THE ART OF HISTORY

HOW WRITING LEADS TO THINKING

Lynn Hunt | Feb 1, 2010

The Art of History is a new series of articles by senior scholars who are willing to share their thoughts on, and offer advice about, some aspect of the art and craft of historical research and writing, drawing upon their own experiences in particular. The series began with Caroline Walker Bynum's article "Teaching Scholarship".

Writing is stressful. Sitting in my computer chair my neck and shoulder muscles almost immediately tense up as I dig around in my brain for the best phrase or even any coherent string of words, whether I am writing an essay like this one, a book chapter, a letter of recommendation, or an email message to a friend. Writing is time-consuming. It's a great way to pass the time on a long airplane flight because you lose track of the passage of time altogether. It's even better, from that point of view exclusively, than watching an episode of *Mad Men* on your laptop. Writing means many different things to me but one thing it is not: writing is not the transcription of thoughts already consciously present in my mind. Writing is a magical and mysterious process that makes it possible to think differently.

Because writing is an act that is far from completely accessible to our conscious minds, recommendations about how to write history may well be irrelevant. And yet they are not useless, if they can make writing seem less like scaling a Himalayan peak after having spent a lifetime as a couch potato. I know that is how I felt when I confronted the task of writing my dissertation. Doing research seemed so much easier, even those days in French archives when the archivist seemed not to comprehend a word I was saying, or those nights when I lay awake wondering which two French cities of 1789 I should compare out of what seemed an endless array of choices. Notecards with city names—Amiens, Blois, Caen, Dieppe and so on—turned over in my dreams, which is an awful waste of dreamscapes. But no, there is nothing quite like the terror of the blank page or the empty computer screen in front of you.

My first rule, in such a situation, is not to look at notes. In the era of digitized databases, digital photographs of manuscripts and archives, and digital copies of notes taken of books and archives, such a rule is yet more imperative. Even when I was preparing my

dissertation, when my handwritten notes could fit into a carry-on suitcase (it was blue with a flowery pattern and more or less joined to me at the hip when traveling), the rereading of notes posed a serious menace. Some of my fellow dissertators spent months going over their notes hoping for manna from heaven, a eureka moment, or just enough inspiration to get started. Reorganizing your notes is a form of house cleaning; it might make you feel good about yourself as a tidy person, but it will not produce a chapter—or even a page. Only writing can do that.

I say this in part, I confess, because I have always been and will always be, I hope, a terrible note taker. Before the computer revolution—that is, for my dissertation and my first two books—I took notes longhand on yellow legal pads, had no filing system, and in any case, once I started writing, I discovered, as many do, that I had taken notes on the wrong parts of books or documents or had not written down something crucial such as the page number or the exact French wording.

Documents that have turned out to be vital to my argument, which I only discovered sometimes after writing the draft of a chapter, usually required multiple consultations, which makes having copies handy, to be sure, but it is usually impractical to copy everything, even if you knew what that everything was. Taking notes, and even more so, ordering microfilms, photocopying or digitally photographing documents, will not get you to the heart of the problem. At least while taking notes you have done some thinking, but in general, your thoughts will remain stalled in the fog of infinite possibilities until you start writing them, not as notes, but as prose arguments.

My second rule, when looking at the blank screen, is called the “radish rule” in honor of my grandmother, who never published anything but did produce many radishes in her garden. Every day in the summer she would call my mother and inform her of the number of radishes in her garden at that moment, a number that grew steadily over time until the end of the season. You want the number of your pages to increase steadily over time, culminating in the completion of a first draft. Whether you use an outline or not (I jot down bullet points in no particular order as a way of starting), what really counts is momentum, not momentum as in a jet racing forward to the completion of its route but rather momentum as in three steps forward, two steps back, two or three pages written (maybe even five!), then revised the next day while another one, two or three are added, and so on. If you are tearing up all your pages and throwing them away day after day, if you are changing your tack every day you sit down, if you are waiting for inspiration to come before writing the next page, your problem is not intellectual, it is most likely psychological, painfully so.

Admittedly, momentum requires a certain tunnel vision. This is one of the dirtiest of the dirty little secrets about writing. Everything about history and life itself is potentially infinite (except one’s life span, unfortunately). There is always another document that

could have been consulted, just as there is always another fact about a friend or partner that if you knew would make you understand her or him better. But life is short and if you want to write more than a dissertation or one book or two books and so on, you have to limit yourself to what can be done in a certain time frame. You cannot accumulate pages if you constantly second guess yourself. You have to second guess yourself just enough to make constant revision productive and not debilitating. You have to believe that clarity is going to come, not all at once, and certainly not before you write, but eventually, if you work at it hard enough, it will come. Thought does emerge from writing. Something ineffable happens when you write down a thought. You think something you did not know you could or would think and it leads you to another thought almost unbidden.

What is that something ineffable and how do I know this? I do not belong to some kind of occult organization with special séances on the magic of writing, unless you want to so describe, with some reason, the guild of scholars more generally. Everyone who has written at any substantial length, whether prose or poetry, knows that the process of writing itself leads to previously unthought thoughts. Or to be more precise, writing crystallizes previously half-formulated or unformulated thoughts, gives them form, and extends chains of thoughts in new directions. Neuroscience has shown that 95 percent of brain activity is unconscious. My guess about what happens is that by physically writing—whether by hand, by computer, or by voice activation (though I have no experience of the latter)—you set a process literally into motion, a kind of shifting series of triangulations between fingers, blank pages or screens, letters and words, eyes, synapses or other "neural instantiations," not to mention guts and bladders. By writing, in other words, you are literally firing up your brain and therefore stirring up your conscious thoughts and something new emerges. You are not, or at least not always, transcribing something already present in your conscious thoughts. Is it any wonder that your neck gets stiff?

Even as your pages proliferate like my grandmother's radishes, they must be weeded and thinned out if they are to grow to an optimal size. Nothing is more important to writing than the weeding, thinning, mulching, and watering that is known as revision. Sometimes another eye provides the added sunlight needed for new growth. I have picked up countless tips about writing from the editors assigned the thankless task of improving my prose, whether in a scholarly book or a textbook. You can only really figure out what you think if you first put it on paper and then develop some distance from it. It has to be a part of yourself, but a part that you are willing to release from yourself. Most problems in writing come from the anxiety caused by the unconscious realization that what you write is you and has to be held out for others to see. You are naked and shivering out on that limb that seems likely to break off and bring you tumbling down into the ignominy of being accused of inadequate research, muddy unoriginal analysis, and clumsy writing. So you hide yourself behind jargon, opacity, circuitousness, the passive voice, and a seeming reluctance to get to the point. It is so much safer there in the foliage that blocks the reader's comprehension, but in the end so unsatisfying. No one cares because they cannot

figure out what you mean to say. How much better it is to stand up before the firing line and discover that no one ordered your execution. The most the critics want is an intense fencing match, and you are more than up to the challenge because you have honed the edges of your research and said forthrightly what you thought.

You do not need to believe me, because professional help is always around the corner. The best advice about writing that I ever got was many years ago from the poet and prose writer Donald Hall. His book *Writing Well* was then in an early, if not a first, edition (it is now in its ninth), but he also generously read the pages of those of us who were junior fellows in the Michigan Society of Fellows. He was a senior fellow, and I knew that my dissertation needed serious work. From him I learned that writing requires an unending effort at something resembling authenticity. Most mistakes come from not being yourself, not saying what you think, or being afraid to figure out what you really think. His approach was not at all solipsistic, for he also recommended a different kind of attention to others who write. When you are reading a book that grabs you, consider how the author accomplishes that effect. What is it that draws you in? What makes you think it beautiful or forceful or astute? Which quality do you cherish most? What can you learn about writing from it? Assistance is available close at hand but you have to know where to look for it.

In short, one is not born a writer but rather becomes one. Learning to write well is a lifelong endeavor. Graduate programs tend to assume that students come with already acquired writing skills that simply need to be polished. History instructors only rarely if ever give courses in writing; we assume that graduate students learn by osmosis, by imitation, and by correction of flagrant errors. We have begun to pay more attention to teaching as a learnable skill. We should do the same with writing. Even if there is no one way to do it well and no recipes to follow, we all might benefit from more attention to writing. I know I always can.

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