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Getting Past Writing Pretty

Knowing your process will help you (and students) achieve your writing goals.

By Mark Fitzgerald

Back in graduate school, before I began writing for magazines, I used to labor over the rhythm of sentences. Sound was one of the big things I valued and liked about writing. This hasn't changed. The problem back then though was the process took too long and meaning was sometimes compromised for the affect and tone I was after.

"Stop trying to write beautifully," I remember one of my instructors saying about an essay I'd spent too much of the weekend trying to perfect. Because I wasn't being as clear and direct as I could've been, I wasn't saying what I wanted to say. That was the takeaway. If I wanted to improve my writing, I needed to rethink my process. When and where I began and engaged with my subject and audience. What I included and what I left out. How I later occurred. I needed to get it all down, before I could simplify and be coherent.

I asked my students the other day to distinguish teaching from learning in the context of writing. A number of hands went up. One student said that the difference was in the individual lessons of the practice, in the act of writing itself, which is different from reading about it or hearing me talk about the craft. Another student said that after a certain point she didn't think writing could ever be taught—you either got it or you didn't. Another said that one's inclination for the subject matter may drive an ownership for writing about it that goes beyond teaching.

I like all of these answers. My answer is that good instruction and reading can definitely help, but writing well has a great deal to do with practice and knowing your process. Writing a draft as a draft and not a finished product. Rewriting. Raymond Carver once

said he knew a story was finished after he went through it once and put the commas in, and then went through again and took the commas out. I like that too.

Students tend to have a hard time figuring out who their audience is and how to engage them. They can't connect with everyone, though many try. Young writers often get in the way of what they want to communicate. I tell them not to take their writing too seriously at first. To try to have fun in the early stages when they are still discovering what they want to say and how to say it. I urge them to get to know their process, how and when they work best.

Some mornings at my desk are better than others. Sometimes I get lucky. A friend of mine once told me he often likes to begin writing with a song in his head. It's his process. This makes me think of tone and the importance of syntax—what Coleridge meant about arranging the best words. For those who are serious about the craft, writing is about habit. Having enough time and letting things breathe. Understanding how deprivation and pressure work. Even, to a degree, trusting indirection.

Knowing your process helps deliver the goods.

Process is also about fueling the fire. Most students don't read enough good writing these days. Many are distracted. In class, I highlight points from William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* concerning the personal transaction and simplicity. "Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to personalize the author," he writes. "It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength."

By conveying humanity and warmth, writers welcome the reader into their narrative and rhetoric. But they must be focused and ready for the task. "Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force upon themselves Good writing doesn't come naturally, though most people seem to think it does," observes Zinsser.

I'll add that patience, practice and perseverance go a long way in unleashing one's potential on the page. I enjoy work that gives the reader enough room to actively participate in the creation. A voice that achieves a staying power that lingers on long after it's read. For the writer, space and potency accrue through process and revision. You'll never get it all, and you're never really finished. But with practice you learn to reach a point where you feel comfortable stopping.