

Chapter 3

WRITING AS A DISCIPLINED PRACTICE

Many college professors fear and even hate writing, as do many human services and helping professionals. Practitioners complete their graduate studies in order to work with people, not to write and conduct research. Many academics sought doctoral degrees not to become researchers, but to become teachers. One of the best professors I know feels as though she is cheating her students when she spends time writing for publication. All things being equal, she would rather be preparing for class or mentoring students.

Yet discomfort with writing is not merely a challenge for those with advanced degrees who need to write for their professions. Fear of and displeasure with writing is a social problem that greatly affects the abilities of many people to write and communicate effectively. Given the importance of written communication in today's postindustrial, Internet-focused economy, poor writing skills can have significant economic costs.

Overall, there has been a marked decrease in the writing abilities of students in elementary and secondary schools over the past several decades. Writing in schools is often taught as a means to an end, not as a pleasure in and of itself. Schools are often underfunded, and teachers are overwhelmed with the task of teaching poorly prepared students even the most fundamental skills. These difficulties often continue into the college years; faculty in human services disciplines struggle with how to balance the teaching of content with helping students with inadequate writing skills.

In addition to the basic skills of writing, there are affective issues that inhibit good writing practices, as discussed previously. In grammar school, many of us (or at least those of us who periodically got into

trouble) were compelled to write sentences after school as punishment. I can vividly recall the pain in my hands from writing fifty times, "I must not cut in line." The message in that punishment is clear that writing is not something you would choose for personal or professional fulfillment. Indeed, writing is often viewed as a task, a chore, even a punishment.

Perhaps the most profound experience that shapes the feelings of scholars about writing is the process of working on theses and dissertations. I liken writing a dissertation to a hazing. You perform your quota of painful, subservient rituals in the most banal, repetitive manner possible. Writing a dissertation is viewed as something to endure, not the opportunity to engage in a life-enhancing and potentially invigorating culmination of learning. This is a near-tragic cultural phenomenon, as dissertation writing should be viewed as a special time when you are afforded the opportunity to master knowledge and skill in an area of your choosing.

I have come to love writing—not any particular kind of writing (as I write poetry in addition to scholarly work), but the actual process of writing. In fact, I do not draw a distinction between creative writing and other forms of writing. In a very real sense, all writing is creative writing. The traditional conceptualization of academic writing, in which the researcher merely objectively reports results, positions the writing endeavor as an afterthought, a nonessential activity. As I previously stated, writing itself is a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1993, 2000). Through the process of writing, researchers come to understand the connections among their data, constructs, and theories. The notion of the detached, distant researcher objectively writing down results denies the personality of the researcher and the important creative decisions in the writing process.

To say that writing academic research is fundamentally a creative process does not mean that it is easy or always enjoyable. As with many things we love, there are moments of drudgery and difficulty. Yet we can draw an important distinction between the notions of happiness and joy and the importance of meaning. May (1979) distinguishes between the deep joy experienced from creating a life of meaning and the fleeting experience of momentary happiness. We can find momentary happiness through consumption and passive-receptive acts,

WRITING AS A PRACTICE

which demand little effort. Writing takes effort, though, and at times it can lead to frustrations and headaches. Yet there is a profound joy to be experienced when you are able to overcome such feelings. Each time you write something, take a few moments to reflect upon what you have accomplished. Let it wash over you, and give yourself the validation and praise that you deserve. Changing your perspective about the writing process, and about what you are able to write, will help lead to a shift in the role writing plays in your life.

WRITING AS A PRACTICE

In the game of publishing, consistency beats brilliance. This does not mean that brilliant ideas do not matter; who would not love to develop an innovation in a field that would profoundly affect the lives of others? Practitioners and faculty in the human services fields want to help: we want to have impact and change the world. However, it is important that we do not wait until we have a brilliant epiphany before we write. Perhaps brilliant, transformative ideas are not the only ones that should be written about (and perhaps these types of ideas only can come about in the context of writing more routine, ordinary insights). Perhaps the goal should be providing meaningful, valuable contributions to our professions. Expecting anything more may create too much pressure and lead to debilitating blocks and limitations. Besides, more than one brilliant scholar has been denied tenure for not having developed the practice of writing and not publishing. To be successful in publishing articles, you need to develop writing as a practice or discipline.

In this sense, writing is similar to meditation. It is very hard to meditate well if you only do so once in a while. Meditating solely when you want to reduce stress may provide some benefits, yet many of the most powerful effects demand daily practice. When you meditate daily, over time meditation becomes integrated into the core of your life. It becomes both easier and more beneficial. Having a daily meditation practice does not allow you to fall out of practice. Over time, you experience new depths, insights, and benefits. If you miss more than a day or two, you come to feel as if something were missing, as if something were not right.

The same is true with writing. When you are out of practice, the blank sheet is daunting. However, when writing has become a central part of your life, words and ideas tend to flow, if not effortlessly, at least more smoothly. Daily or near-daily writing can even become like a meditation practice, something that takes you out of yourself, connects you to different parts of your personality, and helps you let go. When writing becomes a friend, a daily routine, it loses much of its anxiety-producing qualities. When you do not have to worry whether you will be able to produce because you already are producing on a consistent basis, you are free to consider what you want to write about and who *you* want to become as a scholar. What I am suggesting is that we treat writing as a creative, life-inspiring practice. This clearly demands an attitude shift for many of us. It is not enough to wish this relationship into existence; it requires practice and work, including work on the psychological and emotional barriers that you identify in yourself. It can also mean learning to view writing as a vehicle for becoming more fully who you are. For some, this may be an extreme and unhelpful goal. For those of you who do not wish to see writing in this almost-spiritual light, at the very least you will still need to develop a practice of writing.

Developing rituals is a valuable way to create a practice of writing. Rituals mark the end of one period or event and the beginning of another. Developing rituals around writing says, "Now I move from this past activity to writing, which is all I will do with this time." This book-marking of time will help you view your writing time as something special, and it signals that other activities can wait until you are done with your writing.

While I write in my office at the college during the day, I do my best writing at home, late at night. I like to write in my oversized leather easy chair. It has a good large footrest and two very wide stuffed armrests. On each armrest I can place four or five articles. My laptop fits easily into my lap and my arms rest comfortably by my side. Before I sit down to work, I brew myself a cup of green tea (or even pour myself a very small snifter of single malt scotch, not to everyone's taste). I sit in my chair and drink about half a cup (this would be the tea), savoring the gentle tastes and aromas. Almost ritualistically, I remind myself how lucky I am to be able to have this time to write and

PRODUCTION GOALS

enjoy my tea. I remind myself that my goal is to write either one page or for one hour, and anything beyond that is pure gravy.

I strongly encourage you to develop your own writing ritual, one that helps you to see writing as an enjoyable and enriching activity. Try to incorporate objects and experiences that you enjoy into your writing.

PRODUCTION GOALS

Sitting down and saying to yourself, “I am going to write an article today,” is not a helpful goal. An analogous goal is weight loss: if I want to lose twenty pounds, it may be daunting, not to mention unrealistic. It is better for me to focus on eating well and losing a pound a week, which is a far more healthy and feasible plan. As with weight loss, the goal of writing an article must be broken down into achievable subgoals. My personal writing goal is to write a minimum of one page a day, five days a week. Now, this may sound like a lofty goal, but writing a page rarely takes more than a half an hour, or perhaps an hour if I am really working through some difficult material or a problem. The benefits of achieving my personal goal are enormous. First, if I meet my minimum production goal, it translates to more than two hundred pages a year, roughly equivalent to ten articles. In truth, once I sit down and write, I rarely write just one page. This is merely a goal designed to keep me on track and develop the consistency I need to achieve maximum efficiency. If I am in the mood, I will often write much more. If I am not, I meet my goal and get to feel good about myself for doing so. However, when I write on a daily basis, writing flows fairly easily, and I am able to continue without a great deal of effort. In sports they call it being in the zone or feeling locked in. It is not so coincidental that athletes who experience this sense of mastery on a regular basis are those who put in the most practice. It is the same for writing. With consistency in writing, it is much easier to access our writing “muscles.”

Newell (2000) says that the principle of change is as good as rest. This means that when working on scholarship, it is not necessary to work sequentially, or even on one article at a time. When you feel stuck on a particular section of a paper, it is a good idea to move on to

WRITING AS A DISCIPLINED PRACTICE

another section and see if you have fresh ideas for that work. Or if you feel stale on one article, move to another one. This principle is analogous to another important one that I have learned from my work as a social worker: go where the energy is. That is, if I have energy for one task, it is best to utilize this energy to the fullest. For example, suppose you are writing the findings section of an article. After some time, you begin to lose energy on the task and your ideas do not flow as quickly. Yet from having worked on this section, you find yourself thinking about several potential limitations of your data or implications for the research for your profession. Since these are the ideas occupying your attention, it is wise to honor them and work on those sections. Following this energy flow often leads to your being able to produce far more work than you would otherwise believe possible.

I have heard some people express the fear that if they work in this manner, they will never finish their work, and certainly not on time. In fact, I have seen just the opposite in those who attempt this method. Perhaps you will not complete one initial article as quickly as you would have liked, but over time many articles begin to take shape, and ultimately you will complete them. After six months of daily writing, you will find that you have many articles close to finished (and hopefully a few already in review) and several more in various degrees of completion. For faculty on the tenure track, having this steady flow of scholarly work in different phases of completion is advantageous; while you are putting the finishing touches on next year's publications, you are starting others to be published in subsequent years. Having a scholarship pipeline takes a great deal of pressure off faculty who work in publish-or-perish environments. Knowing that you have articles that will be completed this year and that you have already begun to write articles for subsequent years allows you to concentrate on your work in the here and now without the pressure of worrying about future publications.

WRITING IS NOT REWRITING

It has been said that writing is rewriting. I believe that this notion hinders the writer's ability to write more than anything else. According to this view of writing, each sentence must be carefully reworked over

and over for it to be “writing.” This is not writing; it is revising. As you will come to understand, writing and revising are two different activities and may even involve different parts of the brain. Of course, before you submit anything for publication, it will need to be revised; some authors produce as many as three to five drafts at this stage. Once this is done, do one last check for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. And remember that when your manuscript is accepted for publication, it will be reviewed and edited by a copy editor, who will make additional modifications to your work. However, at this point in the writing process you do not need to worry about these things; what is important is generating ideas and getting them down on paper.

Jack Kerouac has said that he wrote all of *On the Road* in two intense weeks of freewheeling writing. When he finished writing the last word, his book was done (although, like any other manuscript, the “finished” product still needed to be edited by a copy editor). One of the truly great American novels was written without revision. I am not suggesting that you can produce scholarship in the same manner. However, what Kerouac and the other beat writers of his generation knew was that we have an internal wisdom that goes beyond the plodding pace of logical thinking. When set free to just write, our minds and fingers surprise us. We know more than we think we know and we are able to communicate more than we may have anticipated.

What would it be like if you allowed yourself to start with some idea and let yourself just write? What if you were to sit down and write about some of your practice or teaching experiences and just allow the writing to flow? In all likelihood, after some time you will have written some ideas or experiences that are valuable to others. Your subjective experience matters. Your training, experience, and intellectual currency can lead to helpful and publishable work if you develop trust in your subjectivity and practice of writing. What variables we choose to research and what findings we focus on have a great deal to do with our own beliefs and values. I am suggesting that you learn to value your subjective experiences as a means of freeing yourself to write.

Much has been written about the processes of freeing the mind to write. In this section, I now explore several techniques that have been found to be helpful.

FREEWITING

Freewriting is a valuable writing tool that serves several key purposes. First, it is a great warm-up exercise for getting the mind ready to write. Second, through the process of freewriting, we tend to access information that we never knew we had. Third, freewriting seems to help us get around our internal critic, that voice that judges what we write. Last, by engaging in freewriting, we come to learn that we can indeed write on demand.

Freewriting can be either prompted or unprompted. During unprompted freewriting, you begin to write whatever is on your mind for a set amount of time, usually three to ten minutes. It is imperative that you censor nothing and that the writing does not stop until the designated time. If you get stuck, simply write the last word over and over or write any nonsense that may find its way onto the page. During prompted freewriting, you follow the same procedures, but the difference is that a word or topic becomes the focus of the exercise. Therefore, freewriting may start off with a simple word or phrase such as “children” or “the causes of childhood poverty.”

For several examples of freewriting exercises, see Exercise 6. Now is a good time to complete one of the freewriting exercises to help you develop this new tool.

THE ACADEMIC NOTEBOOK

Many authors have noted the value of keeping a journal to their development as scholars. Henson (2005) observed that even though much of his work is traditional survey research, some of the most important ideas happen at random and unforeseen times. Having a notebook available at all times allows scholars to capture insights that would otherwise be lost. Many ideas for articles or insights into the research endeavor come to me at random times. Having a notebook with me allows me not only to capture these ideas before they are lost but also to spend less overall time on my work. Spending a few minutes writing in my academic journal when my mind is most attuned to a particular idea or problem often saves me hours of laborious

MIND MAPPING

thinking. Academic notebooks can be used not only for spontaneous insights but also in a playful manner to develop creative insights.

The first step in developing an academic notebook is to buy a writing journal. I suggest not merely recycling an old notebook or buying an inexpensive spiral notebook. It is easier to write in a book that feels good and has meaning rather than in a random, cheap notebook. By giving your journal a prominent place in your life you will create a space for writing to become important. Also, since you will carry your journal around with you, you may want one that does not make you look like a high school student or a starving artist (though there is nothing wrong with either). Choose a journal that feels good in your hands. Pay attention to the fabric and size. Some people like larger leather-bound journals, while others like smaller more intimate notebooks that fit into the back pocket of a pair of pants. The idea is to create a journal that will become a part of your life.

With a journal you can develop a consistent flow of ideas around your work, scholarship, and insights. For at least a few minutes of your day, write in your journal. You might want to ask yourself what you are curious about right now, what questions need to be answered in your profession, what gaps there are in your knowledge, what has been bothering you lately. Some of these questions may help trigger your thoughts. Your notebook is not the place to evaluate and critique your ideas; that comes later in the process. For now, the goal is to allow yourself to jot down and make connections among your ideas. Think as outlandishly as you like. Pretend you are from another planet and are just trying to understand things. Imagine yourself to be a curious child who does not evaluate thoughts but merely has them. Let yourself develop a sense of play and creativity.

MIND MAPPING

Mind mapping, often referred to as concept mapping, is a means of representing potential and actual knowledge in visual forms. The theory behind mind mapping is that the development and creation of ideas and concepts on a high level of abstraction is far too complex a task for a word processor. The actual process of writing on a computer

limits the creative capacities of thinking to a relatively linear process. The brain is a powerful machine with billions of neural connections; the mind is able to think in complex nonlinear patterns. In other words, mind mapping seeks to free the mind of limiting constraints imposed by overly simplistic linear tools.

In mind mapping, you draw and connect circles or nodes with lines that demonstrate the connections among various ideas and bits of knowledge. Mind maps are a valuable means of generating ideas, designing intricate models, communicating complex ideas, or helping to understand information in new ways (Lanzig, 1997).

Creating mind maps is also a valuable tool at various stages in the writing process. They can be used at the beginning of the writing process to help generate ideas, sources of knowledge, or novel ways of understanding a problem. According to Doyle, Coggin, and Lanning (2004), mind mapping “can help the author establish a central focus of purpose statement, identify concepts and arguments of primary importance, explore cause-effect relationships between constructs, and use the resolving visual as a guide for organizing and writing the manuscript” (p. 107).

Mind mapping can be done by hand or with the help of various software programs. Exercise 7 presents two examples of mind-mapping exercises that are useful in exploring potential sources for data and in generating ideas for writing and research.

EXERCISE 6

Exercise 6

FREEWITING EXERCISES

1. As a warm-up, on a blank piece of paper, write the sentence, "Today I feel. . . ." Then, write for five minutes without thinking or censoring yourself. Often, writing from our own experience helps free us to write more easily.
2. It is difficult for some people to write about themselves. As an alternative warm-up, write for five minutes on this sentence: "If I could write about anything today, it would be. . . ."
3. On a blank piece of paper, write the one word that best describes your main research interests (e.g., "adolescents"). Starting with this word, freewrite for five minutes.
4. Complete the exercise described above, but with a concept that intrigues you.
5. Write on a piece of paper the following sentence: "Two important concepts that I am trying to connect are _____ and _____." Write for five minutes.

Exercise 7

MIND-MAPPING EXERCISES

For these exercises, you will need a piece of white or light-colored poster board or four taped-together sheets of standard white computer paper. Spend a couple of minutes clearing your mind. Conduct each exercise when you have no interruptions and can spend at least a half hour on each.

1. In the middle of the page, draw a circle and in it write the word that best describes your main scholarly area. Draw ten other circles surrounding your original word, at least six inches away. In each circle, fill in a related concept. From each of these concepts, draw three circles and connecting lines that lead to another group of circles. Fill in each of those circles with new connecting concepts. Now, draw lines between each concept that relates to another. Along each line, describe how the concepts are connected. This exercise is a valuable way to understand how different concepts in our work are related.
2. In the middle of another page, draw another circle and write the same word in the middle. Again, draw ten circles surrounding the word, connected by lines. In each circle, write the name of a potential title to a new article about this topic. From each of those circles, draw lines out to new circles that explore what the article will look like, what data you need, what skills and resources you need, and where it might be published. This exercise helps you brainstorm potential article ideas.