

What Would a Writer Do?

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What Would a Writer Do?

PAUL ALLEN

A NUMBER of years ago I was teaching three to four freshman composition classes plus a creative writing class each semester while trying to write poems and to start a creative writing program at the College of Charleston. Between grading freshman essays and driving writers to and from the airport, studying my lessons in *Steps to Writing Well* and walking up and down Charleston's main streets posting announcements of readings, I became so desperate for coherence that I simply let my composition students spend more time around the visiting writers.

But as the semesters went on, my freshmen (also out of desperation, I suspect) began teaching me that the writers who came here were offering them lessons that the students themselves applied to their essay writing. They didn't know enough, I thought, to realize that the poets and fiction writers were on a different plane altogether, but I was too harried to correct them. Perhaps the first time I recognized the benefits they were gaining was a few days after the poet David Wagoner read here. A student from whom I'd come to expect only marginal work turned in a fine piece of writing, more polished and clear than anything he had previously turned in. When I asked him what the turnaround was all about, he said, "Well, you know that poet that was here?" (What? He didn't know the name of the poet? Give me author, title, and significance!)

"David Wagoner?"

"Whatever. He said something that made me keep working on my paper. Somebody asked him why he worked so hard on his poems, and he said, 'Well, you want to be remembered in life. And why should you be remembered if you don't do anything memorable?' I just wanted to see what I could do if I wanted to be remembered for this essay."

When a student from Basic Writing Skills class began writing much more interesting, better-developed paragraphs, she told me she had heard the poet Pattiann Rogers say that she often wrote poems by writing on a legal pad, a quick draft. Then she turned the page and didn't look at it again. The next day, still not looking at the first version, Rogers wrote a second version, following whatever course the poem wanted to take—and so on, day after day until she felt as if she were repeating herself. Then she spread the sheets of paper out, picked

the best lines and images, and typed out what she called her *first* draft and began working from that. The student herself decided to try the process with paragraphs.

We might think that in interviews, personal and "craft" essays, readings, and receptions "creative writers" are speaking only to our poets and fiction writers. Not so. Freshman composition is writing, and the teaching of it does not have to be contrary to studying the methods of poets and fiction writers.

Writers talk about the work in terms of the life. Indeed, the title of William Stafford's latest book on writing is *You Must Revise Your Life*, no doubt taken from Rilke's sonnet on the antique bust of Apollo, "Archaischer Torso Apollon," whose last line reads "Du musst dein Leben ändern" "You must change your life."¹ Students require a fundamental change in attitude if they are to write as well as they can, and writers themselves can help students with that fundamental change.

The poet Howard Moss says that craft must serve art: "To create a beautiful house you may have to learn the whole history of architecture, and math, etc., but you don't learn that for itself. You learn it in order to make a beautiful house" (276). I submit that in composition classes students are often learning craft without art, and without the art, they have no need for craft, because they aren't building what is to them the "beautiful house."

I'd like to propose some principles for the art of writing that writers offer freshmen composition students.

Obsessive Thinking

One night in Oxford while Phil Stone made the drinks, Emily Stone guided William Faulkner upstairs to show off the curtains. Halfway up the stairs she said, "Oh Bill, you didn't notice the new figurines downstairs on the mantel." "Emily," Faulkner said, "I notice everything." And whenever she tells the story, Emily adds with

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delight, “It’s true! He noticed the most minute things.” John Frederick Nims, the poet and translator who wrote *Western Wind*, the classic introduction to poetry, once told some of my students that the one piece of advice he’d give a beginning writer is to “notice everything.”

Serious writers recognize a kind of obsession with their work. John Gardner says that writers should have “accuracy of eye” in their observations of the world around them (19). The British novelist John Braine, author of *Room at the Top*, writes, “Time spent in thinking about anything else but one’s craft and the material of that craft, which is the whole visible, tangible world, is wasted time” (64). Many writers seem to know that their work is on their minds, consciously or subconsciously, at all times. Wallace Stevens, for example, separated his work and his writing life, yet according to his co-workers, he would scribble on his poems at the office intermittently with his insurance work and even send office personnel to look up words in the *OED* at the State Library (Brazeau 25).

So how do we get students to keep their essays in mind at all times? Can writers open composition students to the serendipitous image that comes out of seemingly unrelated work yet which makes their papers so individual, with—to paraphrase Robert Frost—surprises for the writer and the reader?

We are capable of taking in about 480 words per minute; we can utter 120. The 360-word difference is filled in with thought, observation, reverie—mind wandering. Since the mind does in fact wander, why not let students start learning to tap that resource, just as writers do? It is simply a lot of one-room-schoolhouse-turn-of-the-century-knuckle-rapping-dunce-cap nonsense to reprimand a student for reverie during class or to think that such reverie undermines the lesson in writing. We can work with that reverie.

Instead of faulting students for looking out the window, we should encourage them to take notes on the woolgathering—in other classes as well as in ours, day and night.

As Henry James advises, “Be one on whom nothing is ever lost” (403). When I ask my students to turn in their essays along with preliminary notes, I receive notes that were written on napkins, envelopes. I get photocopies of algebra and biology class notes with ideas for their English papers in the margins. I have received Styrofoam cups covered with writing, crushed to fit in the students’ folders. When I passed one student on campus, he showed me a note on his arm, an observation he had taken down while driving to school—not unlike Frost’s writing on his shoe soles (11).

Commitment

John Braine reminds writers that they must give considerations of “self” over to the work: “You must realize

that you yourself don’t matter. Only the work matters” (48). All serious writers understand this concept as an element of the process, the writer’s working for an altered state of concentration. The problem for the teacher is how to induce it so that students can experience writing in the way writers do.

Most writers give themselves assignments in order to lose themselves in the work. It might be a time frame in which to write on a given day or a sense of how finished a poem should be by a certain time. In fiction, often it’s a quota of pages.

Of the dozens of writers who have talked with our students, most say they work for pages, blocks of time, or some other kind of self-imposed assignment. In this context we remember Hemingway’s diligence. George Plimpton tells us that Hemingway was precise in keeping track of his daily progress—“so as not to kid [him]self—on a large chart. . . . The numbers on the chart showing the daily output of words differ from 450, 575, 462, 1250, back to 512, the higher figures on days Hemingway puts in extra work so he won’t feel guilty spending the following day fishing on the Gulf Stream” (219).

As Joseph Campbell says in the PBS television series *The Power of Myth*, “Rituals wear you out, and then you break through to something else.” When students shoot for time or pages, something new happens to the images and ideas simply because the students are wearing themselves down, wearing down their egos. As Norman Cousins writes in *Human Opinions*, writing “is the one fatigue that produces inspiration, the exhaustion that exhilarates” (186).

Unless the teacher designs assignments with this concept of commitment in mind, students may never get a chance to know it and thus to understand it as a valuable goal in writing. In suggesting that the writer must have a “daemonic compulsiveness,” Gardner writes, “No novelist is hurt (at least as an artist) by a natural inclination to go to extremes, driving himself too hard” (62).

I saw a program on PBS a couple of years ago that revealed how doctors who treat cancer often hold back on the appropriate doses of chemotherapy to spare patients the suffering caused by the therapy itself. The same thing often happens in the treatment of student’s writing maladies. Given the students’ wrinkled brows, teachers reduce the necessary tasks, time, or pages. Consequently, the student doesn’t break through the tedium, boredom, and soft familiarities to discover the excitement, joy, and accomplishment of real writing.

Writers strive for a discernible physical feeling, and when students can experience that feeling, then working on grammar, punctuation, or logic is easy, simply an extension of the experience.

Student athletes let their coach run them around and around a track; the coach determines how long they can

last (“Two more laps and you can come in”). Writing teachers have no less a responsibility than athletic coaches to help their students push through immediate comfort to achieve some real growth in writing.²

Priorities

What separates writers from nonwriters is often simply their differences in priorities. It is effective, therefore, to help students put their writing in perspective. To get the best writing from themselves, students must protect their writing from outside distractions, guard against their own excuses for less than their best effort, and rediscover *Spieltrieb* ‘the play spirit’ in language.

On the subject of distraction, Stacey Chase, the Bernard J. O’Keefe Scholar in nonfiction at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in 1988, says that the three words of advice the writer Andre Dubus gave her at their first meeting were “Piss on it.” She explains: “The ‘it’ was anything that prevented me from writing—bills, errands, my job; all the annoyances of daily living I complained got in my way. Piss on it—that was Dubus’s encouragement to me” (109).

Just when their subconscious is about to give students a juicy turn of invention, for example, a call from a store saying a check has bounced will pull them immediately out of the world of the work. Explaining to a class of freshmen how their concentration and rhythm may be thrown off at the whim of “outsiders” is not a wasted lesson. Teaching students to write better often means teaching them that they must make choices about life as much as about their writing.

Students, like all writers, must also learn to be on guard against their own excuses. For example:

I didn’t have time. One day the College of Charleston writer-in-residence, Bret Lott, and I met at the mailboxes fifteen minutes before class. Rather than get a cup of coffee, Bret decided to grade one paper. I had coffee. The next morning he used that fifteen minutes to work on his novel while I was at home frantically grading papers, another day with no progress on a poem.

What students discover if we help them manage their time is that, as all writers know, there is an implied coordinate: “I didn’t have time to do the assignment *and* make the banner.” Teachers do it too: “I don’t have time to do scholarship *and* paint my mailbox.” As long as the coordinate remains unstated, lack of time sounds legitimate. But when we articulate those *and*’s, most sound quite trivial. With empathy, we ought to help students articulate the coordinates. Balancing family, teaching, and writing is difficult, but as Braine warns:

Most people accept that to sit on a committee, to learn to play a musical instrument, to learn one’s lines for a play, require a definite expenditure of time and absence from the

family circle. It’s only writing which is supposed to be the result of some magic process, which isn’t to be taken seriously. (19–20)

All writers have to deal with the time excuse.

I need a break. Writers learn that a break at the wrong time may mean the loss of an impending idea. We need to explain to students that the mind will call for a break in any number of ways and that they should be on guard; the desire for a break may actually be the mind’s way of keeping the writer from having to work with the idea that is about to surface.

To ask students to work for an hour in class on a paper they have already begun may help, if we watch them. As each one looks up or stretches, we can be the reminder to get back to work immediately. About ten minutes before the end of class, we should stop to discuss new ideas that came after the students felt frustrated or bored. Asking students to write twenty pages over a forty-eight-hour period also will give them a sense of that frustration and the value of “pushing through” the desire for too many breaks.

I can’t find anything to write about. Or I can’t write about something that I’m not interested in. On the surface, that excuse seems legitimate. What students need to understand, however, is that for a writer the interest doesn’t come with a choice of subject but evolves through the writing.

Whether the task is to write a personal essay or a critical analysis, the student can always generate something, just as writers do. Winfield Townley Scott writes, “I want to start with a room—a house—a street corner—a town—a city—and *see if I can be taken* from there” (150; italics mine). And Richard Hugo once enforced on himself the rule not to use the same subject in consecutive sentences, noting, “It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs” (“Writing” 4–5). Students just need to keep pen to paper.

A final priority is to begin replacing the lost sense of *Spieltrieb*. Writers never lost the sense of fun they had babbling in their cribs or saying tongue twisters on the back steps with their cousins. Writers know that language is something not so much to use as to do (“Syllables / are the things I do, and do them carefully. . . .” [Lynch 3]). Hugo writes, “One way of getting into the world of the imagination is to focus on the play rather than the value of words” (“Triggering Town” 16). Frost puts it this way: “All the fun’s in how you say a thing” (qtd. in Nims 129).

Teaching students to play with language and ideas as legitimate activities of process is to teach them a great deal about thinking as writers. Pattiann Rogers’s inadvertent lesson on drafting poetry—or paragraphs—mentioned earlier is an example of productive “play.”

Another might be based on Frost's "discovery." In a mess of terrible language in an early Frost poem is the line "Its two banks had not shut upon the river." In discussing the poem, Nims tells us that Frost recognized in that line the voice he was to develop over the course of his career. Instead of reflexively asking students to scratch out unrelated sentences that destroy unity, we can teach them more about invention by asking them to use such a sentence as a point of departure for a three-to-five page exploration. A better paper may have been trying to surface. A similar assignment is to write a sentence twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred different ways, adding or subtracting information in various ways as they see fit. For guidance, students can use models from their readings or even sections in their handbook on emphasis, variety, and subordination.

For the teacher, I recommend a book by the poets Robin Behn and Chase Twichell called *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*. The book includes ninety-six exercises designed for beginning poets to practice the craft, but if we read *paragraph* for *poem* and *sentence* for *line* (and so forth), we can offer excellent exercises for improving student essays through *Spieltrieb*.

Risk

The poet Andrew Hudgins says that we like to see risks taken in contemporary poetry. He says that the tightrope walker sixty feet high is more interesting than the one six feet high. The risk is greater (527). There can be no real excellence without risk of utter failure. Let's remember, the same people who gave us the '64 Mustang also gave us the Edsel. Great efforts in writing surface from a wash of failures, yet in traditionally graded classes a record of more failures than successes averages out to a bad grade.

Stafford argues that in writing a poem he "must be willing to fail" (*Australian Crawl* 18), yet we often teach students that failure is the worst thing that can happen. We should emphasize the following to our students: All serious writers try their best to succeed in their work, but not by trying to avoid failure.

If students do not feel free to take a risk with teachers, who are supposed to know writing and writers, with whom can they take a risk?

A few years ago I had a colleague who did not allow any risk taking. Indeed, sometimes the bolder or more perspicacious students would say something like, "Well, Faulkner did it." My colleague would respond with an odd comment along the lines of "Well, Faulkner was *Fauuulknah!*" Then he would add, "When you get to be a Faulkner, you can do it, too." But anyone who writes seriously knows that Faulkner was Faulkner, Joyce was Joyce, and Sartre was Sartre not because they were writers first and then took risks but *because* they took risks.

Even a failed effort resulting from a student's taking a risk may create good writing if we encourage the student and allow the failure to do what it does for writers. About twenty years ago I heard the poet and novelist George Garrett say that he had been working on a long piece for years which would probably never get published, yet whenever he worked on it, he generated other, better writing. Hugo had experienced the same thing when he advised students, "You will find that you may rewrite and rewrite a poem and it never seems quite right. Then a much better poem may come rather fast and you wonder why you bothered with all that work on the earlier poem. Actually, the hard work you do on one poem is put in on all poems" ("Triggering Town" 17).

Most writers take such a concept as a given. And it works for students. By urging students to work diligently, even when a paper seems to be going nowhere, by demanding they risk failure, we are often helping them improve other papers (in, say, history or psychology) on which they are, or will be, working. Some problems they would have encountered will be solved now, unconsciously perhaps, in the "failed" effort. Composition students need to be reminded of that principle—constantly. They need to learn to trust it. So do many composition teachers, I suspect.

The poet, editor, and essayist Sydney Lea argues that writers need to do battle with confusion, risk absurdity:

One contingency of our battle, however, is the prior need to submit ourselves to confusion itself, in fact willfully to plunge into it. Indeed, should there be a hell that awaits sinners, those who censure their pupils for an occasional and natural incoherence or befuddlement may count on meeting the Devil in time.

While I would argue strongly against giving credit for silliness under the guise of building self-esteem, I fear that we often create young people who are afraid to fail.

When she was here, the novelist Lee Smith referred several times to "one of the best books on writing," introduced to her by John Gardner. It was *Wake Up and Live!*, an early self-help book by the editor and writer Dorothea Brande. The thesis of Brande's book is this: "Act as if it were impossible to fail" (80). What would students write if they knew it was impossible to fail on a specific assignment? To take the idea further, what would they do if they knew that the way to fail was through *not* risking, either in content or in presentation?

Independence

At a difficult time while writing *Jewel*, Bret Lott had the following passage from Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* taped over his work station:

Writing every book, the writer must solve two problems: Can it be done? and, Can I do it? Every book has an intrinsic impossibility, which its writer discovers as soon as his first excitement dwindles. . . . Complex stories, essays, and poems have this problem, too—the prohibitive structural defect the writer wishes he had never noticed. He writes it in spite of that. . . . And if it can be done, then he can do it, and only he. For there is nothing in the material for this book that suggests to anyone but him alone its possibilities for meaning and feeling. (72)

The fiction writer Gladys Swan told my students that no matter how many stories she writes, with every one she feels helpless and alone, as though this story is her first, and there are no previous problems and solutions in her other stories that will guide her with this one.

Freshman composition is probably the students' last hope of learning the painful lesson that writing is a lonely business. In a wonderful poem, "The Writer," Richard Wilbur draws an analogy between his daughter's writing a story and the starling once caught in her room. The narrator of the poem remembers that the family had to let the bird beat itself bloody about the room before "clearing the sill of the world." The narrator knows that the situation of the beginning writer is akin to that of the starling: there would have been more danger of killing the bird if the family had tried to catch it and "help" it out than there was in letting it painfully find its own way.

I respectfully submit that we are killing the starling, and often.

As Stafford writes, "If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it. It has one justification: it occurs to me. No one else can guide me. I must follow my own weak, wandering, diffident impulses" (*Australian Crawl* 18). Freshmen are too dependent on the teacher as it is, and when we "approve" a topic or outline, when we are too clear about "what we want," we are stifling the real essay, the one neither we nor the student could possibly have anticipated. When we talk to the student about where an essay *might* go, we are at each moment limiting where the essay *can* go.

The student is like John Ashbery, who says that his poetry is exploratory and that only he can do the exploring: "I don't have it all mapped out before I sit down to write. I do have a very general idea which it would be very difficult to tell anybody about before I had written the poem; it would simply make no sense to another person" (117).

In conference, we could help "make sense" of the student's "very general idea," but we shouldn't want to. The final idea would inarguably be an idea that filters the student's images through the teacher's experience. Following the principle of independence as writers understand it, the student will always write a more important paper—important to personal growth and to ultimate improvement as a writer.

The few conferences we do have with students ought, then, to deal with the writing process rather than with commentary on a specific paper's content. At least ninety percent of these talks could be handled as casual conversations while walking with students or having coffee in the student center, without sitting over books and papers. Students need to learn to answer their own questions on technique and craft. As Hugo says, "When we teach how to write, the student had best be on guard" ("Stray Thoughts" 64).

Students can even answer their own questions on such issues as grammar, punctuation, and syntax if they take the time to explore, to "feel around in the dark," as the poet Michael S. Harper put it during a poetry reading here. Composition teachers who do not themselves write often and seriously tend to attack student writing problems too soon and too directly, and students will let them do it, of course.

In his essay "Loving (Hating) the Messenger: Transference and Teaching," Eric Torgerson argues that writing teachers and students sometimes encounter the phenomenon psychologists call transference, in which "students who [have] been turned on by one teacher . . . come to expect to be turned on—rather than taught—by each new one in turn." He goes on to assert that such situations produce derivative student work, work "written finally with the charismatic teacher's inspiration rather than the student's own." This relationship creates what he calls a "negative transference." Instead of trying everything we can to "turn students on," Torgerson argues, we ought to wean them from us (15).

My job is to teach students about themselves, about what independent, strong writers they are; it is not about me, how understanding and "helpful" I can appear to be.

Students are sometimes herded away from independence not only by the teacher's trying to help but also by fellow students' peer review, collaboration, or peer editing. Such strategies may be comfortable for students, but we must not be misled by an overweening enthusiasm for the idea that writing is a communal activity. Some teachers may have forgotten a fact that writers are painfully—and even deliciously, to use John Berryman's word—aware of: writing is primarily a solitary activity.

When working on an essay, students might feel hopeless and alone. They want answers that aren't there. They feel very small in a big world. So what? Writers feel that way with nearly every poem or story or essay they write. Students should experience writing through those feelings to get to their essay. Indeed, their enjoyment of writing ultimately comes from the growth and self-sufficiency they experience.

Whether about mechanics, syntax, or invention, every suggestion a peer makes is one more contribution to the

lesson that writing done completely on one's own is somehow not as good as writing done with others. For all its benefits to collaborative learning, such activity is also a reinforcement of students' anxieties about writing. Yet that reinforcement is masked by the students' enthusiastic acceptance of the activity because of their erroneous notion of what writing is. Regrettably, then, while this technique brings students closer to the "comfort" of writing, it takes them farther from successful growth and maturity as writers.

I do not presume to argue that every essay in any one class be "independent." I do suggest, however, that at least some essays—most?—should be done without any collaboration, head-to-head conference, lab referral, or peer review. With collaboration, students may learn a number of things about themselves, their writing, and their classmates, but the lesson that all writers must learn—that they can battle their personal demons alone in a morass of confusion, insecurity, vagueness, indolence, and guilt—well, that is just not one of them.

When a student feels lost in the writing, a pat on the shoulder, a few "I know how you feel" comments, and anecdotal references to writers who have experienced the same problem is often the only guidance that student needs to work through a hapless situation. Students can do some wonderful and surprising things if they just know that what they are feeling is perfectly normal.

Some composition teachers "collaborate," but what does a writer do? A writer tries it both ways, writing out two drafts completely, then trying out various revisions; often, the writer doesn't know which is the better one and so does it yet again. Then the student goes for coffee and thinks about Joyce and *Stephen Hero* or some other writer who has battled through a problem.

Freshmen can do this. The teacher provides the anecdote about a writer who had the same problem. Or, better, a visiting writer provides the lesson while standing at the punch bowl, when no one realizes the students are even listening.

I began this study and this essay with students. I'll end with Brad Rickenbaker, a math major I admire, who one afternoon as a freshman came to my office to turn in his fifth short essay of the semester. He sat on the floor putting his forty pages of notes, drafts, attempts, failures, and "games" in order. I asked him the question I often ask students: "Brad, are you proud of this paper?" He looked up at me without his boyish "I hope so" face but with an adult matter-of-factness and said, "Mr. Allen, I don't give a damn whether you like this paper or not. It is the very best I can do, and I am proud of it." Such affirmation of the work itself is a writer's affirmation. Freshman composition students are writers, and writers can help us teach them.

Notes

¹I am indebted to John Frederick Nims for noting Stafford's allusion and for translating the line.

²Donald Murray uses the coach metaphor for the writing teacher. We are, after all, teaching a skill with more similarities to tennis than to, say, the study of history. The metaphor was conceived by the ancient Greeks, who called poets "athletes of the word" (Nims xxv).

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I need to write though I do not consider myself a writer. I am now retired but have worked in some 15 different types of work from Investigator to Cartographer, Welder to Vegetable and Flower picker. I have spent more time and ...Â I need to write though I do not consider myself a writer. I am now retired but have worked in some 15 different types of work from Investigator to Cartographer, Welder to Vegetable and Flower picker. I have spent more time and money on travel than any one thing with Education coming a close second in money but not time.