

# writing

A GUIDE TO NARRATIVE CRAFT

Tenth Edition

# fiction

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# 1. Whatever Works

## THE WRITING PROCESS

### Get Started

- Keeping a Journal
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- Prompts
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### A Word about Theme

You want to write. Why is it so hard?

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

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

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

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

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

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

It helps to know that most writers share the paradox of least wanting to do what we most want to do. It also helps to know some of the reasons for our reluctance. Fear of what could emerge on the page, and what it may reveal about our inner lives, can keep us from getting started. "What's called writer's block," claims novelist Tom Wolfe, "is almost always ordinary fear." Indeed, whenever I ask a group of writers what they find most difficult, a significant number answer that they feel they aren't good enough, that the empty page intimidates them, that they are in some way afraid. Many complain of their own laziness, but laziness, like money, doesn't really exist except to represent something else—in this case fear, severe self-judgment, or what Natalie Goldberg calls "the cycle of guilt, avoidance, and pressure."

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

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

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### GET STARTED

The variety of authors' habits suggests that there is no magic to be found in any particular one. Donald Hall spent a dozen hours a day at his desk, moving back and forth between as many projects. Philip Larkin said that he wrote a poem only every eighteen months or so and never tried to write one that was not a gift. Gail Godwin goes to her workroom every day "because what if the angel came and I wasn't there?" Julia Alvarez begins the day by reading first poetry, then prose, by her favorite writers "to remind me of the quality of writing I am aiming for." Like Hemingway, Andre Dubus advised students to stop writing midsentence in order to begin the next day by completing the thought, thereby reentering the creative flow. Yelizaveta P. Renfro always begins with lists, "often in the margins or endpapers of books I'm reading." T. C. Boyle starts knowing "nothing. Nothing at all. The first line comes and I start." Shawn Wong wants "to hear the language in my ears before I start writing." Dickens could not deal with people when he was working: "The mere consciousness of an engagement will worry a whole day." Thomas Wolfe wrote standing up. Some writers can plop at the kitchen table without clearing the breakfast dishes; others need total seclusion, a beach, a cat, a string quartet.

There is something to be learned from all this, though. It is not an "open sesame" but a piece of advice older than fairy tales: Know thyself. The bottom line is that if you do not at some point write your story down, it will not get written. Having decided that you will write it, the question is not "How do you get it done?" but "How do you get it done?" Any discipline or indulgence that helps nudge you into position facing the

page is acceptable and productive. If jogging after breakfast energizes your mind, then jog before you sit. If you have to pull an all-nighter on a coffee binge, do that. Some schedule, regularity, pattern in your writing day (or night) will always help, but only you can figure out what that pattern is for you.

But you don't have time! It's true, you don't. You have a job, six courses, two kids, a dying parent, a divorce. I know; I've gone through all those things. One truth is that these hour-eaters will never get any easier; obligations and pleasures accumulate, and if you're lucky, life is always too full. If you're not, it's worse. So it's not that there will be no better time to develop the writing habit; there will no other time.

*Another really important part of my writing process is that I have a writing group.... You sit down, you're in a room, everyone has the experience together.*

—Jennifer Egan

Yet I believe it is not really, or not mainly, a question of time. I used to fret that I never had time to write—yet I notice that I have time to read the morning op-eds, do some stretching exercises, put fresh flowers on the table, read one more chapter of fiction, have a glass of wine in front of the evening news, catch whatever late-night comic grabs my attention before I go to bed. What all those things have in common is that I don't make myself do them; I allow myself. The lesson is not that I should give up any of those pleasures in order to write. It's that I should allow myself also to write every day. It is not a duty; it's what I want to do and am willing to structure my life to do. Try—over and over again, if necessary—to think of that writing time, wherever it falls in your day, however short or long it is, as the time you allow yourself to indulge in this activity that is not an obligation but a choice.

### *Keeping a Journal*

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

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

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

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

### *Freewriting and Freedrafting*

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

anything on paper and I mean anything, it doesn't matter as long as it's coming out of your head and the ends of your fingers, down onto the page I wonder if I'm improving, if this process gets me going better now than it did all those—however many years

ago? I know my typing is geting worse, deteriorating even as we speak (are we speaking? to whom? IN what forM? I love it when i hit the caps button by mistake, it makes me wonder whether there isn;t something in the back or bottom of the brain that sez PAY ATTENTION now, which makes me think of a number of things, freud and his slip o tonuge, self-deception, the myriad way it operates in everybody's life, no not everybody's but in my own exp. llike Aunt Ch. mourniong for the dead cats whenevershe hasn't got her way and can't disconnect one kind of sadness from another, I wonder if we ever disconnect kinds of sadness, if the first homesickness doesn;t operatfor everybody the same way it does for me, grandma's house the site of it, the grass out the window and the dog rolling a tin pie plate under the willow tree, great heavy hunger in the belly, the empty weight of loss, loss, loss

That's freewriting. Its point is to keep going, and that is the only point. When the critic intrudes and tells you that what you're doing is awful, tell the critic to take a dive, or acknowledge her/him ("typing is geting worse") and keep writing. If you work on a computer, try dimming the screen so you can't see what you're doing. At times, you might find it liberating to freewrite to music, random or selected. If you freewrite often, pretty soon you'll be bored with writing about how you don't feel like writing (though that is as good a subject as any) and will find your mind and your phrases running on things that interest you. Fine. The subject doesn't matter, nor does the quality of the writing. Freewriting is the literary equivalent of scales at the piano or a short gym workout. All that matters is that you do it. The verbal muscles will develop of their own accord.

Though freewriting is mere technique, it can affect the freedom of the content. Many writers feel themselves to be an instrument-through-

*When I stare at a blank page  
where I'm supposed to build  
worlds and lives, I think that  
maybe I shouldn't be doing  
this after all. But if I start with  
something, with one thing,  
everything follows.*

**—Tabitha Chartos**

which, rather than a creator-of, and whether you think of this possibility as humble or holy, it is worth finding out what you say when you aren't monitoring yourself. Fiction is written not so much to inform as to find out, and if you force yourself into a mode of informing when you haven't yet found out, you're likely to end up pontificating or lying in some other way.

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

Freedrafting, as you might expect, is a slightly more focused and directed way of getting the juices flowing. You’ve done a freewrite that suggests an interesting character, or you want to catch what that smell from the pantry reminds you of, or you’re midway into a story and you haven’t quite caught the dialogue between these two. Focus on the interest or the problem, jot a list, maybe, of whatever associations you may have, then take a breath, stare into space, and launch yourself forward, focusing on the subject at hand but making no corrections and no judgments. You’re not expecting a piece that’s polished or even well-spelled. You’re giving your subconscious the best way it has of finding the way onward.

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#### KEEP GOING

##### Prompts

Exercises, or prompts, can be helpful for writers at all stages. They help you get started, and they can give you focus—whether you are writing in

your journal, doing those early morning pages Brande suggests, sneaking in a bit of freewriting during the day, or trying to get to that next scene in a story.

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

Gymnasts practice. Pianists practice. Artists sketch. Prompts are a form of writerly practice, a way to exercise your skills, develop them, hone them, make them stronger.

Each chapter of *Writing Fiction* will end with some prompts designed to help you get started and move further into the issues discussed along the way. You can also find books of exercises (*What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter has deservedly become a classic). *Glimmer Train* publishes a quarterly pamphlet of advice and perspectives called "Writers Ask." And there are numerous websites with prompts and exercises; one I especially like is published by *Poets and Writers* magazine. The online *Brevity* magazine has short and pithy craft essays. Internet help is also offered by *LitHub*, *Catapult*, and *Narrative Magazine*.

### The Computer

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

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

Nobody, I think, denies that email and social media are enemies of concentration. The tricky question is not how those gremlins are best handled but, as with your writing habits in general, how you best handle them. Do you operate most efficiently by first clearing the petty distractions out of the way? Maybe. But it's countless writers' experience that whatever you start on absorbs you. "Do the most important thing first," says Warren Buffett, who, though not known for his fiction, gets a lot done. If the first thing you tackle is fiction, the emails recede to the end of the day. If it's Snapchat, you may find yourself, hours later, wondering where the time has gone. Maybe you're someone who can afford to check your email every half hour. Maybe. Or are you like the addict who deceives himself with the promise of just one more . . . ? Figure it out for yourself honestly, and then follow where honesty leads you. Allow yourself to do the thing you really want to do. That meme will wait. Today's Twitter will be gone tomorrow. Your work, your friends, and your family matter. That latest app? Not so much.

***Forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories.***  
***Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice.***

—Octavia Butler

### The Critic: A Caution

The cautionary note that needs to be sounded regarding all the techniques and technology that free you to write is this: they are nourishing to inspiration, but they are only half the art. Revision—the heart of the writing process—will continue until you finally finish or abandon a piece of work. The revising process is continuous and begins as soon as you choose to let your critic in. Freewriting and prompts allow you to create before you criticize, to do the essential play before the essential

work. But don't forget the essential work. The computer helps you to write a lot by making it easy to cut. Don't forget to do so.

### *Choosing a Subject*

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

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

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

The kind of "writing what you know" that is least likely to produce good fiction is trying to tell just exactly what happened to you at such and such a time. Probably all good fiction is "autobiographical" in some way, but the awful or hilarious or tragic thing you went through may offer as many problems as possibilities when you start to turn it into fiction. The first of these is that, to the extent you want to capture "what really happened," you remove your focus from what will work as narrative. Young writers, offended by being told that a piece is unconvincing, often defend themselves by declaring that it really happened. But credibility in words has almost nothing to do with fact. Aristotle went so far

as to say that a “probable impossibility” makes a better story than an “improbable possibility,” meaning that a skillful author can sell us glass mountains, UFOs, and hobbits, while a less skilled writer may not be able to convince us that Mary Lou has a crush on Sam.

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

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

Good. Now: what was it about this experience that made it matter to you? Try writing a very brief summary of what happened—no more than a hundred words. What are you going to cook? What kind of story might this be? Can the raw material of incident, accident, and choice be reshaped, plumped up, pared to the bone, fleshed, differently spiced? You experienced whatever it was chronologically—but is that the best way to tell it so as to bring out its meaning? Perhaps you watched events develop over a period of months or years; what is the smallest number of scenes in the least amount of time that could contain the action? If “you” are at the center of the action then “you” must be thoroughly characterized, and that may be difficult. Can you augment some aspect of yourself, change yourself so you are forced to see anew, even make someone else the central character? Try freewriting moments from your memory in no particular order. Or freedraft the last scene first. Describe a place and exaggerate the atmosphere: if it’s cold, make it murderously

cold, if messy, then a disastrous mess. Describe the central character, and be at least partly unflattering. All of these are devices to put some distance between you and the raw experience so you can begin to shape the different thing that fiction is.

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

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

The essential thing is that you write about something you care about, and the first step is to find out what that is. Playwright Claudia Johnson advises her students to identify their real concerns by making a “menu” of them. Start with the big emotions and make lists in your journal: What makes you angry? What are you afraid of? What do you want? What hurts? Or consider the crucial turning points of your life: What

***What you read is as important  
as what you write.***

—Margaret Atwood

really changed you? Who really changed you? Those will be the areas to look to for stories, whether or not those stories are autobiographical. Novelist Ron Carlson says, “I always write from my own experiences, whether I’ve had them or not.”

Another journal idea is to jot down the facts of the first seven years of your life under several categories: Events, People, Your Body, Your Emotions, Your Relation to the Cosmos, Valued Things. What from those first seven years still occupies your mind? Underline or highlight the items that you aren’t done with yet. Those items are clues to your concerns and a possible source of storytelling.

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

Identifying what we care about is not always easy. We are surrounded by a constant barrage of information, drama, social media, theories, and judgments offered to us live, in print, and electronically. It is so much easier to know what we ought to think and feel than what we actually do. Worthy authorities constantly exhort us to care about worthy causes, only a few of which really touch us, whereas what we do care about at any given moment may seem trivial, egotistical, or self-serving.

This, I think, is in large part the value of Brande’s first exercise, which forces you to write in the intuitively honest period of first light, when the half-sleeping brain is still dealing with its real concerns. Often what seems unworthy is precisely the thing that contains a universal, and by catching it honestly, then stepping back from it, you may achieve the authorial distance that is an essential part of significance. (All you really care about this morning is how you’ll look at the dance tonight? This is a trivial obsession that can hit anyone, at any age, anywhere. Write about it as honestly as you can. Now who else might have felt this way? Someone

you hate? Someone remote in time from you? Look out: You're on your way to a story.)

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

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

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

**The Connection.** You notice a striking similarity in two events, people, places, or periods that are fundamentally unlike. The more you explore the similarity, the more striking it becomes. My novel *The Buzzards* came from such a connection: The daughter of a famous politician was murdered, and I found myself in the position of comforting the dead young woman's fiancé. At the same time I was writing lectures on the Aeschylus play *Agamemnon*. Two politicians, two murdered daughters—one

in ancient Greece and one in contemporary America. The connection would not let go of me until I had thought it through and set it down.

**The Memory.** Certain people, places, and events stand out in your memory with an intensity beyond logic. There's no earthly reason you should remember the smell of Aunt K's rouge. It makes no sense that you still flush with shame at the thought of that ball you "borrowed" when you were in fourth grade. But

for some reason these things remain vivid in your mind. That vividness can be explored, embellished, given form. Stephen Minot in *Three Genres* wisely advises, though, that if you are going to write from a memory, it should be a memory more than a year old. Otherwise you will likely be unable to distinguish between what happened and what must happen in the story or between what is in your mind and what you have conveyed on the page.

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

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

*If you sit there long enough,  
you collect enough sentences to  
make a book. It's just chipping  
and chipping away.*

—D. B. C. Pierre

A story idea may come from any source at any time. You may not know you have an idea until you spot it in the random jottings of your journal. Once you've identified the idea, the process of thinking it through begins and doesn't end until you finish (or abandon) the story. Most writing is done between the mind and the hand, not between the hand and the page. It may take a fairly competent typist about three hours to type a twelve-page story. It may take days or months to write it. It follows that, even when you are writing well, most of the time spent writing is not spent putting words on the page. If the story idea grabs hard hold of you, the process of thinking through may be involuntary, a gift. If not, you need to find the inner stillness that will allow you to develop your characters, get to know them, follow their actions in your mind—and it may take an effort of the will to find such stillness.

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

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

Many writers have observed that it is ideal, having turned your story over in your mind, to write the first draft at one sitting, pushing on through the action to the conclusion, no matter how dissatisfied you are with this paragraph, that character, this phrasing, or that incident. There are two advantages to doing this. The first is that you are more

likely to produce a coherent draft when you come to the desk in a single frame of mind, with a single vision of the whole, than when you write piecemeal, with altered ideas and moods. The second is that fast writing tends to make for fast pace in the story. It is always easier, later, to add and develop than it is to sharpen the pace. If you are the sort of writer who stays on page one for days, shoving commas around and combining the thesaurus for a word with slightly better connotations, then you should probably force yourself to try this method (more than once). A note of caution, though: If you write a draft at one sitting, it will not be the draft you want to show anyone, so schedule the sitting well in advance of whatever deadline you may have.

It may happen—keeping in mind that a single-sitting draft is the ideal—that as you write, the story takes off of its own accord in some direction other than you intended. You thought you knew where you were going and now you don't, and you know that unless you stop for a while and think it through again, you'll go wrong. You may find that although you are doing precisely what you had in mind, it doesn't work—Brian Moore called this “the place where the story gets sick,” and often found he had to retrace his steps from an unlikely plot turn or unnatural character action. At such times, the story needs more imaginative mulching before it will bear fruit. Or you may find, simply, that your stamina gives out, and that though you have done your exercises, been steadfast and loyal, and practiced every writerly virtue known, you're stuck. You have writer's block.

Writer's block is not so popular as it used to be. I suspect people got tired of hearing or even talking about it—sometimes writers can be sensitive even to their own clichés. But it may also be that writers began to understand and accept their difficulties. Sometimes the process seems to require working yourself into a muddle and past the muddle to despair; until you have done this, it may be impossible suddenly to see what the shape of a thing ought to be. When you're writing, this feels terrible. You sit spinning your wheels, digging deeper and deeper into the mental muck. You decide you are going to trash the whole thing and walk away from it—only you can't, and you keep coming back to it like a tongue to an aching tooth. Or you decide you are going to sit there

until you bludgeon it into shape—and as long as you sit there it remains recalcitrant. W. H. Auden observed that the hardest part of writing is not knowing whether you are procrastinating or must wait for the words to come.

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

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

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

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

### *Reading as a Writer*

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

Ask yourself as you read: What is memorable, effective, moving? Re-read, watching for the techniques that produced those reactions in you. Why did the author choose to begin at this point? How does she engage

my attention, make me wonder what will happen, make my heart race for the character? Why did she choose this image, this setting, this ending? You can also learn from stories that don't move you. How could you have handled the same material? What would you have changed, and how? Be greedy as an author: What can I learn from this story? What can I imitate, steal?

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#### A WORD ABOUT THEME

The process of discovering, choosing, and revealing the theme of your story begins as early as a first freewrite and continues, probably, beyond publication. The theme is what your story is about and what you think about it, its core and the spin you put on it. John Gardner points out that theme "is not imposed on the story but evoked from within it—initially an intuitive but finally an intellectual act on the part of the writer."

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

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

*And there are people who want to be writers because they love to write.... Because they love the process and... through that process they realize they become more intelligent and more honest and more imaginative than they can be in any other part of their life.*

—**Russell Banks**

### SUGGESTED READINGS

*What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*

Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter

*Becoming a Writer*

Dorothea Brande

*How to Write Short*

Roy Peter Clark

“Why I Write”

Joan Didion

*The Writing Life*

Annie Dillard

“Message from a Cloud of Flies: On Distraction”

Bonnie Friedman

*The Art of Fiction*

John Gardner

“Shitty First Drafts”

Anne Lamott

*The Subversive Copy Editor*

Carol Fisher Saller

*One Writer’s Beginnings*

Eudora Welty

### WRITING PROMPTS

1. Keep a journal for two weeks. Then decide on a comfortable amount to write daily, and determine not to let a day slide. In addition to the journal suggestions in this chapter, you might try these:

- Open any book and point at random. Take the noun nearest where your finger falls and make a quick list of anything it suggests to you. Freedraft a paragraph about it.
- Take note of bumper stickers as you encounter them. When you have a half dozen or so, pick one and quickly list what you remember about the car, its make, model, color, condition—or make it up. Then freedraft a portrait of the car’s owner.

- Identify the kernel of a story from your experience of one of the following: first memory; angry parent; lost object; unfounded fear; haircut.
2. Every morning for a week, sit down before breakfast and freewrite a paragraph of whatever comes into your head. At the end of the week, read the pages over, circling any word, phrase, person, place, or thought that seems interesting to you. Pick one. Freedraft a page about it.
  3. Make a list of a dozen things you know nothing about. Pick one at random and freedraft a paragraph about it.
  4. Write a short memoir that has to do with reading or writing—the moment you discovered you could read or write your name, for example, or the class where you practiced making letters, or the person who inspired you to write. Is there the kernel of a story here?
  5. Write a short passage about why you want to write. Write another about why it's so hard. Imagine someone radically different from yourself in some way. Write a page in which you attribute something of that desire and that difficulty to this other person.
  6. Make a list of the first ten things that come into your head. Pick one. Make a list of the first ten things it brings to mind. Pick one. Write a paragraph about it.
  7. Pick one of these phrases and, beginning with it, use it to freedraft a page:
    - After supper he would always . . .
    - In my favorite photo . . . ?
    - But why did she have to . . . ?
    - I took one look and . . .
    - That little space made me feel . . .
    - Then the door opened and . . .