follow your pencil where it leads, but when you suddenly realize, "Hey, this has nothing to do with what I want to write about," just stop, drop the whole thing, skip a line or two, and get yourself back onto some aspect of the topic or theme.

Similarly, don't allow too much repetition. As you write quickly, you may sometimes find yourself coming back to something you've already treated. Perhaps you are saying it better or in a better context the second or third time. But once you realize you've done it before, stop and go on to something else.

When you are trying to put down everything quickly, it often happens that a new or tangentially related thought comes to mind while you are just in the middle of some train of thought. Sometimes two or three new thoughts crowd in on you. This can be confusing: you don't want to interrupt what you are on, but you fear you'll forget the intruding thoughts if you don't write them down. I've found it helpful to note them without spending much time on them. I stop right at the moment they arrive—wherever I am in my writing—and jot down a couple of words or phrases to remind me of them, and then I continue on with what I am writing. Some-

\* An excerpt from a letter giving me feedback on an earlier draft: "I tried the direct writing process. Though it sounds simple enough, I . . . see now that in the past I've often interrupted the flow of writing by spending disproportionate time on spelling, punctuation, etc. I can spend hours on an opening paragraph stroking the words to death; then, if there's a deadline, have to rush through the remainder." (Joanne Turpin, 7/24/78.)

reader reacts to it. In such situations you have to contend with anxiety as well as lack of time. You need the discipline of the quick revising process. I will describe it here as though you are preparing a substantial piece of writing for tomorrow morning for an important audience because I want to stress the experience of battle conditions with live ammunition. (If it is a small job such as writing that memo in thirty minutes, you probably won't go through all the separate steps I describe below. You'll probably just stand up and stretch now after your fifteen minutes of raw writing, and use your remaining time to look with fresh eyes through what you've written, figure out what you really want to say, and just write out your final draft—perhaps using substantial portions of your raw writing unchanged.)

Quick revising is simple and minimal. A lot depends on having the right spirit: businesslike and detached. A certain ruthlessness is best of all. Not desperate-ruthless, "Oh God, this is *awful*, I've got to change *everything*," but breezy-ruthless, "Yes, this certainly does have some problems. I wish I could start over and get the whole thing right, but not this time. I guess I'll just have to put the best face on things." If you are too worried about what you wrote or too involved with it, you'll have to work overtime to get the right spirit. You need to stand outside yourself and be someone else.

First, if this piece is for an audience, think about who that audience is and what your purpose is in writing to it. You had the luxury of putting aside all thoughts of audience and purpose during the producing stage (if that helped you think and write better), but now you must keep them in mind as you make critical decisions in revising. Try to see your audience before you as you revise. It's no good ending up with a piece of writing that's good-in-general—whatever that means. You need something that is good for your purpose with your audience. (See Section IV, in particular Chapter 18, for more about audience in this regard.)

Next, read through all your raw writing and find the good pieces. When I do it, I just mark them with a line in the margin. Don't worry about the criteria for choosing them. It's fine to be intuitive. If the sentence or passage feels good for this purpose or seems important for this audience, mark it.

Next, figure out your single main point and arrange your best bits in the best order. It's easiest if you can figure out your main

point first. That gives you leverage for figuring and what order to put things in. But sometimes your main point refuses to reveal itself—the one thing you are really trying to *say* here, the point that sums up everything else. All your writing may be circling around or leading up to a main idea that you can't quite figure out yet. In such a dilemma, move on to the job of working out the best order for your good passages. That ordering process—that search for sequence and priorities—will often flush your main point out of hiding.

You can just put numbers in the margin next to the good bits to indicate the right order if your piece is short and comfortable for you. But if it is long or difficult you need to make an outline before you can really work out the best order. It helps most to make an outline consist of complete assertions with verbs—*thoughts*, not just *areas*.

And of course as you work out this order or outline you will think of things you left out—ideas or issues that belong in your final draft that weren't in your raw writing. You can now indicate each of them with a sentence.

If after all this—after getting, as it were, *all* your points and getting them in the right order—you still lack the most important idea or assertion that ties them all together into a unity; if you have connected all this stuff but you cannot find the single thought that pulls it all together, and of course this sometimes happens, you simply have to move on. You have a deadline. There is a good chance that your main idea or center of gravity will emerge later, and even if it doesn't you have other options.

The next step is to write out a clean-but-not-quite-final draft of the whole piece—excluding the very beginning. That is, don't write your first paragraph or section now unless it comes to you easily. Wait till you have a draft of the main body before deciding how to lead up to it—or whether it *needs* leading up to. How can you clearly or comfortably introduce something before you know precisely what it is you are introducing? So just begin this draft with your first definite point. Out of the blue. Start even with your second or third point if the first one raises confusing clouds of “how-do-I-get-started.”

Perhaps you can use the good passages almost as they are—copy them or use scissors—and only write transitional elements to get you from one to another. Or perhaps you need to write out most of

it fresh. But you can go fast because you have all your points in mind and in order, and probably you have a clearly stated, single main idea holding it all together.

If you don't yet know your single main point, there is a very good chance that it will come to you as you are writing this draft. The process of writing the real thing to the real audience will often drive you to say, "What I'm really trying to make clear to you is . . ." and *there* is your main point. This is especially likely to happen toward the end of your piece as you are trying to sum things up or say why all this is important or makes sense. When your main point emerges late in this way, you may have to go back and fiddle a bit with your structure. It is very common that the last paragraph you write, when you finally say exactly what you mean in the fewest words, is just what you need (with perhaps a minor adjustment) for your first paragraph.

On rare occasions you still won't be able to find your main point. You know this is a coherent train of thought, and you know you are saying something, but you cannot sum it up in one sentence. You are stuck and you now have to make some choices. You can open or close your piece with a clear admission that you haven't focused it yet. This is usually the most helpful strategy when you are writing for yourself. (Sometimes, in fact, stating your dilemma—as dilemma—as accurately as you can, serves to produce the solution.) Or you can just present your train of thought without any statement at all of a single main idea. Or you can try to trick the reader into a feeling of unity with a vague, waffling pseudo-summary. But this is dangerous. If a reader sees you waffling he is liable to be mad or contemptuous, and even if he is not conscious of what you are doing he is liable to be irritated. If it is important—for this audience and situation—to end up with a piece of writing that is genuinely unified and focused, there is nothing for it but radical surgery. Settle for the best idea you *can* find in your writing and make that your main point. Organize what goes with it and throw away everything else. This usually hurts because it means throwing away some of your best bits.

So now you have a draft and a clear statement of your main idea. Finally you can write what you need for an introductory paragraph or section. Almost certainly you need something that gives the reader a clear sense of your main point—where you are going. If you have been writing under the pressure of a tight deadline your

final draft will probably have some problems, and so this is no time for tricky strategies or leaving the reader in the dark. Subtlety is for when you can get everything just right.

This is also the time to make sure you have a satisfactory conclusion: a final passage that sums up everything you have said with the precision and complexity that is only possible now that the reader has read and understood all the details. For example you have to begin an essay for most readers with a general statement that is easy to understand, such as "I want to explain how atomic bombs work," but at the end you can sum up your point more quickly and precisely: "In short,  $E = mc^2$ ."

Now you have a draft of the whole thing that probably comes close to what you'll end up with. The next step is to change from writer-consciousness to reader-consciousness. For in writing that draft you were, obviously enough, functioning as a writer: a person trying to put down on paper what you had finally gotten clear in your own mind. Now you should read through this draft *as a reader*. The best way to do this is to read your draft *out loud*: you won't have to search for places that are unclear or awkward or lacking in life, you will *hear* them. If you are in an office or a library or some other place unsuitable for declaiming, you can get almost as much benefit by silently mouthing or whispering your draft as though you were speaking. If you put your fingers in your ears at the same time, you will actually hear your words good and loud. It is the *hearing* of your own words that serves to get you out of the writer-consciousness and into the audience-consciousness.

Finally, get rid of mistakes in grammar and usage. (For more about that process, see Chapter 15.)

Certain people on certain occasions can afford to collapse some of these steps together and type out their final, clean copy after they have settled on their main idea and numbered or outlined their best bits. But this means paying attention to spelling, grammar, and usage while you are engaged in trying to write clear language: focusing simultaneously on the pane of glass and on the scene beyond it. It's not a wise or efficient thing to do unless you are an exceptionally fluent and polished writer. Most people—and that includes myself—save time by waiting to the very end before worrying about mistakes in grammar and usage.

Even if you are writing informally for friends you must take care to get rid of these mistakes. Your friends may say, "Oh, who cares



about trivial details of correctness," but in fact most people are prejudiced, even if unconsciously, against writing flawed in this way. They are more apt to patronize your writing or take it less seriously or hold back from experiencing what you are saying if there are mistakes in mechanics.



In thinking about the whole process of quick revising, you should realize that the essential act is *cutting*. Learn to leave out everything that isn't already good or easily made good. Learn the pleasures of the knife. Learn to retreat, to cut your losses, to be chicken. Learn to say, "Yes, I *care* more about this passage than about any other, I'm involved in it, but for that very reason, I can't make it work right. Out it goes!" Of course you don't need to be so ruthless about cutting if you are writing something to share informally among friends or to save for yourself. You can retain sections that feel important but don't quite work or don't quite fit. You can let your piece be an interesting muddle organizationally or conceptually—*so long as it's not muddled in wording or sentences*. Friends are willing to ponder your not-quite-digested thinking so long as your sentences and paragraphs are clear and easy to understand.

When you have *lots* of time for revising you tend to finish with something longer than you had expected. The thing cooks and grows on its own and you have time to integrate that growth. But quick revising usually produces something shorter than you had expected. The reader should probably finish a bit startled: "Done already? This seems a bit skimpy. Still, everything here is well done. Actually, it's not too bad." Better to give your reader mild disappointment at a certain tight skimpiness than to bog him down in a mess so that he stops paying attention or even stops reading.

In the last analysis, the main thing for quick revising is to get into the right spirit. Be your brisk, kindly, British aunt who is also a nurse: "Yes. Not to worry. I know it's a mess. But we'll clean it up and make it presentable in no time. It won't be a work of art, ducks, but it'll do just fine."

### **Main Steps in Quick Revising**

- Try to step outside yourself and get into a spirit of pragmatic detachment. Emphasize cutting.
- Keep your audience and purpose clearly in mind.
- Mark the good passages.
- Figure out the main point.
- Put the good passages in order. Perhaps make an outline.
- Add pieces that are missing.
- Write out a draft—excluding the beginning.
- Write the beginning; make sure you have a suitable conclusion.
- Tighten and clarify by cutting. Reading your draft aloud will help you experience it from a reader's point of view.
- Get rid of mistakes in grammar and usage.

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## The Dangerous Method: Trying To Write It Right the First Time

There are obvious attractions to a writing process where you avoid the complications of the last two chapters and try to get your piece right the first time. You don't have to make such a mess with raw writing, you don't have to write in the dark without knowing where you are going, you don't have to engage in extensive revising—just a little tidying up, perhaps, at the end. No wonder most people instinctively try to write this way. Why keep on writing when you know something is wrong and will have to be changed? It feels obvious that you should stop and cross it out now and not go on to the next bit till you get this bit right.

If you want to use this one-step writing process, the main thing you must learn to do is what writers have traditionally been advised to do: get your meaning clear in your head *before* you start writing. (In effect you are stuck with two steps again: figure out your meaning, then write.)

There are lots of methods people use for figuring out their meaning before they write. Making an outline is probably the most common and versatile method. An outline, by its nature, almost forces you to figure out what you really mean. And because of its compressed visual form, it permits you to see your whole train of thought or narrative in one glance and thereby detect problems you miss when you go through your writing more slowly. (Remember that you are always moving more slowly through your writing than your reader will move: if you aren't actually writing you are constantly pausing to change or fix things.)

Outlining is most effective when you already know many of the

ideas or incidents or images you want to use in your writing and you are trying to clarify and organize them. If you don't yet know much of what you want to say you may find outlining of no use at all. Who hasn't had the dismal experience (as you to follow the teacher's orders and start with an outline) of sitting there trying to transform one uninteresting thought into an architecture of Roman numerals, capital letters, arabic numerals, and small letters.

The most exotic way of working things out in your head is exemplified by A. E. Housman's practice. He would (according to his account, anyway) put in mind his general idea or ingredients for a poem, then have a heavy ale for lunch, and then take a long sleepy walk. By the end of the walk his highly polished poem would be completely worked out in his head. Evidently he didn't have to think actively or manipulate his ingredients, he could just let the poem steam itself done in his warm beery consciousness. I have heard of a number of mathematicians and designers who employ a similar method: they put in mind all the elements they are struggling with and then take a nap, and when they wake up they often have the answer or the approach they need.

The point is that a deeper level of thinking can go on when you relinquish your conscious grip on your material. A kind of letting go is necessary for this deep cooking. Having a beer, taking a walk or a bus ride, taking a nap or a shower—these all serve some people as ways of letting go.

A more common form of getting your meaning clear before writing is simply to put off writing till you have had a chance to mull and ponder and chew on your topic for at least a few days—longer if possible. Many competent experienced writers never actually *start* writing about anything without first giving themselves plenty of time for this early simmering process.

Another way to get your meaning clear before you write is to have a conversation or discussion about the topic—better yet, perhaps, an argument. This permits you to try out various ideas, approaches, formulations. Thoughts mature, crucial distinctions emerge, precise terms come clear.

Yet another way to figure out what you mean before you write is to think as hard and as clearly as you can about the audience (if any) for whom this piece is intended and the effect you want your words to have on it. Bring your readers into your presence by

seeing them clearly in your mind. And as for purpose, don't settle for "I want my words to work." Visualize specifically *what* you want the words to do: Make the readers see something? Make them feel certain emotions? Perform certain actions? Change their minds? This clear grasp of your audience and purpose may focus your thinking in such a way that you immediately realize just what you need to say and how you need to say it.

You can also focus your thinking quickly by simply increasing the pressure on yourself. Pressure cookers permit higher temperatures, quicker cooking. That is, one of the things that keeps us from figuring out what we really mean is having too many interesting choices of things we *could* mean. We can't make up our mind. Blocked writers suffer from too many ideas more often than from too few. But if you are standing up on a stage and have already been introduced and the audience is sitting there waiting for you to speak, you simply have to decide on something to say. It may not be the right decision, but it's a decision and you are off.

It turns out that you can easily produce this same pressure on yourself in writing, too. Just put off all work till 9 o'clock the night before the piece is required. After an hour of pondering, the pressure will be great enough that you finally have to decide what you are going to say and start. "Oh, hell, it's ten o'clock, I guess I'll choose this conclusion to build my report on. I don't like it. I'm not sure I even believe it. But I've got to write something." (When you start writing something way before the deadline, sometimes the lack of pressure allows the consequences of making the wrong decisions to feel worse than the consequences of not writing at all and so you don't write at all.)

You can also give yourself this pressure by not letting yourself revise at all. Just as you cannot revise when you are standing up giving a talk to an audience—this is it!—so, too, you cannot revise if you type onto the official application form or paint right onto expensive stretched canvas without any sketching. I think of my late colleague Willi Unsoeld. Where the rest of us wrote our official evaluations of students in draft form so we could make changes or corrections before giving them to secretaries to be typed (for these are photographed as part of the student's permanent transcript), Willi would roll the official form into his typewriter and type without error his one- or two-page evaluation of each student. He was a

mountain climber and believed in the importance of risk and performance under duress. He used the pressure of the audience and the moment to force his meaning clear and to transform an onerous task into a performance.



With this hymn to writing things right the first time, can I really go on to write a book which celebrates the opposite process? The fact is, I'm not going on to write the rest of the book. I've already written most of it now as I figure out this chapter. Having done so is what gives me the security to feel the virtues in what is nevertheless a dangerous method.

When the method works magically—that is, when you tap your deepest powers and cook everything completely before you write anything down—sometimes there is a finer integration and connectedness than you can achieve by revising. And even when it works only adequately—that is, when you merely settle on something that happens to be on the surface of your mind and then write it out—you may be able to write your piece more quickly and with less uncertainty than if you used two steps.

But it is a dangerous method because it puts more pressure on you and depends for its success on everything's running smoothly. If you are out of practice or insecure or just a bit off your form, you can take longer trying to get something right the first time than you would have needed for writing roughly and then revising. Indeed, the method often fails outright. That is, you can sit there and think and stare into space, try to make an outline, perhaps try beer and naps and walks, and still not figure out what you want to say—or even *anything* good to say. That need to get it right prevents the ingredients in your head from cooking, developing, progressing. You are at G, you are looking for Z, but your eagerness for Z prevents P, Q, and R from occurring to you since they are so different from Z.

By this time you have wasted most of the time you had available for writing this thing, you feel there is something the matter with you ("Everyone *else* can figure out what to say by making an outline!"), and so you either settle on something obvious and uninteresting or you fumble your way through the whole piece of writing without ever really deciding what you mean.

Even when you do manage to decide on your meaning before you start writing and you feel satisfied with it ("Yes, that's what I want to say"), sticking with that meaning as you write stops all creativity and the generation of new ideas. You have settled for what you already know and understand. You have locked yourself into duller thinking than you are capable of; indeed, you have virtually ruled out your best thinking. When you see a piece of really vacuous writing, you can be almost certain that it was the result of someone's feeling she had to figure out her thesis before starting to write and then stick to it at all costs. It's only sensible to try to write things right the first time if you know you already have terrific insights.

There's one more danger. Trying to write things right usually means writing very slowly and carefully. Long pauses between sentences and paragraphs to make sure of your bearings. This often leads to overwriting and overintricacy. You have too much time to work up clever turns of phrase and cunning complexities. Writing slowly and carefully, you also invest too much love and effort into that draft—after all, those intricacies *are* clever—so it becomes too hard to throw those cute gems into the garbage. Thus, odd as it may sound, trying to write it right the first time not only increases the danger of dull writing, it also increases the danger of writing that is cloyingly precious.

But if you let yourself write things *wrong* the first time—perhaps even the second or third time too—something wonderful happens: when you feel a story or an idea in mind but can't quite get a hold of it, you discover that by just starting to write and forcing yourself to keep on, you eventually find what you are looking for. And you didn't even know what you were looking for. You discover you can write almost anything you want to write. You get braver. Trying to get it right the first time, on the other hand, often makes people timid—less willing even to *try* writing things—because it often leads them to the experience of struggling and getting stuck and finally giving up with nothing to show for their efforts. The need to get things right the first time, I suspect, is often the culprit in the case of people who want to write but don't do so or stop doing so. I certainly wouldn't have gone through two years of total inability to write if I hadn't been trapped by the dangerous method.

## Advice

- At *some* point before you finish revising any piece of writing, you should figure out and state clearly for yourself exactly what you are trying to say. In one sentence. (In the case of poetry or fiction it may not be your meaning or message that you must make clear to yourself—perhaps your piece does not have a meaning or message—but rather your plan or what your piece is about or what effect you are trying to have.) If you want to make your writing as good as possible—to tap your full range of insights and perceptions—it's usually better not to *start* with this exact conception of your meaning or goal but instead to let it emerge as you are writing or force it to emerge as you revise. If, however, your main goal is to save time and simplify the writing process, it may help to crystalize your meaning before you start writing. What's important to remember is that getting your meaning clear in advance is a simplification that only simplifies when you can do it quickly and well. Otherwise it complicates your efforts.

- Therefore it is probably worthwhile practicing methods for getting your meaning clear in advance. Outlining, thinking about your audience, and putting yourself under pressure are good methods when you already have a lot of ingredients in mind. If you are still pretty blank, a nap, mulling it over, or a discussion is probably more effective.

- One good way of learning to work out your meaning in advance is just go give it a quick try whenever you have to write anything. But don't insist on success or use up too much time on the effort.

- But when you are writing small pieces that aren't too important (as in the case of some memos, letters, reports, and abstracts) try *forcing* yourself to get your meaning clear before you start. These are just the kinds of writing where speed and ease of writing are more important than achieving the highest quality. You will be grateful if you can learn to write memos and reports and letters by just closing your eyes for a moment or jotting down a quick outline and then whipping them off pretty much as they belong. You have no choice but to master the dangerous method if you have to write essay exams or write letters by dictation.

- The best way to make an outline for nonfiction writing has two stages. First write down all the ideas you can think of in whatever



sequence they occur to you. (If your piece calls for careful or complex thinking, force yourself to write each idea in the form of a full sentence with a verb. A mere word or phrase—"outlines" or "importance of outlines"—doesn't clarify your thinking as much as a sentence: "Outlines are important." You can clarify your thinking even more by insisting on an *action* verb: "Outlines *organize* your thinking.") Second, look through all these sentences and figure out your main idea—what you really want to say. Then arrange the sentences so they form a clear sequence—so they "tell a story." You may have to add a couple of points to make your sequence complete; and throw a couple away to get rid of some kinks in your sequence. Now you know just what you are saying and your order for saying it.

- When you try to write something right the first time, don't try to get it *absolutely* right. You can get the job done quicker and also avoid preciousness and overwriting if you give yourself some leeway about how to begin and about wording and phrasing throughout. That is, don't try to write your opening sentence or paragraph unless it comes to you immediately just right. You can waste an enormous amount of time trying to find a good opening, and it will probably need to be changed by the time you are done. Just skip some space at the beginning and start right in with the main body of what you are writing so you can come back later and write your opening when it will be much easier. And as you write, allow yourself to fumble a bit in your wording, try one phrase and then another, and don't insist that it's right before you put it down. You'll write more quickly and naturally if you are not always struggling for the exact word or phrase. When you finish you will be able to polish your piece very quickly by just going back through it once and crossing out the wrong words and occasionally writing in a new one. Your final language will be more lively and direct and you will have saved time.

- You can probably sense if you are one of those people who have a knack—or a potential knack—for the more magical kinds of cooking in their heads. If you are such a person you should work to develop and exploit your gift so you can use it even on creative and important pieces of writing.

- You might think that figuring out your meaning before you write would be especially helpful for inexperienced or unskilled writers since it gives so much security and confidence to have that

outline in hand as you start to write. But really, only experienced pros can use this approach reliably. Only pros can count on getting life and creativity into those outlines or naps or sleepy walks. When you see a pro sitting there at the desk staring into space not writing a word, you can probably trust that she is engaged in creative, productive and efficient work. But if you see any of the rest of us sitting there like that, you'd be doing us a favor if you tapped us on the shoulder and said, "Get your pencil moving, Mac."

for eventually I hope to turn the subject into a different kind of travel book about the Middle East when I'm able to take another trip. Trying to explain what happened to writing friends, I described the process as the complete opposite of the traditional way of doing a piece; that is, standing back far enough to get an objective look at the material. In Open-Ended Writing, when I arrived at that first center, it was like standing in the middle of a circle, looking out and not being able to see the whole thing, but feeling quite excited about what I might see next if I turned just a bit more. What a different way to look at a subject. It's a bit scary too. Must be how a sculptor feels when he first starts to chip away.

JOANNE TURPIN, 7/24/78

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After you have your vision of your final piece and after you have worked out that vision in a new draft—perhaps starting with an outline—you need of course to revise and polish your way to your final draft. Sometimes the open-ended writing process yields a draft that needs little revising, sometimes lots. (See Section III for options in revising.)

### Main Steps in the Open-ended Writing Process

- Write for fifteen or twenty minutes without stopping. Start with whatever comes first to mind or perhaps with some particular topic you've been wanting to write about. But make sure to let the writing go wherever it wants to go.
- Pause and find the center or focus or main point in what you wrote. Write it down in a sentence.
- Use that focusing sentence for a new burst of nonstop writing. Again, let the writing go wherever it wants to go. Invite yourself gradually or suddenly to lose sight of whatever you started with.
- Again, pause and focus and write down the focusing sentence.
- Keep up this alternating cycle till you get to the piece of writing that is in you that wants to get written.
- Find a way to write it: perhaps you already have; perhaps you need to start in with a fresh draft; perhaps you need to make an outline or plan before you start a draft.
- The open-ended writing process is most useful if you sense you have something to write but don't quite know what it is; and if you are willing to allow for time and chaos while it develops.



• Here are two accounts of readers trying out the open-ended writing process. They are excerpts from feedback to me on an earlier draft of this chapter.

The open-ended approach surprised me. Perhaps not the process itself, but what I found its result to be. Like everyone else, I had something in my mind wanting to be written, but it really worried me. So I attacked it, diving in right at the point where it didn't want to be put in words. After four retries I found, to my surprise, that I had gotten a hold on the main idea and, though this may not be unusual in your experience, I found that the original somewhat slippery concept I was struggling with was not actually at the center of my subject. But by putting it down in writing and discussing it with myself I found out where everything was pointing (I hope). I ended up with a very broad but, I think, useful general outline that gives me a direction to head into. I suppose the process doesn't always work like this, but I was pleased to find that things surfaced as quickly as they did this time.

GLORIA CAMPBELL, 8/23/78

Following your suggestion, I began some nonstop writing. Feeling totally lost—and with absolutely no control over my writing for the first time in memory—I wrote: “I’m not sure why this piece of writing fights against my wanting to set everything down in a logical order, such as a compact magazine article would be. The subject of pilgrimage should fit neatly into categories describing history, how it’s common to all faiths, etc.”

From there I went on to record all the images flashing through my mind. Utter chaos. I’d done a good deal of research as well as a little travel in Palestine. In the jumble was Egeria, a 4th century traveling nun, Egyptians (during Herodotus’ time) floating in a barge up the Nile to visit the shrine of a cat goddess, and a group of Arab teenagers sitting in the back of a camper, shouting and waving, “Hallo, American,” as I trudged the long dusty road between the highway bus stop and the Mount of Beatitudes. There’s much more, but you get the idea. I could begin to laugh at myself and write now with enthusiasm. What difference did it make, after all, where I was headed—I was having a terrific time going there. And then quite suddenly I reached a center, threw down my pencil, stared at the sentence, and the light dawned. I could finally understand what you meant about finding a center, “letting the writing make the choice.”

I still have a long way to go on pilgrimage—finding new centers—

that same fight, but you are led to a portrait of the other person, then to another person from the distant past, and finally to an important event from your childhood that is unrelated to that original fight. (Of course these pieces of writing may only appear unrelated: the childhood event may actually unlock the meaning of the fight.)

- The open-ended writing process may lead to successive versions of a short piece of writing as it goes through various stages or transformations: you end up keeping what is in effect the “last version” and throwing away all the previous ones—that is, throwing away 95 percent of what you have written.

- But on the other hand, perhaps you will find you have been engaged almost all the time in writing what is more or less one draft of a single, very long work. The periodic focusings are merely pauses in the slow unwinding of a single long thread. Perhaps it is a novel; perhaps it is a long letter where the focusings are pauses for the voice to say, “Let me pause to sum up what I seem to be saying to you.” Or perhaps it is a long record of what has been going on with you: even though it goes through a lot of changes of mood or form, everything you’ve written seems to *belong*.

There is some danger that I have made the open-ended writing process sound too complicated. I could describe it more simply as follows: just start writing, keep writing, don’t stop writing except for eating, sleeping, and living, and keep the process going till you have figured out what you are writing, and when you have done that, keep writing still until you get it right. This is the heart of the process and if it is what you do and it works, terrific. But I am trying to emphasize two additional elements that may well be part of your process without your paying much attention to them: first, let yourself start without knowing where you are going and even get more lost as you proceed; and second, alternate between nonstop writing and pausing to focus what you’ve written. As long as your nonstop writing is going well there is no need, of course, to stop and focus. But if you are writing and writing without getting anywhere, it will help to move deliberately back and forth between immersion and perspective. Doing so will help each wave of writing carry you farther and make each pause not just a rest but an occasion for progress.

cess you used for the sea voyage, but instead of using it for divergence and getting lost, use it for convergence and getting found. If this doesn't work, you may simply have to stop and rest. Give your writing more time in a drawer unlooked at. Anything that takes this long simply to emerge is probably important. Some complicated and important reordering of things is trying to take place inside you.



Now that I've suggested some of the different ways that nonstop writing can lead to focusing sentences, and that focusing sentences can lead to new bursts of nonstop writing, I would like to suggest some of the larger patterns of unfolding you might encounter in the whole cycle of the open-ended process.

- The writing may change moods and modes: from prose to poetry; from experiential to conceptual; from logical to associational; from first person to second or third person; from talk aimed at one person to talk aimed at someone entirely different or aimed at no one at all.

- Perhaps all the writing throughout the open-ended writing process hovers over the same territory. You are gnawing on a single tough bone. You are circling around and around like a plane zeroing in on an airport. Your writing yields successive photographs of the same general scene till you finally get the right perspective and focus. For example, you start writing about a particular afternoon that seems important in your life; your writing leads you to different views of that afternoon, successive versions of what happened, successive attempts to say what it means. Or perhaps you start writing about a particular fight and that's what all your writing continues to be about, but first you find yourself describing what actually happened, then how it felt from your point of view, then what the other person must have felt, and then a fantasy version. In the end you produce a piece of thinking that explains what the fight was really about; or perhaps you end up with a fictional version of a similar fight.

- But on the other hand, perhaps the open-ended writing process carries you not on a circling path over the same territory but on a traversing journey depositing you far from where you started: each stage is, as it were, a sketch of an entirely *new* scene, a treatment of new subject matter. Perhaps, for example, you start with

tence, and then put these sentences into the most logical or easily understood order. Even for a long story or poem, you may need some kind of schematic representation of the whole so you can see it all in one glance.

But perhaps it is too early for any outline or overview. Perhaps you cannot really get this final vision clear and right except by plunging into a new draft in your present frame of mind—starting the first scene of the story or novel, the first line of the poem, the introductory thought for your essay—and just plowing along. Perhaps *doing it* is more helpful at this point than any method of planning or outlining.

What if you keep writing and writing and you sense that the sea voyage is really done, but you lack any glimpse of land. You feel you have gotten down everything you can get down, you are beginning to repeat yourself, there is no more divergence. You've succeeded in getting productively lost, but now this unknown territory starts to get depressingly familiar.

You can try to hasten the convergent process of coming to land. Go back over all the centers or focuses you have written down in the course of the sea voyage. Ponder them for a while. Then engage in some nonstop writing on the basis of them. Start writing "I don't yet know what all this writing is really about, but here's what the important elements seem to be: . . ." Of course you can't put them in the right or logical order—that's just what you don't know. You are trying to bring them together into the same burst of energy and attention. You might write something like this:

There's writing that sounds like the writer talking, there's writing that somehow just resonates in some mysterious way, there's radio announcer speech with great energy and liveliness but sounding completely fake, there's——, and there's——. How can I make sense of it all.

You are trying to get the important elements to bounce against each other in a tight place.

Keep up this burst of writing—this attempt to figure out what your writing is about—as long as you can. Perhaps a center will emerge. If not, go on to the step of standing back and looking for a center. If that isn't the final center, then go on to another wave of writing. Keep this up for a while. Keep up, that is, the same pro-

and perspective, and find the summing up or focus or center of gravity for this second piece of writing.

The sea voyage consists of repeating this cycle over and over again. Keep up one session of writing long enough to get loosened up and tired—long enough in fact to make a bit of a voyage and probably to pass beyond what happened to be in mind and in mood. But usually a piece of open-ended writing takes several or even many long sittings. One of the major ingredients in the open-ended process is time and the attendant changes of mood and outlook.

As you change modes from writing to focusing and back to writing and back to focusing, practice letting the process itself decide what happens next—decide, for example, whether your focusing sentence springboards you into a new treatment of the same material, into a response to that material or into some other new topic or mode that “wants” to come next. If it sounds a bit mystical to say “Let it decide,” I don’t mean to rule out hard conscious thinking. “Letting it decide” will often mean realizing you should be rigorously logical at this point in the writing cycle. As you practice the open-ended writing process, you will get better at feeling what kind of step needs to be taken at any given point. The main thing is not to worry about doing it right. Just do it a lot.

As you engage in this sea voyage, invite yourself to lose sight of what you had in mind at the beginning, invite digressions, new ideas, seeds falling from unexpected sources, changes of mind. You are trying to nurse your thoughts, perceptions and feelings through a process of continual transformation—cooking and growing. (For a fuller treatment of the cooking and growing processes, see Chapters 2 and 3 of *Writing Without Teachers*.)

The sea voyage is most obviously finished when you sight new land—when you get a trustworthy vision of your final piece of writing. You see that it’s an argument and where it is going; or you see it is a poem and feel the general shape of it.

To come to land you need to get this vision clearer and more complete. Perhaps your first glimpse showed you what is central: now you need to write out that central event or idea more fully. If what is emerging is primarily conceptual, such as an essay, you may well need to make an outline. You won’t be able to see your structure clearly until you go through all you have written to find the points that feel important, write each one into a complete sen-



to come forward. In any event, don't worry about it. Choose or invent something for your focus and then go on. The only requirement is that it be a single thing. Skip a few lines and write it down. Underline it or put a box around it so you can easily find it later. (Some people find it helpful to let themselves write down two or three focusing sentences.)

If this center of gravity is a feeling or an image, perhaps a mere phrase will do: "a feeling that something good will happen" or "mervyn the stuffed monkey slumped under the dining room table." But a complete sentence or assertion is better, especially if the focus is an idea or thought or insight. Try, that is, to get more than "economics" or "economic dimension"—since those words just vaguely point in a general direction—and try for something like "there must be an economic reason for these events."

You have now gone through a cycle that consists of nonstop writing and then sitting back to probe for the center. You have used two kinds of consciousness: immersion, where you have your head down and are scurrying along a trail of words in the underbrush; and perspective, where you stand back and look down on things from a height and get a sense of shape and outline.

Now repeat this cycle. Use the focus you just wrote down as the springboard for a new piece of nonstop writing. There are various ways in which you can let it bounce you into new writing. Perhaps you just take it and write more about it. Or perhaps that doesn't seem right because what you already wrote has finished an idea and the focusing sentence has put the lid on it. If you wrote more about it, you would just be repeating yourself. In this case, start now with what comes next: the next step, the following thing, the reply, the answering salvo. Perhaps "what comes next" is what follows logically. Perhaps the next thing is what comes next in your mind even though it involves a jump in logic. Perhaps the next thing is a questioning or denial of what you have already written: arguments against it, writing in an opposite mood, or writing in a different mode (from prose to poetry). Stand out of the way and see what happens.

Whatever kind of jump it is, jump into a second burst of nonstop writing for however long you can keep it up. Long enough to get tired and lose track of where you started; not so long that you keep pausing and lose momentum. And then, again, stop and come out from the underbrush of your immersion in words, attain some calm

lost is the best source of new material. In coming to new land you develop a new conception of what you are writing about—a new idea or vision—and then you gradually reshape your material to fit this new vision. The sea voyage is a process of divergence, branching, proliferation, and confusion; the coming to land is a process of convergence, pruning, centralizing, and clarifying.



To begin the sea voyage, do a nonstop freewriting that starts from wherever you happen to be. Most often you just start with a thought or a feeling or a memory that seems for some reason important to you. But perhaps you have something in mind for a possible piece of writing: perhaps you have some ideas for an essay; or certain images stick in mind as belonging in a poem; or certain characters or events are getting ready to make a story. You can also start by describing what you wish you could end up with. Realize of course that you probably won't. Just start writing.

The open-ended writing process is ideal for the situation where you sense you have something to write but you don't quite know what. Just start writing about anything at all. If you have special trouble with that first moment of writing—that confrontation with a blank page—ask yourself what you *don't* want to write about and start writing about it before you have a chance to resist. First thoughts. They are very likely to lead you to what you are needing to write.

Keep writing for at least ten or twenty or thirty minutes, depending on how much material and energy you come up with. You have to write long enough to get tired and get past what's on the top of your mind. But not so long that you start pausing in the midst of your writing.

Then stop, sit back, be quiet, and bring all that writing to a point. That is, by reading back or just thinking back over it, find the center or focus or point of those words and write it down in a sentence. This may mean different things: you can find the main idea that is there; or the new idea that is trying to be there; or the imaginative focus or center of gravity—an image or object or feeling; or perhaps some brand new thing occurs to you now as very important—it may even seem unrelated to what you wrote, but it comes to you now as a result of having done that burst of writing. Try to stand out of the way and let the center or focus itself decide

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## The Open-ended Writing Process

The open-ended writing process is at the opposite extreme from the direct writing process. It is a way to bring to birth an unknown, unthought-of piece of writing—a piece of writing that is not yet in you. It is a technique for thinking, seeing, and feeling new things. This process invites maximum chaos and disorientation. You have to be willing to nurse something through many stages over a long period of time and to put up with not knowing where you are going. Thus it is a process that can change you, not just your words.

As the most creative and unmethodical writing process, I associate it with poems or stories or novels. But it will also lead you to essays. It has led me to parts of this and my previous book about writing (in particular to the long essay in *Writing Without Teachers* on the doubting and believing games and to the voice chapters—25 and 26—in this book).

Ideally you should not choose in advance what you are going to end up with. Perhaps you start out thinking and hoping for a poem, but you may well end up with a story in prose, a letter to someone, an essay that works out one of your perplexities. The open-ended writing process goes on and on till the potential piece of writing is fully cooked and grown. Sometimes this happens quickly, sometimes you nurse it through decades (though I will suggest some ways to hasten the process a bit).

I think of the open-ended writing process as a voyage in two stages: a sea voyage and a coming to new land. For the sea voyage you are trying to lose sight of land—the place you began. Getting

think about it. This kind of writing is peculiarly helpful in making your other, more formal writing more comfortable for you and more natural and lively for readers.

Finally, "Poetry as No Big Deal" describes a way of writing poetry where the emphasis is on modest goals and pleasure.

The eight ways of getting words on paper described in these first two sections are, in effect, different strategies for bringing out creativity. You can also think of them as different strategies for managing chaos. It has seemed to some readers of my earlier book as though I only celebrate chaos. It is true that I believe most people need to learn to exploit chaos better in their writing: it helps break down preconceptions and old frameworks and permits growth and new ideas. You can use chaos to blast open what you are stuck on. But once I persuade you to use chaos, I am eager to turn around and admit that there are many situations where you should keep chaos to a minimum (as in the dangerous method and the direct writing process). Chaos increases anxiety and may make the job take longer. There are many times when I cannot think at all till I have some firm structure to work from. I have to make an outline that is simple and neat—plodding even—before my mind will take the tiniest flight. On such occasions I may theoretically be limiting myself by starting with a rigid cage to keep out chaos, but practically speaking I would limit myself much more if I tried to deal with more chaos than I could handle. (Sometimes an outline serves best as a cage to break out of: it makes you think of ideas that won't fit inside but which otherwise wouldn't occur to you. This is an argument for not spending too long making perfect outlines.)

By settling on eight specific processes for getting words on paper and describing some of them in a very definite step-by-step fashion, I am not trying to suggest that these are eight pure essences made in heaven. I'm simply trying to lay out an admittedly artificial spectrum of processes which you can easily learn to use—perhaps even to vary and add to. By doing so you will finally free yourself from that common human condition of falling into a single and unvarying gear for trying to write whenever you sit down to write something. You don't see options and indeed you don't even see clearly your own process—you are "just writing." Some people have learned a good gear. Many are stuck with a terrible one. But no gear is efficient or creative for all writing tasks.

are looking for if you just start in writing. You need to learn to avoid that commoner response to the itch of an idea: waiting and not writing till you see things clearly and have the words you want already in your head.

I have already in Section I described three ways of getting words on paper:

- Freewriting is an exercise for making the quickest and deepest improvements in how you write. The goal is in the process, not the product.

- The dangerous method, trying to write something right the first time, is useful to most people on certain occasions. Only a few people can use it efficiently and creatively as their normal procedure.

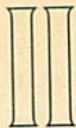
- The direct writing process is the simplest and most practical way of getting words on paper when you are writing something in a hurry or when you know you'll have no trouble finding material. It is a way of inviting relatively little chaos and keeping it within limited bounds. You don't try to get things right or in the right order as you write, but you do keep your goal in mind at all times—avoid digressions and getting lost.

"The Open-Ended Writing Process" begins this section and it is at the opposite extreme from the direct writing process. It courts the most intuition, it invites the most chaos, it takes the most time, and it requires you to let the writing determine entirely its own goals.

Next, Chapter 8, "The Loop Writing Process," tries for the best of both extremes. It helps you make good use of what might be called "almost-freewriting" for any topic you happen to be writing about, even if the topic seems very foreign to you. You will find the loop writing process especially helpful if your topic bores you or you can't think of much to say about it. This process is the most powerful way to bring creative imagination into nonfiction or expository writing.

Next, Chapter 9, "Metaphors for Priming the Pump," contains metaphorical push-ups for helping you see more about any topic and think more creatively.

In "Working on Writing While Not Thinking about Writing," I suggest some common occasions in life when you might not think to use writing but it will prove useful—occasions, however, when the writing itself doesn't matter and so you don't worry or even



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# MORE WAYS OF GETTING WORDS ON PAPER

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps my general point would be clearer if I called this section "More Ways of Producing a First Draft," but I want to emphasize the fact that first-stage writing need not take the form of a draft. That is, it need not be a single connected piece of writing. There is no good reason why you must try to produce something in your first cycle of writing that resembles the form of what you want to end up with. Of course, if you *have* a vision of how your piece ought to be structured, yes, by all means do your raw writing in the form of a draft. But if you only have the hint of a hunch or some initial thoughts or incidents or images and you can't see how they should be shaped, it's usually best to go ahead all the same and plunge into what I call raw writing. Instead of a draft you will be producing a pile of rough ingredients. The fact is that you usually get more and better visions for how to shape these ingredients by starting to write them out however they happen to come off the pencil than by waiting till you get the so-called "right" structure. Any structure that you dream up before actually getting your hands dirty in the writing itself is apt to be like a plan you work out for travel in an unfamiliar country: it usually has to be changed once you get there and see how things really work.

The secret of success in getting words down on paper is learning to adopt a crucial attitude that is new for most people: a sense of trust that when you have the germ of an idea or even just the hankering for one, you will be led sooner or later to the words you

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## The Loop Writing Process

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I've described the two ends of the spectrum of writing processes. One extreme is the dangerous method of painstaking writing where you figure out your meaning entirely before you start and thereby maintain complete control while you write. (Not quite so far in that direction is the direct writing process where, by and large, you maintain control of where you are going.) The other extreme is the open-ended process where you let the writing steer itself and let yourself be ignorant of where you might end up. The dangerous method may save you time and perplexity but it often gets you in trouble or leads to dull thinking. Open-ended writing maximizes growth in yourself and new thinking on paper but you pay the obvious price in time, energy, and uncertainty.

The loop writing process is a way to get the best of both worlds: both control and creativity. On the one hand it lets you steer where you are going. Perhaps, for example, you have to write an essay on the causes of the French Revolution and the teacher won't accept a novel or love letter instead. But on the other hand it expands your point of view—sometimes even more than the open-ended process does; it generates copious new thinking, and it is a way to *focus* that creativity on goals other than the ones you happen to carry around inside you. Thus it is especially useful if you can't think of much to write or are stuck with a topic that bores you. The loop writing process will take you longer than the direct writing process, but not so long as open ended writing. (I will write as though your task were an essay or some other kind of non-

fiction writing. It will be obvious how to apply the loop writing process to poems, stories, or plays.)

I call this process a loop because it takes you on an elliptical orbiting voyage. For the first half, *the voyage out*, you do pieces of almost-freewriting during which you allow yourself to curve out into space—allow yourself, that is, to ignore or even forget exactly what your topic is. For the second half, *the voyage home*, you bend your efforts back into the gravitational field of your original topic as you select, organize, and revise parts of what you produced during the voyage out. Where open-ended writing is a voyage of discovery to a new land, the loop process takes a circling route so you can return to the original topic—but now with a fresh view of it. Where open-ended writing is only suitable if you have free choice over the topic and form, loop writing is useful if you have *no choice*—and especially if you hate it or feel bored by it.

The loop writing process is really my response to something many people told me about *Writing Without Teachers*: that what I said about, “well, growing and cooking” was all very well for creative writing but it didn’t help them to write an essay on the causes of the French Revolution for Monday morning. At first this response made me mad. “Yes, it *does* help,” I wanted to say. “Everything you need is right there. I was thinking very much about just such a task.” But after hearing the response often enough I finally had to admit I hadn’t given as many directions as I could have for using fast and free writing on required essays, memos, or reports that you may not be interested in. When I finally gave in and set about trying to write what these people were asking for, the process led me to new ideas. I tell this story as a lesson in feedback. So often when readers complain that something is missing in a piece of your writing, you *know* they are wrong. But if you can finally manage to see it through their eyes, to have some of their experience, you don’t just get new perceptions of your writing, you usually get completely new ideas that please you.

The creative element in the loop writing process comes from letting your topic slide half out of mind and doing some initial bursts of directed raw writing. This gets more of your *experience* linked to your thinking. Some teachers have objected, “Why encourage unskilled writers to put *more* into their essays when they can’t even handle the little that is there?” But I have found that people pro-



duce their best writing when they finally have ideas that are powerful and exciting to them. When they try to weave an essay out of ideas that are watery and uninteresting to them, their language often disintegrates into incoherence: they are trying to make something solid out of what they know isn't really worth the effort. How can you reason well and produce strong language if you aren't connected to the topic and don't have any ideas that excite you? After you have that connection and after you have produced lots of writing that interests you, then you will be willing to summon the cold, hard discipline needed for the voyage home—for building an organized and focused piece of writing.

### The Voyage Out

For the voyage out I suggest thirteen procedures for loop writing: directed freewriting. I will explain and discuss them before going on to describe the voyage home. You won't need all of them for any one piece of writing. Usually a few are enough. But if you practice them all you will have them all available and know which will be most suitable for any given writing task you face.

1. *First thoughts*. This is a good one to start with. Do it even before you have done any reading, research, planning, or new thinking about your topic. Just put down as fast as you can all the thoughts and feelings you happen to have about the topic. You will discover much more material than you expected. And not just feelings and memories either: there are probably solid facts and ideas you forgot you had.

Writing down first thoughts is more or less what you did during the first half of the direct writing process, and for some topics you will turn up enough material with first thoughts for your whole piece of writing. If so, go on to revising. Your ideas won't be as numerous or interesting as they would have been if you used some of the techniques I describe below, but you will have saved a lot of time and effort.

If it seems to you that you don't have any first thoughts, you are mistaken. It is because you aren't listening or accepting them. That is, I'm not calling for *good* thoughts or *true* thoughts—just *first* thoughts. If you have trouble, adopt the frame of mind of a scientist and simply record the reactions and thoughts that pass

through consciousness as you struggle with the topic. More often you will have too many rather than too few first thoughts. Take the ones that appeal most.

If you are writing some kind of analysis or description—perhaps an evaluation of a person or a program, a write-up of a case, an abstract of a long article—first thoughts will often consist of certain details or incidents simply jumping out from your memory. You may not know why. They may seem senseless or random but they are not. These first tiny details and quick impressions often hold the key to important insights that you would miss if you proceeded straight to careful analytic thinking.

If you are having a particularly hard time making up your mind between two or three opinions—perhaps you are writing a report on two competing proposals, an essay on conflicting theories, a piece of personal writing to help you decide whether to break up with someone—first thoughts are particularly valuable. “What do you *think* you should do? Give an instant answer.” “Which plan do you suspect you’ll endorse in the end? First thoughts.” Because these are naked hunches that lack any clear justification or support, you often feel shy about taking them seriously, much less writing them down. But you should. It’s not that you can trust these hunches to be right (though surprisingly often they are: your instantaneous-computer-mind has taken everything into account and cranked out a judicious answer). But the slower, careful thinking you need for *deciding* if your hunch is right will go much better because you wrote it down blatantly: “Jung’s account feels better than Freud’s. Jung’s feels . . . while Freud’s feels. . . .” Of course your hunch may be wrong but if so, it turns out that writing it down bluntly somehow helps you to abandon it more easily than if you leave it lurking in the back of your mind.

Spend at least fifteen minutes of nonstop writing on first thoughts even if the process seems a waste of time. Take longer of course if the material seems good. But don’t spend any time at this early stage trying to get your thoughts correctly ordered or reconciled with each other. Just get them all down as quickly as you can.

2. *Prejudices*. This, too, is a good one to start with—even before reading, thinking, or researching your topic. What are your biases in the area of your topic. With the example of the Jung/Freud first thoughts above, I was obviously illustrating prejudices too. What kind of explanation of the French Revolution would be most *satis-*

*fying* to you? Do you suspect that monarchy is an inherently unjust form of government? That royalty was really the root cause of the revolution? Do you feel that mobs always do the wrong thing? Or that “the people” are always right in the end? That intellectuals are trouble-makers? If you are writing to persuade someone or a committee to adopt a certain policy, write out your naked prejudices and preferences before you do any careful thinking. It will help you see the difference between your biases and your genuine arguments—something you need to see if you want to persuade effectively.

If it isn't clear to you what your prejudices or preferences are, do first thoughts and then—in a somewhat detached and clinical spirit—look through what you've written to see what point of view or assumptions or biases are revealed there. But then jump with both feet *into* that point of view and write in as prejudiced a way as you can. You aren't trying to think carefully, you're trying to let your own prejudices run rampant without any censorship so you can see more clearly what they are. If it is hard to stop censoring, pretend to be *someone else* who is an extremist. Write his views.

Even if your topic seems more a matter of facts than of opinion—perhaps you are writing an environmental impact statement—it is still helpful to write prejudices. Prejudice and point of view are even more slippery in issues of fact. Perhaps you can't find a prejudice in yourself to exaggerate if you are writing, for example, about the effects of widening a road on the adjoining area of the county. But even if you do lack overt prejudices, you still have a whole web of assumptions and preconceptions of which you are probably unaware but which you can learn about if you write as though you *were* someone who is very prejudiced on the issue—perhaps someone who lives on the road and feels strongly against the widening. By taking a point of view as different as possible from your own, and really trying to enter into it as seriously as you can, you will begin to notice your own unconscious assumptions as they begin to be violated. You do best of all, perhaps, if you take two or three different points of view—one of them your own “objective” view—and write an argument among them. (See Number 4, *Dialogues*, below.)

Writing down your prejudices also helps you generate new ideas and insights. It's only by being obsessed with an idea, taking it as far as you can and seeing it everywhere, that you will notice all the

arguments and evidence that support it. Copernicus wouldn't have found the evidence for the heliocentric model of the planets if he hadn't been obsessed with the importance of the sun and given some scope to his obsession. In addition, when you give more scope to your prejudice you will be led to notice more ideas that run *counter* to it that you wouldn't otherwise have seen. That is, you will start to pay attention to what an opponent would say. This helps you think of better arguments for your own point of view.

3. *Instant Version*. It would be a miracle to turn out a final version of any extensive writing task in half an hour. But it's worthwhile pretending to pull off this miracle. Simply deny the need for research, thinking, planning and turn out a kind of sketch of your final piece—an instant projected version. You'll have to pretend you know things you don't know, act as though you have made up your mind where you're uncertain, make up facts and ideas, and leave out large chunks (perhaps symbolizing these omissions with little boxes). But by doing so you can *will* yourself into producing a quickly written final version.

Some people are paralyzed by the process of extensive research for a major report or paper. The more research you do, the more impossible it is to start writing. You already have so much material—whether it is in your head or in your notes—that you can't find a place to start, you can't find a beginning to grab hold of in that tangled ball of string. You can write more notes but you can't start. Besides, you never feel you have finished your research: there are a couple more books or articles to get a hold of; they sound promising; better not write anything yet because they probably have some very important material that will change the whole picture. This is the path to panicked 3 A.M. writing the night before the due date. (Or the night after.) Writing first thoughts or prejudices or an instant version keeps you from falling into this research paralysis. Have the sense to realize that it's easier to write now when you know less. You can use subsequent research to check your thinking and to revise your writing to any level of sophistication that you wish.

If you do write first thoughts or prejudices or an instant version—and especially if you use a couple of these techniques—you will be able to get much more out of any reading and research you have to do for your paper. The more boring or difficult the research, the more helpful these early pieces of writing. They will

make dull research interesting because you will already be an “authority” on the topic: you will already have lots of thoughts and a point of view. You will find yourself interested and alert as you read to see when the other authorities are smart enough to agree with your prejudices and when they get off track. When they come up with data or thinking that is new to you, it will be interesting and energizing. In short, your mind will already have a “set” or receptive net which will help you absorb all this otherwise dull information. You won’t be in that demoralizingly passive position of doing research with your mouth hanging open and trying to take in *everything*. You’ll remember more with fewer notes.

You will also discover, by the way, how close you often come to valid conclusions and sound arguments *before* you have consulted the data and arguments of others. You end up feeling much more powerful. It gets you out of that helpless position where you feel you cannot write anything unless you find out what all the “authorities” have said—a frame of mind that seduces you into one of the major forms of poor writing: writing that merely summarizes what “they” say. First thoughts, prejudices, and instant versions catapult you into a position of initiative and control so that you use reading and research to check and revise your thinking actively, not passively just to find something to think.

Even if your research is purely quantitative, these early-writing procedures will help a lot. Perhaps you are writing about levels of pollution of various chemicals in Puget Sound; or about government expenditures for various kinds of armaments and “defense.” Write an instant version by making up your own numbers (based either on intuition or fantasy) and reaching your own conclusions. Afterward you’ll do a much better job of seeing, remembering, and understanding the real numbers when you turn to the dull research.

These three early-writing procedures have another benefit that is especially important when the paper is difficult for you. Even experienced and professional writers often waste a lot of energy with old and sometimes unconscious fears of “This one’s too hard, I won’t be able to think of anything to say this time, I’ll be a failure.” After you have written first thoughts or prejudices or an instant version, these old feelings can’t trouble you so much because you don’t, in a sense, have to “write a paper,” you just have to “revise a paper”: change some numbers, add some sections, reverse some

conclusions, perhaps even adjust the whole organization. That's all. Even though you may start with a short, sketchy, disorganized paper consisting entirely of fantasy thoughts and information, it is still a sort of paper. And more often than not, there are strong parts that you will keep in your final version. You have already performed the essential inner miracle that makes all writing mysterious and difficult: you have created something out of nothing.

4. *Dialogues*. If you discover that instead of having one clear prejudice you have two or three conflicting feelings, you are in a perfect position to write a dialogue. Give each of the feelings a voice and start them talking to each other. Keep your pencil moving and stand out of the way and these voices will have a lot to say that is important for your piece. You will probably discover somewhere along the way *who* these people are: perhaps one is your head and the other is your heart or guts; perhaps one is your mother who always saw things in terms of individuals, and the other is your father who always saw things in terms of their public consequences. Perhaps one voice is someone especially wise or perceptive who once gave you a glimpse of how things could be. It will probably help your dialogue writing to give these voices their right names and actually be these people as you write in each voice. But don't get side-tracked into wondering what these people would actually say: just keep them talking. If the effort to be these people slows down your writing, go back to the nameless dialogue you started with.

But I'm not recommending that you always do dialogues before you have engaged in research or thought about your topic. They are also especially valuable afterward. They help you to digest and understand all that thinking, research, and early writing and help you to come up with conclusions. After you have read about Louis XVI and Voltaire, get them talking and arguing with each other about the causes of the French Revolution. Let others join the conversation: a peasant, a courtier, one or two of the authors you have read on the topic, yourself, whoever might have something to say. Or get that homeowner who objects to having the road widened talking to a land developer—but not just off the tops of their heads this time: pretend they know all this specific data you've turned up in your research on environmental impact and watch them help you interpret it as they argue.

The main principle of dialogue writing is that you don't have to

know ahead of time what a person is going to say. Just pick the speakers, get them talking, and see what they do say. They will often surprise you by saying things you've never thought of. For though you may know everything that two old friends of yours might say on some topic if you just wrote solitary monologues for each of them, you don't know all they will say if you start them interacting with each other. Arguments are especially fertile ground for new insights.

It's sometimes helpful to pick people whose opinions are not completely obvious to you. If, for example, you have the feeling that you already know everything Louis XVI will say about the French Revolution, don't pick him, pick some courtier whose opinions will be related but slightly unpredictable. But don't worry about this issue: even if you think you already know what Louis XVI or your mother will say, they will come up with new and surprising things under the circumstances of a real dialogue. Think of a dialogue as an invitation to the unexpected and spontaneous.

Part of the power of dialogues comes from using the language of *speech* and *talking* and getting away from "essay language" which is usually more cumbersome and artificial and farther away from your felt perceptions. Therefore, make sure you *talk on paper*. It is important to sit inside each person's head in turn and actually write down the words that come out of that person's mouth. This means you'll probably write down lots of little words and phrases that occur in speech which don't contain much substantive meaning—phrases like "Well, um, maybe," or "You have a point there," or "I don't know, let me think about that," and so on. These are the phrases that occur when a person is in the middle of a conversation but isn't quite sure for a moment exactly what he thinks. That's exactly the position you should be in as you write your dialogue. Unless you write down what the people *say*, you won't actually get yourself into their heads and get the benefit of their thinking and points of view. Their "~~s~~peech" is what they are, and since you need them to get the benefit of their thinking, you need their speech. Besides it's more fun just to let a real conversation unfold than to look for ideas or arguments. (And it helps all your writing to keep it in contact with the rhythms and textures of speech.)

Dialogues are especially useful if you have trouble writing analytically (which means you probably have trouble writing essays

and reports). Writing a dialogue produces reasoning, but produces it spontaneously out of your feelings and perceptions. Get two people arguing with each other on paper—or give your opponent a voice so he can argue with you on paper—and you will naturally produce arguments: assertions, supporting reasons, and evidence. Since you are producing them in the heat of battle with your opponent interrupting you and perhaps changing arguments in mid-stream, they may be disordered or flawed, but you will nevertheless already have written most of the ingredients you need for an intelligent and muscular train of reasoning.\*

5. *Narrative Thinking*. If your topic is confusing to you—if for example you find your mind shifting from one thought to another or from one point of view to another without any sense of which thought or point of view makes more sense—then simply write the *story of your thinking*. “I thought this, then I thought that,” and so on. This process can help untangle bad snarls in your mind. It is especially useful if you are having trouble writing about something very complicated. If, for example, you are trying to analyze a tangled movie plot or a confusing legal case, move into the strict narrative mode and tell what happened and how you reacted; for example, “She described what happened to her and why she deserved to be repaid and I thought she was right, but when he answered I agreed with him, but then I began to change my mind again when I thought of. . . .” Needless to say you may not want your final version in this narrative mode—it’s very slow—but this early narrative writing can help you finally see the issue clearly enough so you can write something very tight and to the point. In particular it often helps you notice unconscious assumptions that have trapped you.

6. *Stories*. The best way to write a letter of recommendation or a job analysis or an evaluation of a person or project is to start by letting stories and incidents come to mind and jotting them down very briefly: good stories and bad ones, typical stories and unusual ones, funny stories and, best of all, stories that somehow stick in your mind for reasons you cannot pin down. This will spare you

\* Part of the reason why inexperienced essay writers benefit so little from the corrections of teachers on their essays is because the teacher is usually trying to correct *flaws* in an argument, while the student hasn’t yet learned simply to *engage* in sustained argument by himself on paper. The student experiences the feedback as a double-bind: “You ask me to engage in sustained, abstract solitary reasoning—something that is difficult for me—and when I do it you punish my behavior.”



from that awful dullness so characteristic of evaluations and reports: empty generalizations and dead lists of qualities or adjectives. Each story will have a lively insight for you and most of those insights—especially the ones that grow out of the perplexing stories—will be far more useful than what you come up with when you just try to *think* about the person or the project or the job. In addition you can include some scraps of these stories in your final version to make it more clear and alive. Letters of recommendation are most useful if they include examples of actual incidents.

As you think through your reading about the French Revolution, what stories or incidents come to mind? Some will be obviously important and illustrative. But stand out of the way and let others simply occur to you. They won't all be from your reading. Perhaps the plight of the royalty or the peasantry reminds you of situations you were in. Perhaps the behavior of the urban poor reminds you of something you once did. Write these associations down. Try, in addition, to think of stories and incidents related to theoretical or structural elements in the topic. For example, what stories strike you about *causes*: occasions when one thing caused another but it seemed different from what you usually think of as a cause; perplexing arguments you've had about whether or not you caused something; cases where something had no cause or too many causes?

Write down these stories and events briefly and in a thumbnail way. You are trying to record as many as you can as quickly as you can. If there is a long and complex story, run through it in your head and write down a summary version in a long paragraph. You can use strings of phrases instead of whole sentences, but do include details. The effectiveness of this loop writing procedure stems from dredging up lots of rich concrete detail from your memory. You want to get your mind working on the narrative and experiential level, and away from saying, "What are my *thoughts* about the causes of the French Revolution?" The previous loop writing procedures will give you thoughts. Now you want your mind asking, "What are my *memories* and *experiences* that somehow relate to the French Revolution?" There is plenty of precious knowledge locked away in your narrative and experiential memory that you can't get to by thinking. Many wise people do their best thinking by telling stories.

Learn to trust yourself. Learn that the stories and events that in-

trigue you in connection with your topic will end up useful to you later. Practice this technique so you can end up with at least three or four pages containing at least fifteen or twenty stories or events briefly told. Sometimes the material you come up with is so obviously important that you know you should devote more time to get it all.

7. *Scenes*. Stop the flow of time and take still photographs. Focus on individual moments. What places, moments, sounds, or moods come to mind in connection with the French Revolution? Not only from your reading, but also from your own experience. Assume that they will be important if they come to mind, especially if they stick in mind.

If you are trying to decide on a career or choose between two people or life situations, jot down as many scenes as you can think of from your past when things were going well or you were functioning well. Then note just as many bad ones. Afterwards read through these scenes and you will be able to reach some really trustworthy judgments about your skills and strengths and what you need to function at your best; and your weaknesses and what you should try to avoid.\*

It is particularly valuable to use scenes if you are writing some kind of analysis of a novel, story, poem, or movie. What moments, sights, and sounds stick in your mind from the work? This will give you insights about where some of the centers of gravity are. What structure emerges when you look at all these snapshots together? Add scenes from the rest of your experience that come to mind. These will lead you to important insights about the work under analysis and about your own preconceptions and point of view.

8. *Portraits*. Think about your topic and see what people come to mind. Give thumbnail portraits of them: again not necessarily with full syntax; just phrases will do. Tell the qualities or characteristics of these people that stick in mind, such as their physical appearance, odd movements or posture or gait, intriguing qualities, things they said or did. Some portraits will have obvious relevance to your analysis. But see who else comes to mind as you muse about your topic: people from other areas of your experience who pop up in your train of reflection. Have faith that there is something useful in the fact that your third grade teacher comes to

\*I first learned this useful tactic from Gail Martin.

mind as you think about the causes of the French Revolution. Tell what particular things you remember about this teacher and later on you will probably reap an insight.

If you are trying to evaluate an organization or analyze a novel, portraits will often lead you immediately to your best insights. If you are trying to make a hard personal decision, portraits of important people in your life will help you see what matters most to you and separate it from what's merely attractive or tempting.

9. *Vary the audience.* Write about your topic to someone very different from the real audience of your paper. If your audience is sophisticated, try writing to someone very unsophisticated, perhaps to a young child. If the audience is someone you don't know, write to a close friend. If the audience has a definite point of view about the topic, write to someone with the opposite view. If you are having trouble writing a letter of recommendation for a friend who is applying for a job, put aside for a while the question of what you want to say to the employer and do a freewriting letter to your friend telling him bluntly everything you feel about him.

If you have difficulty varying the audience, try actually visualizing these alternate audiences you are writing to; address them by name periodically in your writing as though you were actually talking to them. If you are one of the many people who tend in general to forget about their audience and write to sort-of-nobody-in-particular, your writing probably tends to be dead. Practice visualizing your audience as you write—your real audience and some of these alternate audiences.

The act of writing to a different audience doesn't just clarify your thinking. It also leads you to new insights. If you have to write a job description for a very bureaucratic audience, but you start by writing it to your children or your parents or to a close friend who has no connection with your workplace, you will find yourself noticing important aspects of the job you are trying to analyze that you never would have noticed if you just wrote to the official audience. Write about the causes of the French Revolution as though you were Mao Tse-tung giving advice to revolutionaries or as though you were Kissinger writing a memo to the rest of the government about how to prevent revolution. You will have new insights.

10. *Vary the writer.* As you vary the audience, you often naturally vary the writer. Each device has its own power to generate

new insights. Write as though you were someone whose view on the topic is very different from your own. Or write as though you lived in a different culture. If you are analyzing a particular policy, pretend to be someone affected by it. If you are writing about a particular person—perhaps an essay about a historical character or an evaluation of a client or colleague—it is enormously fruitful to *be* that person and write a *self*-portrait or *self*-analysis. Again you will learn things you didn't know. If you are writing about a novel or poem or movie, *be* one of the people in it and see what he or she has to say. Or be the author and give your understanding of your own creation.

11. *Vary the time.* Write as though you were living in the past or the future. Write, for example, about the French Revolution as though you were living at the time or as though it hadn't happened yet but you had an intuition of its possibility. Write as though the *topic* were in a different time: if you are writing about civil disobedience or the relationship between the sexes, write about the topic in the distant past or future. Similarly, try writing to an *audience* in the past or the future.

Varying the audience and the writer and the time is particularly fruitful if you can't think of anything to say about your topic, or if everything you think of seems ordinary and obvious and uninteresting.

12. *Errors.* Write down things that are almost true or trying to be true; things that you are tempted to think or that others think but you know are false; dangerous mistakes. "People only take care of things they own." "John is essentially lazy." "Revolutions are always part of progress." Writing these down lessens the static in your head. The process corrals your thinking bit by bit into a narrower and narrower space so that a sprawling, confusing issue slowly becomes clearer and more manageable.

13. *Lies.* Write down quickly all the odd or crazy things you can come up with. For example: "The French Revolution wasn't started by the Wobblies in Seattle, or by Lenin, or by Marx, or by the Marx brothers. It wasn't part of the women's movement. It didn't last forty days and nights, it isn't in the Bible, they didn't just get the enemy drunk and slide them into the sea." If you let the nonsense roll effortlessly for ten or fifteen minutes—spelling out some of the individual fantasies at more length, too—you can discover some ideas that will help your thinking even if they are

not true. (And they may be true. Could the French Revolution have been part of the women's movement?)

Writing down as many lies as you can as quickly as you can gives you glimpses of your unconscious mind. You will discover some important preoccupations and assumptions that relate to the topic. Many, of course, will be irrelevant, but if you are more aware of them you can think better about the topic. In addition, even if you cannot draw any conclusions from reading back over the nonsense you have written, the process of writing it all down serves to clear some of the fog in your mind that was confusing or slowing down your thinking. You often end up with renewed energy.

### Applying These Looping Techniques

In most cases three or four of these techniques are enough to help you generate lots of good thinking on your topic. Occasionally, for hard cases, you'll need more. First thoughts, prejudices, and instant versions are good ways to get warmed up and creative at a very early stage in your writing. Perhaps errors, too. Dialogues, stories, scenes, and portraits are useful later, after you have done some of the research and thinking and early writing. Varying the audience, the time, and the writer is helpful at any stage in the writing. It is particularly useful for enlarging your point of view or getting yourself more personally invested in your topic.

Writing down your prejudices is particularly valuable if you are writing about an issue where opinion plays a major role such as politics or ethics—a topic like abortion. In your final paper you want to be *careful* in all the applications of that word: careful to look at the evidence, to argue well, to document your conclusions—careful, in short, not to let your prejudices fool you or blind you. Here you want to do the opposite. Sometimes it's only by relinquishing all care and seeing what spills out that you can really get a glimpse of your own assumptions and point of view from the outside. Only by doing so—by understanding your own frame of reference—can you deal well with difficult issues, whether your goal is to analyze objectively or to persuade subtly.

Dialogues are particularly helpful if you are having trouble finding a real issue, something to quarrel about or get involved in—if you seem to have nothing but a whole bundle of thoughts that are true but uninteresting. A dialogue generates tension and energy. A

dialogue is also ideal if you have to do some kind of compare-and-contrast analysis: you can get the two proposals or candidates or poems or modes of government to talk to each other and fight about their differences.

If you have to analyze a novel or work of art of some sort, stories, scenes, and portraits help you notice hidden structures or centers of energy behind the surface of the work. Errors are useful for a topic you find so confusing that your head spins. Vary the audience, the writer, and the time when you are trying to digest and make sense out of what you know. These techniques also help in revising, when you are trying to bring focus or organization to something that persists in sprawling all over the place.

But you may end up choosing among these techniques not on the basis of the kind of writing task you are engaged in but rather on the basis of your own temperament and skills. Some people, for example, are more comfortable and skilled when they write from experiences than when they write from thinking. They are better at writing stories, telling what they feel, describing specific sights, sounds, feels, and smells than they are at abstract reasoning, analysis, argument, and building trains of thought. If you are such a person you probably sound much duller when you write essays and reports than you actually are. But you will be able to get real perceptiveness and intelligence into conceptual writing if you use the experiential loop writing techniques: stories, scenes, and portraits. When you read over what you produce with these techniques, you will see that almost every piece contains a good insight which you can now easily put into the conceptual mode: "Oh, now I see what those two stories are telling me. I can trust John to do energetic, conscientious work when I give him a certain kind of direction, but when I don't, he just goofs off." Or "This poem keeps reminding me of a bittersweet memory of my own that seems very different from anything in the poem. I never would have called the poem melancholy, but pondering this memory and the poem together, I can finally see a faint undertone of melancholy in some of the images—faint, but important in explaining why the poem is powerful."

If you have the opposite temperament and love to reason and argue on paper, your essays or reports will benefit in a different way from using stories, scenes, and portraits. You will get more life into your arguments. Indeed your very taste and skill for rea-

soning may *undermine* your power to persuade readers if your arguments are too abstract—too little grounded in human experience. You may get out-argued, as it were, by people with poorer arguments. Stories, scenes, and portraits will give your arguments more of the experiential texture they need to work on flesh and blood readers. In addition, these loop techniques will simply give you *more* ideas than you usually get, even though you love reasoning. Reasoning itself is deductive. It only tells you more about what you already know. But writing stories, scenes, and portraits is a very inductive process and will lead you to new insights and new points of view you couldn't reach by reasoning alone.

The important thing is to try out all these devices. You will learn which ones work best for you in various circumstances. And you will probably develop variations and brand new devices that are particularly suited to your needs.

### **The Voyage Home**

Many new insights and understandings will come to you as you engage in this writing on the voyage out, but don't demand them or struggle for them. If you want to end up with new insights, you have to allow yourself to *lose sight* of your topic during much of the voyage out. You are letting goals, meanings, and end-products slip partly out of mind in order to allow for restructurings of your mind and new points of view that would be impossible if you kept your eye on the goal all the time.

But the voyage home is a process of bending the curve back toward the original goal. Return, then, to full consciousness of what your goal is: think as precisely and consciously as you can about your topic and audience. If there was an assignment or guidelines, think about exactly how they were phrased. And think about exactly what you want to do to your audience, about what they expect, and about their relationship to you. Then go back over all that writing you did during the voyage out and look for useful ideas and insights.

For in the voyage home, obviously enough, you are engaged in the process of revising. You have used your creative mentality to generate lots of examples and ideas and the makings of ideas, and now you need to use your critical mentality to shape a coherent draft out of this raw writing. You can choose among various

methods for revising: I have already described quick revising in Chapter 5 and other ways are in Section III, "More Ways To Revise."

I usually start by just reading it all through without doing any writing at all—just to immerse myself in one jump in all the writing I have done from so many different points of view and in so many different modes and moods. Perhaps I mark the margin of what feel like especially good or important bits, or even jot down some notes when the reading makes me think of something new I'm afraid I'll forget. But this first read-through gives me the lay of the land. Sometimes by simply reading through everything you have written, you will see very clearly what you want for your main point and what all the other points are. But sometimes you won't see yet how to turn it into a draft.

For it is probably fair to say that the loop writing process, especially if you use it for a piece of expository or conceptual writing, makes more of a mess than the other writing processes. With the dangerous method and the direct writing process you keep your eye on the goal at all times. With the open-ended process you probably arrive gradually at your final piece of writing. With the loop writing process you may have to struggle harder for order.

For one thing you probably have to throw more away. A generative process as creative as this one will inevitably turn up more insights than you can logically or comfortably fit in one piece of work. You will have to develop the strength to throw away some good material. And when you figure out your final train of thought, you will probably find some gaps you need to fill in.

In addition you may have to work harder to clarify some of the insights it has produced. That is, even though some of the insights will be sitting right there on the surface of your raw writing, some will only be potentially there. While you were writing some particular story or portrait that somehow seemed intriguing, you weren't in the best position to see the insight into the causes of the French Revolution. But now that you are thinking carefully about your topic and applying all these varied pieces of writing to it, you will usually see the insight.

A few pieces will persist in being obscure. You have a dialogue where the two speakers are at loggerheads and their disagreement yields you nothing but perplexity. What does it tell you about the suitability of this candidate for the job? About the trustworthiness



of your research on the environmental impact? You don't know. What is that story or portrait telling you about the causes of the French Revolution? Is it telling you to think about the influence of a certain person? Is it telling you to think about a certain meaning of the word *cause*? Some passages won't yield up their secrets. Get the ones you can and let the others go. Assume each has a meaning and think hard about what it might be, but after a while don't waste any more effort on it. Perhaps the meaning will pop up later as part of some other train of thought.

The loop writing process lends itself to a form of writing I call the collage which I describe in Chapter 14. I include there two collage essays which illustrate the use of ingredients produced by the loop writing process.

### Summary of Loop Writing Procedures

- First thoughts.
- Prejudices.
- Instant version.
- Dialogues.
- Narrative thinking.
- Stories.
- Scenes.
- Portraits.
- Vary the audience.
- Vary the writer.
- Vary the time.
- Errors.
- Lies.
- The loop writing process is generally helpful in bringing life to conceptual writing and it is especially helpful if you feel bored or unconnected to your topic.

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## Metaphors for Priming the Pump\*

This chapter contains metaphorical questions that will help you produce more ideas, perceptions, and feelings about a topic. These questions will help you see more aspects of what you want to write about and also see the limits or blind spots in your accustomed point of view.

Suppose, for example, you are preparing to write a case study or report or essay about someone you have known or worked with. "Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as *two* people and tell how these two people work together (or don't work together)." "What would never happen to \_\_\_\_\_? If it did, what would be the result?" "Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as a bad person." "Tell the three or four most important sounds that come to mind in connection with \_\_\_\_\_." If you try quickly answering these questions about someone you know, you will figure out things you didn't know or only half knew before.

Your new impressions need not all be accurate, however, to be useful. When you let yourself describe people as bad, you may discover for example that the vague disapproval you've always felt toward them is really part of a deep but only partly conscious prejudice in you that comes from old feelings or attitudes. Or that you've never forgiven them for not inviting you to that party ages ago. The free writing helps you see around such impediments and thus see more accurately.

\*I am indebted to the help I received from Dwight Paine in devising an earlier version of some of these questions. For more about the theory of metaphor making and thinking that underlies these exercises, see "Real Learning and Nondisciplinary Courses," Peter Elbow, *Journal of General Education*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1971.

These questions are generally most useful when you first begin your thinking and writing for some writing task. You need not write down long answers to all the questions. Often a phrase will do. Some items, however, such as perhaps "Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as bad," will set you off on an important piece of writing. The main thing is to make sure that after you have answered a set of questions you plunge immediately into as much fast raw writing as you can manage to do. Answering the questions puts you in a condition where you have more ideas and insights than usual.

These are also exercises in metaphorical thinking. If you use them regularly you will gradually increase your creative and imaginative capacity. (Aristotle was right when he said that metaphorical ability is a mark of intelligence but wrong, I think, when he said it could not be learned.)

Every metaphor is a force-fit, a mistake, a putting together of things that don't normally or literally belong together. A good metaphor in poetry or any kind of writing is also somehow graceful and just right. (William Carlos Williams starts a poem: "Your thighs are apple trees/whose blossoms touch the sky.") But the questions here and the answers you give needn't be graceful or just right. They should in fact wrench and violate your accustomed way of thinking about your topic.

Perhaps, for example, you are analyzing an organization, say Acme Packaging or the C.I.A. The question asks: "If, in addition to French-kissing, there were Acme Packaging kissing (or C.I.A. kissing), what would that kissing be like?" Perhaps Acme Packaging kissing is kissing a sheet of paper and sending it through inter-office mail. Would C.I.A. kissing consist of quick hard hugs once every two months, making sure not to look at each other? Your answer may seem immediately useful, it may seem meaningless, it may suggest something you already knew perfectly well, or it may make you notice a half-conscious perception and then go on to find words for it.

Perhaps you are writing about why Shakespeare begins *Hamlet* with the ghost-on-the-battlements scene, and the exercise says "Pretend the pump needs priming." "How then," you must say to yourself, "is pouring water in a pump to make it draw like starting a play with this scene?" Various answers will come to mind. The first one that occurs to me is that Shakespeare puts us off balance in the opening scene (you can't tell what's happening the first time

you read or see it) to get us ready to experience uncertainty as one of the main underlying feelings and themes of the play. I find it a play which refuses to settle down or be clear.

But the main usefulness of these questions won't come from just one of them, no matter how lucky the insight you get from it, but from a whole succession of them: twisting and stretching what you are trying to write about by mapping it against a variety of terrains—seeing a variety of possibilities in it.

The next item for *Hamlet*, then, would be “Imagine the problem of the opening scene as a problem of defective materials.” What comes to my mind first is to wonder whether there might be a problem of availability of actors. Is it something about having to start with Bernardo, Francisco, Marcellio, and the ghost because of some complication growing out of actors taking two or more parts? Or were these actors needed to do things backstage next scene? It doesn't seem to make much sense, but it's fine to settle for far-fetched or ridiculous answers to these questions. And don't be held back by lack of data. You are mind stretching, not trying to be sure.

But then in the midst of these fumbblings another more immediately fruitful thought strikes me. The *audience* is defective material. Some members of the audience are probably still coming in when the play starts. Others would not yet have shifted full attention to the play from the business of their day or from their conversation with companions. This scene has a certain amount of power to capture audience attention—its mystery and drama—but more important, probably, is the fact that the scene is a bit expendable. If it takes half the scene for some viewers to get around to paying good attention, they are not penalized, they don't miss something they need for comprehending or enjoying the play. That seems a useful thought.

Next item: “Too many cooks.” Too many actors? I tend to be confused by the people running around in the beginning of the play. Too many writers? Could others have collaborated in writing this scene? Was it a suggestion from one of the other actor-shareholders that Shakespeare could not turn down? Could it have been a popular ghost scene from one of the earlier versions of *Hamlet* or some other play? The metaphorical questions often don't *give* you answers, but rather make you ready to look at more kinds of answers.

The trick in answering one of these questions is to force yourself to come up with something without spending too long. And then go on to the next one. That means making things up and sometimes producing nonsense: cartwheels of the mind. If it takes you more than a minute or two, go on to the next one anyway. Not to worry. You may find it impossible to answer all the questions in a set. But you do need to bring to these questions a spirit of entering in, pretending, playing. (If that work of art you want to write about were your body, where would you find its head, hands, feet, heart? If it were a car, where would you find the motor, the muffler?) If you can't enter into the spirit of these questions, it is probably not worth struggling. But before you conclude that the questions are too silly, think about the fact that you engage in the same kind of far-fetched metaphorical thinking every night when you dream (even if you don't remember). Your ability to make rich and creative metaphorical connections is there ready to be brought under more conscious control.

Sometimes you will notice the significance of an answer right after it comes to you. ("Hmm. Freedom is round. Does that mean I take it for granted that freedom is perfect?") But often it's better not to seek interpretation as you are answering the questions. It can make you too self-conscious, too interpretation-hungry so that when you are asked to think of your organization as a method of poisoning you can only follow a path of conceptual translation: "Let's see, what opinion do I have of my organization? Now what mode of poisoning does my opinion remind me of?" That misses the leverage in these questions. Best if you can let a poison float to mind without having to think about it. Perhaps the poison that comes to mind seems totally irrelevant in itself, but when you think of it in conjunction with some other seemingly ridiculous answers, you find a new and valuable insight about the organization. Indeed your answers will fertilize your raw writing even if you never work out their implications consciously.

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I have divided these questions up into sets and phrased them to fit particular writing tasks as follows:

- a. Questions to help you write about someone you have known or worked with.

- b. Questions to help you write about someone you have studied or read about.
- c. Questions to help you write about someone's life as a whole.
- d. Questions to help you write a self-evaluation.
- e. Questions to help you write about a place.
- f. Questions to help you write about an object.
- g. Questions to help you write about a work of art.
- h. Questions to help you write about an organization or group.
- i. Questions to help you write about a problem or dilemma.
- j. Questions to help you write about an abstract concept.

Many of the questions in one set can well be applied to a different writing task. My groupings are sometimes arbitrary. You will find that some questions particularly suit your imagination and are especially fruitful for you on almost any enterprise. You will also find it helpful to start inventing your own questions.

*a. Questions to help you write about someone you have known or worked with (for example, you have to write an evaluation or a letter of recommendation or a case report, or perhaps you simply want to understand someone better).*

1. What would \_\_\_\_\_'s face tell if you knew nothing else?
2. What would \_\_\_\_\_'s body tell if you knew nothing else?
3. What would \_\_\_\_\_'s posture and gait tell you if you knew nothing else?
4. What would \_\_\_\_\_'s manner or style tell if you knew nothing else?
5. \_\_\_\_\_'s name is the name of a color. What color?
6. \_\_\_\_\_ is an animal. What animal?
7. \_\_\_\_\_ is a food. What food?
8. Who would play \_\_\_\_\_ in a movie about her?
9. \_\_\_\_\_'s brains are not in the head, heart not in the chest, guts not in the belly. Tell where they really are.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ is two people. Describe them and how they work together or don't work together.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ is really a spy. For whom? What assignment?
12. If you were going to spend a year in close contact with \_\_\_\_\_, where would you prefer it to be and under what circumstances? What would be the worst place and circumstances?

13. Imagine that you believe all character and behavior comes from imitating significant "role models" when young. Who and what sorts of people do you suppose \_\_\_\_\_ imitated?
14. Imagine you are a kind of Platonist/Pythagorean/Buddhist who believes souls are reincarnated over and over again as they work their way gradually from being a vegetable to being a pure spirit. Where is \_\_\_\_\_ in this cycle? What previously? What next? (You slip backwards for bad behavior.)
15. Imagine you are an extreme Freudian who believes that all important behavior grows out of unconscious feelings—usually sexual or aggressive. Give a quick interpretation of \_\_\_\_\_'s behavior and functioning.
16. If you were writing the history of the *sounds* you've heard while being with \_\_\_\_\_ (excluding words), what would be the three or four most important sounds in that history?
17. Imagine you think \_\_\_\_\_ is a very good person. Now describe \_\_\_\_\_.
18. Imagine you think \_\_\_\_\_ is a very bad person. Now describe \_\_\_\_\_.
19. What is something that would never happen to \_\_\_\_\_? Imagine it happening? What would be the outcome?
20. Imagine an important situation when you were with \_\_\_\_\_. Close your eyes and try to bring the experience back. Now pretend to be \_\_\_\_\_ and describe that situation.
21. What weather does \_\_\_\_\_ bring into the room?

*b. Questions to help you write about someone you have studied or read about (for example, a politician or historical character or person in a work of art).*

1. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as an ordinary person.
2. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as a unique and special person.
3. Imagine \_\_\_\_\_ were the opposite sex. Describe the life that \_\_\_\_\_ would have lived.
4. Describe the life \_\_\_\_\_ would have lived in a very different era.
5. Make up or guess the most important childhood event in \_\_\_\_\_'s life.
6. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s life if that event hadn't occurred or something entirely different had occurred.

7. Tell a science fiction story with \_\_\_\_\_ in it.
8. Tell a soap opera plot with \_\_\_\_\_ in it.
9. What does \_\_\_\_\_ most need to cry about?
10. Imagine you are very angry and strike \_\_\_\_\_. How and where do you strike?
11. What is the caress that \_\_\_\_\_ most needs to get?
12. Give \_\_\_\_\_ an accurate compliment that \_\_\_\_\_ probably never hears.
13. Imagine \_\_\_\_\_'s hair were entirely different from how it is or was. What would it bring out that you hadn't noticed before?
14. What's a secret about \_\_\_\_\_ that \_\_\_\_\_ hasn't told anyone?
15. What's something about \_\_\_\_\_ that even \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't know?
16. How would \_\_\_\_\_'s mother or father describe \_\_\_\_\_?
17. How would \_\_\_\_\_'s child describe \_\_\_\_\_?
18. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as a good president of the U.S.A. A bad president. What would be the important policies or decisions in both cases?
19. Tell a recurring dream that \_\_\_\_\_ has.

*c. Questions to help you write about someone's life as a whole.*

1. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s life and character as essentially unchanging. What may look like changes are really just ways of staying essentially the same.
2. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s life and character as essentially determined by important changes or turning points (even if it looks to most people as though no such changes or turning points occurred).
3. Imagine you believe people are truly free: they somehow choose or cause everything that happens to them. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s life or character.
4. Imagine you have the opposite point of view: people are not free, they are determined by events they cannot control. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s life or character.
5. Find as many rhythms as you can in \_\_\_\_\_'s life: events that repeat or recur whether the scale is in moments or years.
6. What events in \_\_\_\_\_'s life only occurred once?
7. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as primarily a product of national, cultural, and ethnic influences.



8. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as primarily a product of personal and family influences.
9. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as primarily a product of economic and class influences.
10. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as essentially the product of conditioning. What behavior was rewarded and what was punished?
11. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s character as a solution to past problems.
12. Describe \_\_\_\_\_'s character as carrying the seeds of future problems.
13. Think of two or three very unlikely professions or occupations for \_\_\_\_\_. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ in those professions. (For example, describe Napoleon as a poet.)

d. *Questions to help you write a self-evaluation* (for some job or enterprise or life period).

1. Who will play you in the movie about this period or enterprise?
2. What was the predominant weather for this whole time? Or what changes occurred in the weather?
3. Think of yourself as having done a wonderful job. What do you notice?
4. Think of yourself as having done a terrible job. What do you notice?
5. Take responsibility for everything that went wrong. You did it all on purpose or because you didn't give a damn or because you were mad. Explain the events.
6. Tell the three most important moments in this period.
7. What did you learn from each of those moments?
8. What qualities in you did this period bring out?
9. What qualities in you remained hidden or unused?
10. Imagine this period as a journey. Where did it take you? Where did it start?
11. Imagine it is only a half journey, you are only halfway there. Where? What is the second half of the journey?
12. Imagine this period as an interruption or detour or setback in some larger journey. What is that larger journey and how does this function as a time-out?
13. If this enterprise was *work*, describe it as play. Or vice versa.

14. Imagine this enterprise turns out to have very different goals from the ones you expected. Imagine some of these surprising goals.
15. Invent a dream you might have about yourself in this enterprise. Just use what first comes to mind. It doesn't have to make sense.
16. Imagine this whole enterprise *was* a dream. What is it a dream about? What will you wake up to?

*e. Questions to help you write about a place.* Go to this place in your imagination. Pick a particular time of the year and of the day. See it, feel the weather, hear the sounds. Make contact for a few quiet moments.

1. How is your mood affected by being there?
2. Imagine being there for a whole year. How would that make you better? How worse?
3. Imagine you have just seen, in only five minutes, the whole history of this place since the beginning of the world. Briefly tell this history.
4. Imagine your body is the whole world. Where on your body is \_\_\_\_\_?
5. If someone said "It's a \_\_\_\_\_ day," what kind of a day would it be?
6. Imagine you have always been blind. Describe your place briefly.
7. Let the place describe you.
8. Your place is an animal. What animal is it?
9. Your place is a person. Who?
10. Name a story, a song, and a movie your place reminds you of.
11. What is the first thing that comes to mind which your place would never remind you of?
12. What other place does your place make you think of?
13. In what weather is your place most itself?
14. Some places have a proper name all to themselves—like "Chicago." Other places only have a general name they must share with similar places—like "bathroom." Give your place the opposite kind of name from the one it has.
15. How does this new name change things. (For example, how

- would your feelings be different? What things would you notice now? What would you *not* notice now? Would things happen differently there now?)
16. Find as many of your place's rhythms as you can. (For example, find things that happen there at regular intervals—whether they happen every second, every month, or every thousand years. Or any other sorts of rhythms you notice.)
  17. Name as many things as you can that only happen there once. Are there any rhythms among any of them?
  18. Think of your place as if it were old and near death. Now tell what place it was when it was only a child.
  19. Think of your place as if it were a young child or young animal. Now tell what place it will grow up to be.
  20. If "———" stands for the regular name of your place, what does the following sentence mean: "If you do that again, I'm going to —— you"?
  21. Imagine your place was the whole universe and you had always lived there. Tell how you and your neighbors explain the beginning of the universe. How do you folks think the universe is going to end?
  22. Think of your place as if it is carefully planned in every detail. Now describe it briefly from this point of view.
  23. Think of your place as if everything just happened by accident, chance, and luck. Describe it from this point of view.
  24. Think of your place as if it is haunted. Tell about it (for example, how it became haunted; what it does to people it doesn't like).
  25. Imagine an anti-universe where everything is opposite or backwards from the way we know it. Describe your anti-place in this anti-universe.

*f. Questions to help you write about an object.*

1. Think of a particular moment in which this object was meaningful or important to you. Close your eyes and take yourself back into that moment. Bring back the reality of the object and the scene for a few moments. The time of day. The time of year. The air. The smells. Your feelings.
2. If you had never seen the object before, what would you notice when you first looked at it?

3. If you knew it fairly well, what would you notice when you looked at it?
4. If you knew it better and longer than anyone else—if you knew it closely for a whole lifetime—what would you see when you looked at it?
5. Tell two or three different ways you might take it apart.
6. Tell what it's like to take it apart and then to take apart the parts till you get down to its basic ingredients. (Go fast. Don't worry.)
7. Imagine a different world in which this object was made of completely different ingredients. What would they be? Tell the advantages and disadvantages of this new arrangement.
8. Tell how this *particular* object came to exist. (Not this *kind* of object. That is, if you are talking about a pencil, don't tell how *pencils in general* came to exist. Tell how this particular pencil came to exist: where it was made; where the wood, lead, and rubber came from; how they came to be put together.)
9. Pretend it came to exist in a different way and tell what it was like.
10. Tell the history of this particular object since it first existed.
11. Tell its history for the last five minutes.
12. Tell how this *kind* of object came to exist (for example, pencils in general).
13. Tell another story of how this kind of object came to exist, but this time make the story a kind of a love story too.
14. Think of as many ways as possible of grouping a whole bunch of these objects. (In the case of pencils, for example, by length, by color, chewed/unchewed, free/paid for, by color of lead, etc., etc.)
15. Think of a lot of different ways it is actually used.
16. Tell three ways it *might* be used, but isn't.
17. Tell a mystery story of how it came to be used in one of those ways.
18. Tell three ways it could not possibly be used.
19. Tell a science fiction story of how the world changes in such a way that it *is* used in one of the ways you just called impossible.
20. If this object were an animal, what animal would it be?
21. If it were a person, who would it be?

22. If it could speak, what would it tell you about yourself that you weren't aware of?
23. Tell three things it might *stand for* or remind you of. (For example, a pencil might stand for a tree, school, or writing.)
24. Imagine you are much richer than you are and think of something it might stand for. Imagine you are much poorer than you are and think of something it might stand for.
25. What might it stand for if you were much older than you are? Much younger?

*g. Questions to help you write about a work of art.*

1. Pretend you made it. Something important was going on in your life and you poured strong feelings into it. What was going on? What were those feelings?
2. Pretend you made it, but nothing special was going on in your life and you had no strong feelings. Describe what you liked about this thing you created.
3. Pretend you made it and are very dissatisfied. Why are you dissatisfied with it?
4. You made it as a gift for someone you know (a real person in your life). Who? How did she feel about your gift?
5. Imagine this work of art as medicine. What is the disease? What are the symptoms? How does this medicine cure it?
6. Imagine this work of art as poison. It destroys whoever experiences it. Describe the effects of this poison, the course of deterioration.
7. Imagine that everyone on the globe owned this work of art or all infants were repeatedly exposed to it. What would be the effects?
8. What is someone most apt to notice the first time she encounters this work of art?
9. What would you notice about this work of art if you had never encountered *any* other works in its medium (any other novels, movies, ballets, or whatever)?
10. What tiny detail in this work says more about it than any other?
11. Is this work male or female?
12. What other work of art would it marry?

13. What works of art do they have for children?
14. Imagine this work of art as part of an evolutionary process. What work did it evolve from? What work will it evolve into?
15. This work is the only human artifact transported to Mars, the only evidence they have about humans. What guesses or conclusions would they reach about humans on the basis of this work?
16. Imagine your work of art as evolving into different media (poetry, novels, movies, paintings, music, ballet, etc., etc.). Describe two or three of these new works of art. See what these evolutions tell you about the original work.
17. High art/low art: describe \_\_\_\_\_ as though it were in the opposite category from the one it usually occupies. (For example, describe *Paradise Lost* as a soap opera.)
18. Anonymous folk art/signed art made by individual artist: describe \_\_\_\_\_ as though it were in the opposite category from the one it usually occupies. (For example, describe a tribal chant as though it were a Beethoven symphony.)

*h. Questions to help you write about an organization or group of people.*

1. What animal is \_\_\_\_\_?
2. What are the rhythms in the history of \_\_\_\_\_? Events or cycles that recur, whether on a scale of decades or days?
3. What are some of the things that have only happened once to \_\_\_\_\_?
4. What are the three most important moments in the history of \_\_\_\_\_?
5. \_\_\_\_\_ is alive, chooses, acts. Describe its behavior as completely conscious, willed, deliberate.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ has feelings. What does it feel now? What is the history of its feelings?
7. If there were two of \_\_\_\_\_, where would the second one be? How would they interact?
8. Imagine \_\_\_\_\_ is a machine, like a car or a pinball machine. Describe how it works. (For example, where is the motor? the flipper?)
9. What is the most important part of the machine? Which part breaks down most?

10. Map \_\_\_\_\_ onto your body: where are the head, feet, hands, ears, eyes?
11. Imagine all organizations had the same structure or mode of operating that \_\_\_\_\_ has. What would be the effect on the world?
12. What human qualities does it bring out in members? Which ones does it suppress or fail to use?
13. If in addition to French-kissing there were \_\_\_\_\_ kissing, what would that kind of kissing be like?
14. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as a poison; its effects; its antidote.
15. Describe \_\_\_\_\_ as a weapon. How do you make it go off? What does it do? Who invented it?
16. Think of \_\_\_\_\_ in the scheme of evolution. What did it evolve from? What is it evolving toward?
17. What physical shape is \_\_\_\_\_? Imagine that shape in locomotion: how does it move?
18. Think about \_\_\_\_\_ as part of an ecological system: What does it depend on? What depends on it? What does it eat? What does it emit? What eats it? What emits it?

*i. Suggestions to help you write about a problem or dilemma.*

1. The pump needs priming.
2. Defective materials.
3. Too many cooks: a committee designed or executed it.
4. A bribe will do the trick. Bribe whom? With what?
5. The problem is that God is angry. At whom? Why? What did that person do to make God angry?
6. It's a problem of addiction. Who is addicted to what?
7. The problem has been stated wrong. Find two or three ways of stating it differently.
8. The problem comes from bad data. Guess what data are wrong and why?
9. It's a Gordian knot: stop trying to untie it, cut through it with a sword.
10. The problem is a car that won't start in the winter. What are the things you would do.
11. It's a problem of logic; for example, a is to b as c is to d (A:B :: C:D).

12. It looks like a problem, but really everything is fine if you only take the right point of view.
13. Assume the problem has no solution. What is the sensible course of action or strategy that follows from this conclusion?
14. It's a problem in numbers. Try performing the following operations on it: addition, subtraction, division, multiplication, percentages, moving a decimal place.
15. It's just something wrong with digestion: someone ate the wrong thing or has diarrhea, constipation, vomiting.
16. It's a problem of people: incompatible temperaments; struggling for dominance; loving each other but unable to admit it; feeling scared but not admitting it.
17. Outdated design.
18. It's problem of too little money; or rather too much money.
19. It's sabotage.
20. It's a matter of physical sickness. Need for (a) special drug; (b) long recuperation with not much medicine; (c) helping the patient deal with the impossibility of cure.
21. It's mental illness. Needs: (a) shock treatment; (b) talking therapy; (c) group therapy; (d) conditioning therapy; (e) help and support in going through craziness and coming out on the other side; (f) recognition that society is crazy and patient is sane.

*j. Questions to help you write about an abstract concept (such as freedom, democracy, altruism, sexuality, justice; topics like these benefit particularly from the experiential techniques of the loop writing process, such as prejudices, stories, dialogues, moments, and portraits).*

1. What color is \_\_\_\_\_?
2. What shape?
3. Imagine that shape moving around: what is its mode of locomotion?
4. Give the worst, most biased, distorted definitions of \_\_\_\_\_ you can give.
5. Imagine this word or phrase did not exist. (Imagine a people with no word for it in their language.)
6. What would be different because the word did not exist?
7. Imagine \_\_\_\_\_ is a place. Describe it.



8. What animal would make a good insignia for \_\_\_\_\_?
9. What persons are connected in your mind with \_\_\_\_\_?
10. If \_\_\_\_\_ fell in love with something else, what would that something else be? What would they have for children?
11. Design a flag for \_\_\_\_\_.
12. Think of three or four abstractions that are bigger than \_\_\_\_\_ or can beat it up; and three or four which are smaller or can be beaten up by \_\_\_\_\_.
13. Think of \_\_\_\_\_ as part of an ecological system: What does it depend on? What depends on it? What does it eat? What does it emit? What eats it? What emits it?
14. What are the most memorable sounds associated with \_\_\_\_\_? Smells?

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## Working on Writing While Not Thinking about Writing

The door opens. In comes Abby, crying.

"Wah meeg blah egg rogg wee rogg."

"What happened?"

"Wah meeg blah egg rogg wee rogg."

"What happened? I can't understand you."

"Wah meeg blah egg rogg wee rogg."

"Benjy threw a rock at you?"

"Wah meeg blah egg rogg wee rogg."

"You ate a rock?"

"Uh huh."

While Abby fails to communicate, I examine her language with all my attention. As soon as minimal communication occurs, I ignore her language and all my attention slides through it, past it, to the meaning, to the nonlinguistic reality, to the question of whether to call the hospital. When the glass is fogged up, we look at the glass. The glass is all we can see. As soon as it gets unfogged, we ignore it and see through it to the scene outside.

You will help your writing if you can find occasions when the job you are doing matters a lot but the quality of the writing doesn't matter at all—occasions when you pay no attention to the glass and look only at the scene beyond it. A good example is if you are trying to make up your mind about which of two jobs to take and after sitting and stewing and not getting anywhere for a few days, you finally decide to spend a couple of hours writing out all your thoughts and feelings. You don't try to make an orderly presentation or argument, you just write and write until your thoughts and

feelings are on paper. The process gets you unstuck. At first, you lean in your writing toward one job and start to get excited about it, then toward the other. But it isn't mere vacillation as it was when you were just thinking. Writing somehow makes it into a *working through* process so there is development, growth, progress.

It's a great relief to write seriously and usefully, without thinking about your writing. And it helps the rest of your writing. It makes you more comfortable putting words on paper and it makes those words more natural and lively. In this brief chapter, I will suggest a few more occasions when you can work on your writing while you are getting other jobs done.

- If you are facing a difficult dilemma as in the example above, write out your thoughts and feelings as quickly but as fully as they occur to you. Don't just make lists of reasons for and against (except perhaps at the end). Follow threads of thought and feeling where they lead.

- If you want to digest and remember what you are reading, try writing about it instead of taking notes. Stop periodically—at the end of each chapter or when something important strikes you—and simply write about what you have read and your reactions to it. This procedure may make you nervous at first because you can't "cover" as many points or make something as neatly organized as when you take notes. But you will remember more. Perfectly organized notes that cover everything are beautiful, but they live on paper, not in your mind. The same procedure is helpful for lectures. You will learn more if you take no notes at all and instead put all your attention into listening; then at the end sit and write for ten or fifteen minutes about what you have heard and what it means to you.

- If you have to give a talk or speech, work out what you want to say by writing out trains of thought instead of sitting there trying to work it out inside your head and just writing down mere words or phrases for your notes. You'll think better and get your thoughts clearer in your head. After you write you may still want some notes to speak from, but you can make them quickly and they will be briefer because they are just small notations to remind you of what you've figured out. The process of writing and of using shorter notes will probably enable you to talk in a more relaxed way and make better contact with your audience.

- Keep a journal. Explore different ways of doing so: not just what happened, but thoughts, feelings, portraits, snatches of conversation, quotations; not just by writing at the end of the day or week, but intermittently at odd times of the day. Try, for example, taking a moment at the beginning of the day (as you sit down to your desk or after breakfast or on the bus) and write about what you want to accomplish that day or about the spirit or attitude you want to maintain. One particularly illuminating way to keep a journal—to explore not just the present but the shape of your whole life—has been developed by Ira Progoff. (See *At a Journal Workshop*, New York, 1975.)

Some people find it a treat to write in an elegantly bound journal with fine paper—a sensual event. But for many others this adds the pressure to write nicely, to make it memorable, even to think about readers and this makes writing more of an ordeal. If you make your journal a folder rather than a book, you can write on whatever paper comes to hand at odd moments in the day when a thought strikes you.

- Write informal notes to people when a thought strikes you. “Dear Byron, I appreciated the way you ran that meeting. It helped a lot that you told that story about yourself. I was grateful that you got us back on the agenda when we were all sidetracked. The troops seemed restless today. I think you are doing a terrific job.” Even when you see someone frequently, sometimes it’s easier to get something across on paper than by talking. When it’s appreciation you want to express, sometimes the other person is too self-conscious and blots out what you say with protests. (“Oh no, actually I’ve screwed up about this and that.”) And when you’ve finally decided to tell someone how he is frustrating or hurting you, sometimes he blots you out with arguments or excuses. If your goal, in short, is to make someone *hear* what you are saying, often you do better writing words on paper than trying to have a conversation. Even nonstop uncaredful writing.

- Write informal letters. Of course it seems easier to call; or to wait till next month when you will see the person. But in addition to the good practice in writing, letters work better in certain ways than conversations. Often it takes the leisure, privacy, and reflectiveness of writing to permit you to tell him what’s important: perhaps deep feelings you have about him or a delicate, tentative

train of thought. And often you give your reader much more of the texture of your life in writing than you give on the phone or even in talking. You describe better that day in the woods or what struck you as you were walking to work. The uninterrupted monologue of writing permits you to tell what it was really like, to say what you really felt, to finish the whole story, instead of so often being sidetracked by the give and take of conversation.

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There are certain times in the natural cycle of any enterprise—a job, a trip, a relationship, a course of study, a writing task—when it is useful to stop and write out some of your thoughts and feelings.

- At the start. When you are starting a new job or course of study, for example, you will do much better if you sit down and write out your hopes and expectations and fears about what it's going to be like. If you write fast and freely you will discover important assumptions and feelings. "I wonder when this one will end." "If it's the right job for me, I'll love every minute." "School learning can't be useful and it's got to be boring."

The process of writing out your *goals* helps you in particular to come closer actually to achieving some of them, instead of being vaguely hopeful for a while and then vaguely disappointed. Writing helps you see which goals are actually attainable and which are unrealistic traps. You can see which ones conflict with which others. Try to zero in on a few important goals and force yourself to specify the first concrete steps. "I have to find so and so's phone number." "I have to get a pair of waterproof boots."

- Stuck points. When you are stuck at any task, you can often get going again by writing down everything that is going on. When did things start to go wrong? How would you describe the problem from where you now sit? Tell the sequence of events inside you; outside you. Even if this writing doesn't solve the problem, it heightens your awareness of this kind of problem so that next time you'll notice it sooner and deal with it better.

- Breakthroughs. It's such a relief to get out of a jam that you just want to forge ahead. But if you use some of that relief to fuel a short writing-break to tell yourself what you did right or what the necessary ingredients seemed to be—while it's fresh in your

mind—you will be more in charge next time and not just have to trust luck.

- Final reflections. At the end of a job or a series of meetings or a day, try writing briefly about what you did well and what you could have done better. This kind of conscious reflective writing can mean the difference between growing and just continuing to function at the same level. Much good learning I see here at The Evergreen State College comes from students having to write a reflection on what they have learned and how they learned it at the end of each quarter of study.

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Use writing to aid group process.

- At the start of a taskforce or series of meetings, it helps people to work together if you can get everyone to take a couple of moments to write about what they hope, think, and fear will happen, and then either to share these pieces of very informal writing or to speak briefly on the basis of them. Of course, people will disagree. "I'm looking forward to a close-knit comfortable friendly time." "I'm looking forward to some good knockdown dragout arguments." But it's a great benefit if these can be public right at the start. Some disagreements can actually be negotiated. Others can at least be accepted with realism. A few people may realize they've come to the wrong place and leave. When expectations are left unexpressed and the conflicts come as a surprise, it leads to that familiar pattern in group functioning where people have high hopes at the start and then gradually withdraw their involvement as they get disappointed—sometimes even sabotaging the enterprise as they pull out.

- If, in the middle of a meeting or seminar, a particularly hard question comes up, it is helpful to have everyone just write in an exploratory way for five or ten minutes. People will have better ideas. Like brainstorming, writing provides safety for exploring, but it doesn't take so much time. And if some people are habitually quiet so that you lose the benefit of their thinking and their point of view, it's probable that they want more time and privacy to reflect a moment on their first thoughts and check that they are not silly or obvious. Trying to talk and think at the same time is the bane of most meetings: some people love to do it and speak

badly and too much; others are reluctant to do it, so the group loses their contribution. (If those who work with you don't want to interrupt a meeting for reflective freewriting you can just tune out and do it yourself.)

- When a meeting ends, especially if the group will continue to meet in the future, it's useful to take just a few moments for everyone to write down a couple of perceptions about what was helpful and not so helpful about the process (for example, the agenda was well planned; someone was particularly good at formulating an issue; someone else kept interrupting). These perceptions can be quickly shared either on paper or in brief comments. No need necessarily to discuss them. Matters usually improve gradually by themselves through the airing of these perceptions. The goal is not to figure out the absolute truth, but to learn how people experienced things.

Obviously these writing tasks I propose for meetings could be performed by speaking rather than writing, and it is easy to assume that speaking is always more authentic, immediate, and genuine than writing. But if, for example, you decide to end a meeting with a few minutes of *spoken* feedback from everyone about the process, you will find that people often blather and don't really say what is on their mind. "I enjoyed the meeting. I think it would help a lot if we all tried to stick to the subject a bit more." If the person who said that had five minutes to write his thoughts down first, he would be much more likely to come out and say, "Larry, I think you are making it harder for us to get our work done because you keep interrupting people before they are finished, and when you talk you make long speeches. Please stop doing that."

The reason for the difference is interesting. If someone asks you to *speak* your perceptions in a group, you have to do three jobs at once: figure out what you think; figure out how to say it so others will understand; and also figure out whether you *want* to say it (especially if it is controversial or personal). Trying to do all three at once in front of an audience is difficult, and so you often solve the difficulty by deciding not to say anything at all. When you have the privacy to collect your thoughts in writing, however, you often find the courage to share a thought which, while you were writing it out, you assumed you could not share. Seeing your thought on paper somehow helps you see that it's not such a hard thing to say,

not such a big deal—makes it easier to say to yourself, “I don’t need to beat around the bush. It’s time someone was blunt with Larry about his behavior in meetings.”

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People usually assume that writing is always meant to communicate with others. When you use it that way you must think very carefully about it *as writing*. “Will these words really mean to the reader what they mean to me? Will they have the effect I assume they will have?” But writing is also very useful as a way to work out your thoughts and feelings for yourself alone. When you use it in this way as a process of exploration and discovery, you don’t have to think carefully about it as writing (however carefully you may think about the matter you are exploring). Oddly enough, writing as exploration usually helps your writing as communication.