

WRITE MOVES

[A CREATIVE WRITING GUIDE AND ANTHOLOGY]



NANCY PAGH

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Welcome

Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself to write. At all times keep your crap detector on. If I say one thing that helps, good. If what I say is of no help, let it go.

—Richard Hugo¹

Welcome Reader

I'm glad to meet you here on the page. You open this book for the same reason I imagined, drafted, and revised it: to learn more about how creative writing happens and how it moves us. I'm fascinated by the ways creative writing (and other forms of expression—photography, drawing, music, film, dance ...) transports and changes people. I'm seduced by the possibilities and power of words—and committed to the notion that writing gets better when we invest in it, tend to it. For years I've collected and savored advice from favorite authors, artists, and educators. I composed this book for myself, to discover how the pieces fit together. And I wrote it as an extension of the work I do each day, trying to teach students in the caring and honest ways others have taught me.

The experts who astonished and shaped me most—Natalie Goldberg, Donald Murray, Richard Hugo (and my less known but no less appreciated high-school and university teachers)—all taught using their strong sense of personality and voice: they communicated as distinct, specific, *real* people. As a teacher, I noticed creative writing textbooks usually lack the vivacity that animated my own mentors and make literature itself so intense and pleasurable to read. Traditional textbooks tell us to write using “voice” but are themselves dry, voiceless. They offer tons of information about technique (useful, necessary stuff for the growing writer) but without the quirkiness, or—say it: FUN—of inspirational and aspirational “trade” books on writing. It seemed cold and strange to me that textbooks avoid mentioning the emotional experiences that cause us to write, that we experience as we *try* to write, that can happen as a result of having written.

In *Write Moves* I'm reaching out to you, not in the stiff exposition of a traditional textbook but as myself—an actual writer and woman, living in a certain time and place, with (for better and for worse) my own identity. My voice is most potent in the headnotes for each chapter after this introduction. If you find their informality irritating or less than useful, please skip those parts before starting the body of each chapter. I've woven the experienced voices of others into each chapter: you won't have just me as your companion in these pages; you'll have many writers and artists. From these examples and insights, glean what lights you up, what moves you forward, what helps you “learn to write like you.”

Welcome Student

I've been thinking of you for more than twenty years now. About your bravery to sign up for a creative writing class when many of you—most—have had little experience with imaginative expression in school. You wonder: *How can creativity be graded? Where will I get ideas to write about? Do I have to write about personal things and show it to the class?* You love to read (or used

to, before college assignments left too little time to devour stories) and you wish you could write something stunning like the books that inspired you. You hope so ... but suspect it takes a gift, a special kind of person, to be a writer. Can creative writing be taught?

It can be taught and you can learn it. Just like someone who has never sketched before can learn to see and draw a tree or a boat, you'll discover the habits of attention and mind for writing. You'll learn craft—for the sketch artist, that's how to angle the pencil, how to create shadow and a sense of proportion, how to bring life to the line. For the writer, too, there is craft—image, sound, character, plot, and more to explore. You'll discover genre: what makes a poem a poem, or a story a story. You'll soon understand that creative writing isn't a competition about who's had the most outrageous life to confess or invent. Your ordinary life, ordinary self, is enough for the work ahead. Renowned photographer Sally Mann reassures us of this in her memoir *Hold Still*:

Artists go out of their way to reinforce the perception that good art is made by singular people, people with an exceptional gift. But I don't believe I am that exceptional, so what is this that I'm making?

Ordinary art is what I am making. I am a regular person doggedly making ordinary art. [...] Art is seldom the result of true genius; rather, it is the product of hard work and skills learned and tenaciously practiced by regular people.²

Welcome Teacher

You have great ideas about how to organize and teach your course. This book is amenable, flexible: assign it in whole or in part, in any order you choose. *Write Moves* serves as one text, combining an introduction to practice and process, a guide to matters of craft, a discussion of the genres most taught in introductory imaginative writing courses, and an anthology of diverse literary readings. You know best whether to begin with the lens of fiction, the craft of imagery, an invitation to journaling, a discussion of a poem, or a leap into a theme such as “writing about family.” You know what bits your students don't need at their level and what's outside the scope of your course. Chapters are parsed into titled sections—you can assign or discuss *parts* of chapters easily with this shape. If your class is a workshop, this text supports it without assuming the format you'll adopt. Craft is presented in a cross-genre manner, useful whether your students are directed to write within, or free from, genre restrictions.

Each chapter concludes with prompts. Pick and choose, modify, rearrange, supplement, steal—they're enumerated just for your ease of reference communicating with students. You'll also find a list of suggested anthology readings near the conclusion of most chapters. *Write Moves* includes readings because good writers are also good readers; readings are presented separate from the chapters. Suggested texts pair well with their chapters (and prompts often reference them), but the tables of contents, arranged alphabetically by author, by genre, and by theme, make it simple for you to assign readings as *you* see fit, or to encourage your students to peruse and respond to works they select.

No anthology can include everyone's favorite instructional texts, and it isn't my goal to try. I've balanced canonical and noncanonical voices from Canadian, American, and global authors reflecting a range of styles, forms, themes, identities, and periods. With prose I've favored short texts, to model works of the lengths we often assign student writers. With poetry I've made sure to find unique work exhibiting (and bending) a range of forms.

For genre instruction, I present fiction and creative nonfiction in terms of story and personal essay because “Intro to” courses rarely cover the long forms (such as the novel, novella, memoir, new journalism). However, the definitions, traditions, and ethics of fiction and creative nonfiction are explicitly discussed in the story and essay chapters, and, for those teaching through the lens of fiction or nonfiction, those chapters and the alternate tables of contents support your choice. I've omitted drama because its teaching has largely migrated to departments of theater or drama; instructors who elect to include it will need a supplement to this text.

My own experience publishing creative writing is as a poet (although I've written a book of nonfiction too and some pieces for kids). Over the years, one of my beefs with multi-genre textbooks (usually penned by academics or novelists) has been their lack of attention to *sound* across genres. I've tried in particular to address this gap and also to help new writers understand *reflection* (which I've always found slippery to articulate and unaddressed in textbooks I've used). I found those chapters especially satisfying to work out.

I hope you'll discover useful and exciting material in *Write Moves*—resources that help you teach like yourself. I'd welcome and appreciate your feedback at Nancy.Pagh@wwu.edu.

Sincerely,
Nancy Pagh

Notes

- 1 Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (New York: Norton, 1979), 3.
- 2 Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 283.

PART I
PRACTICE

Why Write?

I have written for many reasons: to feed my family and myself, to get ahead, to exercise power, to call attention to myself, to be published, to understand, to entertain, to make something that is my own, to find out what I have to say, and, above all, from need.... I can't explain it, but I must do it.

—Donald Murray¹

When I was thirteen years old, I would wake up in the middle of the night with voices in my head. Already you're thinking: the author of this book is crazy! But wait a minute—. I would wake up in my twin bed, in the soupy darkness that results when your parents cover your window with red curtains made from upholstery fabric, and I would hear words in a foreign language. I don't remember now what those words were, only that they seemed complicated, multisyllabic, and beautiful—the way that words can sound delicate, muscular; or crisp before we have any idea what they mean. For a while, I would lie there under the heavy cotton quilt, rolling its little knots and tassels of yarn between my fingers, trying to memorize the strange words. In the fall, I could hear the foghorn sounding its voice several miles off, down on the Guemes Channel, competing for my attention. Or maybe a slit of streetlight came in where the heavy curtains met—enough light to make out the face of the Six Million Dollar Man or the tartan-decked forms of the Bay City Rollers, pulled from Tiger Beat fan magazine and arranged so carefully (I'm a Virgo) on my bedroom wall. Pretty soon I was thinking about band class, about Mr. Strickland throwing erasers at the boys in the trumpet section and he meant it, too, and the next thing you know it's morning and time for the big decision about trying to wear blue eye shadow or not. Where did those words go?

I started to keep a notebook under my bed. Then when I woke up and heard the words, I could roll over, scrawl them down phonetically in the darkness, and trap them until the light of day. It surprised me to discover that those beautiful foreign words were in my own tongue—English. I looked them up in the Big Dictionary at school. Eulogistic. Unutterable. Infinitesimal. Tintinnabulation. Cinnabar. Assuage. Enigma. What those words meant, I had never thought about before. But I wanted to. I felt as if my life might move beyond the boy band on the wall, beyond the eye shadow, the foghorn, the very tired band teacher, beyond thick red curtains—if I had the words to imagine it.

Now that I look back, I see it wasn't crazy at all.

Language That Is Our Own

Creative writers are sometimes stereotyped as sad and solitary figures, but writing is an expression of hope and connection. We need to communicate—to announce we're here, we exist, we matter. We wouldn't try to express ourselves if we felt hopeless about the possibility of connection. Even writing in private, just for ourselves, we hope to mean and understand something. No matter what subjects you choose to explore as you push your cursor across the field of the page, understand: as a new writer, you're not signing up to suffer or to isolate yourself. You're joining a community of people who write because we hope our words can add up to something that will surprise us, change us, *move* us and our readers.

The urge to write is a close relative to the urge a sculptor has to dig her hands in clay, the urge of a painter to stretch a canvas and move paint around, the urge of a composer to arrange silences

between notes. We experience the urge to write for all sorts of different reasons and at different stages in life. Some of us are storytellers from the moment we can talk—we want to invent narratives before we can grip a yellow pencil. Some begin to write the first time we fall in love. New Mexico poet Jimmy Santiago Baca discovered writing poetry as an adult, in a maximum-security prison, as an alternative to violence. Emily Carr wrote in her journals to understand what she was trying to paint in the forests of British Columbia. Neurologist Oliver Sacks began writing at age fourteen: “My journals are not written for others, nor do I usually look at them myself, but they are a special, indispensable form of talking to myself.”² My friend Paul started writing poems in his sixties, after his wife Susan died of cancer. Paul was a professor of philosophy, the author of many scholarly essays about medical ethics. But he felt he needed to say and discover something in his grief; although he’d never written a poem before, poetry was the shape his impressions had to make.

In Raymond Carver’s story “A Small, Good Thing,” a character named Ann experiences shock and grief over her young son. In a hospital, she shakes her head and tries to speak meaningfully with her husband and their doctor:

“No, no,” she said. “I can’t leave him here, no.” She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted her words to be her own.³

How rare it is, and yet how necessary it sometimes feels, to have the ability to use authentic language that is our own. Words surround and interrupt us almost constantly, usually written with the intent to sell, manipulate, or distract us. We learn to tune them out—and when we *do* listen, it’s with a healthy dose of skepticism. What we say, write, and even think tends to adopt the qualities of this bombarding, synthetic language. But when something *really matters* to us, we want to get outside the superficiality and sameness of that language, using words to dig someplace deep, explicit, and true. Although it is not “therapy,” creative writing is (in Richard Hugo’s words) “a slow, accumulative way of accepting one’s life as valid.”⁴

Chaos and Control

Creative writing, also called “imaginative writing,” differs in purpose from other written communication. It exists to construct experiences for the reader—experiences we taste, touch, see, hear, and smell with our imagination. Other texts are designed to impart information clearly—and we are informed, but not emotionally *moved*. When we finish reading informative texts, their ideas may linger (we “get the gist” of them), but *the experience and expression* dissolves. We’re used to seeing language function simply to convey information, and, as a result, we read by skimming. This relationship with language changes for the creative writer: we learn to read with great attention to the experience of language, and we learn to write with this same level of attention.

This difference between skimming and reading is part of the reason that, as readers, we can savor a favorite story over and over again and our enjoyment and understanding increase. All texts—office memos, résumés, bank statements, tweets, and the like—can be read repeatedly and analyzed for meanings beyond the surface. But creative writing is unique because it’s composed with this purpose and experience in mind—not just for the reader, but also for the writer. The practice of imaginative writing is not about having an idea or point and effectively communicating it to your reader. Instead, creative writing begins with a scene, an image, a memory, a moment, a character, or even a sound or rhythm—and, as the words come, they trigger us to move and play, to discover what we didn’t know we could mean. Rarely—so rarely!—do we know exactly what our story will reveal and then simply write it down. I’ve written scores of poems and for sure, *for sure*, the worst ones said what I meant when I first sat down to write them. The best grabbed me by the throat and shook me hard. They made me laugh out loud or nod my head and cry. They took me someplace I

did not anticipate. We feel this sense of strangeness and transportation as we make creative writing, so that our readers will feel it too.

People who keep writing do it because we're open to this sensation of exploration, even though exploration carries risk and can make us uncomfortable. The practice of imaginative writing is a kind of courtship between the disorder of possibility and the order of language. As with any interesting courtship, there's some tension. The effort to express precisely and beautifully what might be said is, for a few authors, a kind of agony: the sentiment "I hate writing, but I love having written" has been attributed to authors as diverse as Robert Louis Stevenson, Dorothy Parker, Frank Norris, and George R.R. Martin.⁵

For many others, though, the experience of writing is a sweet dance, a shifting balance between chaos and control—we begin to write in one direction and then language leads us off into new possibilities and surprises. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda expresses how sensual the experience of writing is for him:

I run after certain words ... They are so beautiful that I want to fit them all into my poem ... I catch them in mid-flight, as they buzz past, I trap them, clean them, peel them, I set myself in front of the dish, they have a crystalline texture to me, vibrant, ivory, vegetable, oily, like fruit, like algae, like agates, like olives ... And then I stir them, I shake them, I drink them, I gulp them down, I mash them, I garnish them, I let them go ... I leave them in my poem like stalactites, like slivers of polished wood, like coals, pickings from a shipwreck, gifts from the waves ... Everything exists in the word ... An idea goes through a complete change because one word shifted its place, or because another settled down like a spoiled little thing inside a phrase that was not expecting her but obeys her....⁶

"An idea goes through a complete change because one word shifted its place" Neruda points out. Can such openness to possibilities, can this delicious samba between what you intend and what the work itself seems to want, be taught? And even if it *can* be taught, why work to learn these moves unless you want to become a professional creative writer?

To Write as if We Matter

Poet Denise Levertov points out that when it comes to talent and genius, "You cannot will it to happen. But you can place yourself in a relationship to your art to be able to receive it if it should happen; this relationship is 'faithful attention.'"⁷ *Write Moves* is a guide to help you cultivate a "faithful attention" to writing. Your work on the skills necessary for creative writing can lead to all sorts of side benefits. You'll become a better reader, able to perceive meaningful nuances and understand how writers create them. Like an architect who takes pleasure in visiting a beautifully designed house, for the rest of your life, you will walk through poems, essays, and stories, able to feel more keenly their effects because you understand the principles of design they adhere to carefully—or defy boldly. Your fluency with grammar and expression will grow; these abilities can be useful in all sorts of academic, corporate, and "real life" circumstances.

But those are the worthy side benefits. The power to define the world, *to define yourself in it*, is the essential benefit of any serious expedition into the practice and craft of creative writing. Gloria Anzaldúa answered the question "Why write?" this way:

By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy.⁸

Whatever your own particular reason may be for writing now, and whether or not you're experiencing that special "urge" to write, consider this invitation: creative writing is an opportunity to discover how language defines and changes our understanding of the world and who we are in it.

Don't worry that you need to live an uncommonly eventful life in order to write. Don't worry that you need to be born a genius. You need only hope that you can discover something about the experience of being alive by writing it in your own words.

Fiction writer Janet Burroway points out that all imaginative writing is in some sense autobiographical—no matter how inventive the story, all writing is drawn from our experience and our identity. We wear so many masks for our expected roles in this life, and so much of our time is spent in the classroom, on the job, watching television, surfing the Internet, updating our profiles, doing what we think we need to do to stay safe or to distract us from our feelings. What an opportunity—what a relief—to write as if we matter.

Suggested Reading from Our Anthology

Dorothy Allison, from *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*

Sherwood Anderson, "Death in the Woods"

Samuel Green, "Some Reasons Why I Became a Poet"

Your Moves

1. Write about a memory of telling stories or singing songs in your childhood. When you think back on it now, what significance did these stories or songs have for you?
 2. Write about one of the best things you ever read and how reading it made you feel. How did it make you feel this way? This reading need not come from a published book—it could be a text from a friend, a note your mom tucked into your lunch, a letter from a love or from grandpa.
 3. Write about one of the best things you ever wrote—and one of the worst. How did writing each make you feel? Is it a "best thing" because it got a good grade, because it pushed you to write at a new level or in a new way, because it was read with respect, because you felt relief after "getting it out"? And was the "worst" related to a grade, your sense of commitment to the project, your discomfort with the audience, or something else? There are no wrong answers here—just listen to the experiences you've had with writing, the things you already know.
 4. Read the "suggested readings" for this chapter (in the anthology) then create your own poem, personal essay, or story about why you write—or about why you don't.
 5. Write about why you're reading this book or taking this class now. Why do you want or need to write? What are your reasons and what are your fears? What are your personal risks in trying to write, and what would a really good outcome be for you?
 6. Make a list of a dozen "small noticings" in this moment: twelve tangible things you perceive with your five senses (the wind tossing a tree outside your window, a voice in the hallway, the steaming coffee in your favorite chipped mug). How many of these were you unconscious of until you searched for the materials nearby to describe?
-

Practicing Perception

You cannot will it to happen. But you can place yourself in a relationship to your art to be able to receive it if it should happen; this relationship is faithful attention.

—Denise Levertov⁹

It was foggy and we were delayed, ended up at Cypress Head. Saturday late afternoon went ashore and walked, first up a steepish, dusty rock-step then along a ridge trail. The light was incredible—suddenly like a new season altogether sparkling and clear. Maybe b/c of the fog, or maybe b/c I just don't see clear light so much on shore in Bellingham. The madronas were spectacular along the ridge, with the blue water of Rosario Strait dark behind them. So many more shades of deeper reds—mahogany and salmon, peach in speckles as the colors graduated toward that pale clean green in their trunks. A hot afternoon. Some trees had gone completely dead and gray, petrified, with striated cracks running down their trunks. I pressed my hand to one in the sun and the wood was warm, like a live animal. Then I went to a live tree in the sun, cupped it in my hand, and it was cold! Very cool, like touching a cool stream of water. It was moist, relative to the dead tree. Do cold-blooded animals feel like that? Such a reversal from expectation, from my own body. (From Nancy's old writing notebook)

Showing Up

Writing as an experience, an ongoing practice, is different from what many of us associate with “being” a writer. “Being” a writer, in the world of fantasy, might mean signing copies of your latest hardback before an admiring crowd of fans, lunching at a stylish café with your publisher, fielding calls from your agent who recites the latest movie rights offers, languishing on a Caribbean beach beneath a palm tree with the latest-model laptop resting lightly upon your waxed thigh as you happily produce the next chapter in a thirty-three novel mystery series based entirely on the lyrics of songs by your favorite band (you're invited on tour with them next month).

“Writing practice” isn't drafting, revising, publishing, blogging, or promoting work: It's a habit we *do* as writers—beginning and experienced writers alike—to gain and maintain flexibility and skill. Practice makes us capable of writing our stories, poems, and essays the way a runner runs on many days to complete a half marathon a few times a year. It's “practice” in the sense that we do it with a sense of dedication—committing an hour first thing each morning for a year, ten minutes a day for a semester, once per day for as long as the toddler naps, two hours on Tuesdays, or for as long as it takes to wear the freshly sharpened lead off a #2 pencil each night before sleep. We practice regardless of mood or circumstance, much as one would commit to disciplined singing, golf, yoga, piano, weight lifting, meditation, sketching, swimming, knitting, fly fishing, rowing, or chess. Although there may be tangible outcomes down the road (singing in front of a live audience, hitting a hole in one, achieving the lotus position), practice is less about outcome and more about the human need to live as if our participation in life matters. Each kind of practice involves the honing of fundamentals through repetition, attention to form and detail, building and maintaining a level of dexterity, and saying (with the body, the fingertips, the heart or mind) “I've shown up.” In a world that seems to compel us toward boredom, distraction, exhaustion, depression, cynicism,

addiction, or apathy, *showing up* is a powerful action regardless of what we win, catch, or publish as its result.

Timed Practice

A plethora of terrific writers have published books about how to “do” writing practice, and my favorite remains Natalie Goldberg, whose *Writing Down the Bones* has supported millions of us as we’ve approached the blank page. Goldberg introduces the ten-minute form of daily practice: set a timer, open your notebook, and keep your pen moving across the page without caring a whit about spelling, grammar, or even margins. Just write. First thoughts, uncensored thoughts, thoughts that fly under the radar of our “internal editor”—these are the freshest, the richest. Express them with honesty and detail; no one is reading, and no one is judging if you sound brilliant, crazy, or sad. This stuff is not to be graded, not for posting on your blog.

This is “free writing,” composed outside the bounds of audience expectation and outside the bounds of genre: here, you’re not writing a novel, a play, a poem, a speech, a memoir, an essay, an article, a short story, or script. You’re not keeping a diary, a coherent narrative of life story or a series of confessions. “So the point of my keeping a notebook,” said novelist and memoirist Joan Didion, “has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking.”¹⁰ Cartoonist Lynda Barry has her writing and drawing students write daily in their notebooks because this form of practice “makes us begin to notice when we notice something.”¹¹ By expressing what we notice (not narrating what we have *done*—which is the terrain of the diary), we grow better able to understand *how* we notice. The individual way we each have of noticing the world is our bass line—our pulse or voice—as a creative writer. Even the fiction writer who trades in imagined characters and invented landscapes keeps a notebook—because fiction, too, is an invented expression of what an individual writer notices and finds true.

Writing in your journal or notebook you’re loose, experimenting, cleansing what William Blake called the doors (in my imagination they are French doors—glass and many paned) of perception—because writing is a lens through which we bring perception on to the page, into consciousness. Here’s a sample of painter Emily Carr’s notebook writing (her spelling and grammar were corrected before it was printed in her posthumous book *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr*). In this entry, she pays attention to the forest undergrowth before her:

[Excerpt from] September 29, 1935

Down under the top greenery there is a mysterious space. From the eye-level of a camp stool you can peep in under. Once I went to some very beautiful children’s exercises in a great open space. There was no grandstand. The ground was very level and it was most difficult to see. I took a camp stool and when my feet gave out I sat down. It was very queer down among the legs of the dense crowd—trouser legs, silk stockings, knickerbockers, bare legs, fat legs, lean ones—a forest of legs with no tops, restless feet, tired feet, small, big, lovely and ugly. It was more fun imagining the people that owned the legs than watching the show. Occasionally a child’s face came level with yours down among the milling legs. Well, that is the way it feels looking through bracken stalks and sallal bushes. Their tops have rushed up agog to see the sun and the patient roots only get what they can suck down through those tough stems. Seems as if there is something most wonderful of all about a forest, especially one with deep, lush undergrowth.¹²

This degree of attention isn’t unusual—it’s necessary for artists. Musicians are always paying careful attention to sounds, painters to colors and shapes, carvers to wood grain, photographers to light, filmmakers to frames. Writers use language as our medium; we practice so that we may always be learning more about how to word our perspective of the world.

Prompts

Goldberg's books are filled with prompts to get the hand moving ... and it is the *hand*, not the cursor, you might consider moving. Neuroscientists have found that handwriting, not keyboarding, is closely wired to our imaginative expression. So if you feel stuck when you compose using a screen and keyboard, try freehand for practice (screens are great, say those neuroscientists, for the brain that shapes and edits in revision). Aim to write continuously for ten minutes or until you fill one page minimum—no stopping to correct or edit. Use a timer so you need not worry about looking at a clock.

If you're ready to give it a try, here are a few of Goldberg's prompts and some of my own to get you started—use or modify them, as you wish:

Write something beginning with the words "I remember ..." or "I am made of...."

Write about the best meal you ever ate.

Write about the first time you thought about sex or were intimate with someone.

Write about your home.

Write about ways of leaving.

Write about an outsider in your family, school, community, or team.

Write about sleeping, dreaming, or waking up.

Write about the hands of someone you know.

Write about something lost.

Write about starting over.

Write about looking up at the stars.

Write about someone who cuts your hair, drives your bus, cleans your office, or remembers how you like your coffee.

Write about your favorite childhood toy.

Write about an animal you have known.

Write about the smells of your summers.

Write about the moment you made a mistake.

Write about what someone said.

Write about a photograph or painting.

Write about the quality of light, or the textures in the room or space you inhabit right now.

Attention and Empathy

Although such prompts might seem slight or inconsequential—they don't say, "Write *War and Peace*" or "Write something to win a Nobel Prize"—in fact their consequences are vast because this kind of attention is radical. Most of the time, in school, at our jobs, in our opinions and ratings posted online, writing has the quality of a test: it's how our ignorance, competence, and taste are exposed for others to judge. In contrast, writing practice does not perform; it is the articulation of perception. The goal is understanding and accepting whatever we perceive. We live in a world where, today, real people are killed by drones, sold into slavery, left in communities without clean water or sanitation, mutilated, raped, bombed, bullied, forgotten. We may live in communities, extended families, networks of friends and colleagues, or households where such dramatic violations are not as obvious, yet many are addicted (to drugs, to food, to pornography, to our many games and distractions), depressed, or unsettled from lack of understanding, lack of acceptance.

These problems exist for many reasons but chief among them is that we are capable of growing desensitized to the humanity in ourselves and others. For protection—or more selfish reasons—we look away. We choose not to pay attention. Looking away or “tuning out” dilutes our capacity to feel, to be moved—even by simple, delicious, or beautiful experiences.

One of my favorite poems, “What I Saw” by Kathleen Flenniken, describes the sensation of beauty and empathy that can come simply by looking:

Memory jumbles which I noticed first—
the bicycle abandoned in the grass,
discarded clothes, or sounds of splashing
in the lake. She emerged from the weeds
still wet, toweling dry, and must have seen me
round the path, kicking through the leaves
and morning frost, my sympathetic shiver,
though she never met my eye. She turned
her back but didn’t wait to peel away
her seal-black suit and what I saw
was amplexness and white, the beauty
of the world in late September.
Sometimes when I think of it I stare.
Sometimes she is me and I am her.

Paying attention like this, we are made vulnerable to what we see—the mundane, the beautiful, and the ugly impress themselves into us and cause us to feel and be connected.

Sitting With

Poet and essayist Lia Purpura writes about her urge to look away from ugly, painful things both small (chicken meat) and large (photos of torture victims published in the media). She reflects on a form of perception she calls “sitting with”:

To *sit with* you have to look into the gap in your understanding, not drive the conversation, not know where it’s going. Not know beforehand at all where it’s heading.... That’s the space. That open field, where you’re sitting with, and don’t have to answer, but an atmosphere of response is forming.¹³

“Sitting with” is Purpura’s alternative to looking away; it sustains her ability to notice and feel the marvelous parts of her life without denying that the miserable, bad, and unfair also exist.

Writing practice is “sitting with” the details of our lives; we attend, we cultivate an atmosphere in which we can respond to these details instead of looking away. The page is blank. We have no outline, no thesis, no plot, no reader. We write into the open field of the page with perhaps a prompt, a question, but without answers. One of my favorite teachers, Donald Murray (a barrel-chested, white-haired man who looked like Santa, if Santa had been a World War II paratrooper and won the Pulitzer Prize), describes the sensation:

You may feel scared. Language may hold a mirror in which you fear to look; language may, like a dream, take you where you do not want to go. It may not. It may bring you peace, understanding, comfort, insight. Your words may be happy, sad, angry, funny; you may attack, construct, tear apart, connect; you may celebrate, explore, confirm, save. You do not know what you will discover. No writer does. Fear is part of the game.

But this is a private game. You are writing to yourself. No one need see this draft; you take this adventure into the page alone. It takes courage, but in half a century of my own travels into myself and

a quarter century as a guide to students of all ages who make this trip, I have seen none who have not found the trip worthwhile.¹⁴

The timer ticks, the details come, the response forms, the emptiness fills. We repeat the practice, “showing up” to witness the small and large details of a life lived, learning the words and rhythms to help us toward compassion and understanding. Caring about the details of our lives, we are perhaps led toward caring about the details of other lives. This is not moral superiority. It is simply practice: the squeegee applied regularly to the dirty glass doors of perception, preparing us for the stories and poems and personal essays to be seen ahead.

Procrastination and Perfectionism

Each day, each moment holds “reasons” (excuses) not to write. “I have long since decided,” Margaret Atwood tells us, “if you wait for the perfect time to write, you’ll never write. There is no time that isn’t flawed somehow.”¹⁵ Procrastination and perfectionism are the great impediments to writing practice.

- **Procrastination** is something just about everyone is an expert at. I have a black belt in it myself. That creature called “will power”—deliberate control exerted to do something or restrain one’s own impulses—is on the endangered species list. But most of us can work out what it takes to overcome our procrastination, at least in the short term, long enough to write. My favorite techniques include bribery (“if you write now, you can have chocolate later”), accountability (using software, a calendar, or collaboration with a friend to report progress), change of environment (going to a coffee shop, the attic, a park, or your desk expressly to write), and sensory deprivation (no music, no Facebook, no email, no feeds streams tweets or Tubes, no TV, no kitty, no book, snack, phone, comfy chair, or window—in short, make the physical environment *so boring* that it is a relief to write). My independent learning student Kim Bowman describes so wonderfully how she feels settling into her writing mind: “When I first sit down to write, I’m like a horse that is moving around so that the saddle can’t be put on it, fidgeting, and then finally after the saddle is adjusted, the horse settles down and accepts that he is going to be ridden.”
- **Perfectionism** asks us to wait until we have something “good enough” to write about or until we have the “right words” or the “right starting place” in mind. It gets us stuck in editing before we’ve even discovered what might be said. Remember that in writing practice, practice does *not* make perfect. Perfection isn’t the point. Poet William Stafford, well known for rising early to write each morning, was asked how he managed to be so prolific. His answer? “I lower my standards.”¹⁶ Nineteenth-century writer and philanthropist John Ruskin embarked upon a project to teach basic drawing to working-class people; the purpose of drawing, he said, had little to do with drawing *well* or becoming an artist—it was about developing an ability to perceive. When we truly see beauty, Ruskin believed, we are able to understand it, hold on to it, and allow it weight in our lives. A student of mine had a lovely attitude about perfectionism: she called her notebook “little noticings” and wrote each day in its pages about at least one little thing she noticed. The modesty and humility of her practice freed her from the pressure of perfectionism. As a result, she wrote a great deal and later in the term she often mined these “little noticings” for the beginnings of essays that turned out to say some very big things.

Reading as Practice

In learning a craft—how to build cabinets or stone walls, how to sew quilts, carve canoes, design jewelry, write music, dance—you can learn enough to get started by researching online or perhaps

through a special inclination or gift. But to flourish, most of us need to apprentice—spend time with masters, observing, copying, holding our tools as they do, pushing ourselves to meet standards we aren't ready to imagine alone. Analyzing how the masters bring about their work causes us to develop a higher level of perception about our own practice.

In our enthusiasm to make our mark on the page, we sometimes forget that reading literature is a necessary apprenticeship for every writer learning to create literature. Whether our goal is “mastery” or simply to become more articulate than we already are, we're likely to remain the sort of cabinet maker who builds a wonky project from a prefab kit or the sort of quilt maker who uses superglue instead of thread, if we don't practice our ability to read. To practice “close reading” of the texts in our anthology or elsewhere, do the following:

- Give the text your full attention; avoid multitasking as you read.
- Print (or obtain a print copy of) the text you're studying, because your brain isn't built to notice or retain details that appear on a screen.
- Reread to notice patterns and connections that unify the whole work.
- Attend not just to *what* is written but to *how* it is written on the level of the sentence.
- Look up all the words unfamiliar to you, and write their definitions in the margins.

If you're serious about developing perceptiveness as a reader, keep a reader's notebook—a spiral-bound notebook that you divide vertically down the center of each page (using a crease or a drawn line). Each time you begin a new reading, make a heading to identify the author and work. Then follow these steps:

- In the left column, quote (transcribe) the wording of your favorite passages—the ones that really move you, intrigue you, amaze and surprise you ... or that appall you. Note the page number.
- In the left column, also summarize the plot points and aspects of the shape or form of that text that seem especially significant to you.
- In the right column, directly across the page from your transcriptions or notes, free write to express why you selected each passage (and made each note) and how it affects you. Record your perceptions about how this language and how these details accomplish what they do to you as a reader. Don't be concerned with summarizing or reporting—just focus on how this writer is creating effects that move you and have meaning for you. Because the purpose of literature is to move a reader, these are the moments to learn from as a close reader and as a writer.

Writing about what we've read helps us notice how literature works and what “moves” are available to borrow, modify, or try to outshine in our own writing. The practice also helps sear into our memory moments that we react to strongly—so we might respond to those moments in our own imaginative projects. My poem “After I Die” came about because I wrote in response to reading a passage in Muriel Blanchet's book *The Curve of Time*—a passage that I found moving, but that also bothered me. Blanchet describes a creepy feeling she had near a Native burial ground in the islands off the British Columbia coast. She uses the phrase “each moss-hung tree holding its grim burden against the evening sky” to describe the traditional practice of “tree burial” for the dead. I had been

thinking about this wording, and thinking about a friend's fear of death—about how that fear seemed infectious, making *me* afraid of mortality too. I was also writing in my notebook about images I saw each day (creating entries like the passage about the arbutus/madrone trees in the headnote to this chapter). I drafted a poem, combining my reaction to what I had been reading, my “little noticings” of images around me, and my wish to comfort my friend and myself about death. Here is the poem, revised:

After I Die

My grandmother's pear or Italian plum
would be comfortable and sweet
but too domestic. I need
a wild tree. Cedar is my favorite trunk
but close-branched;
in cedar I can't see the sky.
Dreamy blossomed dogwood
are too slender for this purpose.
Douglas fir are tall enough and warm
in winter, but I have never felt at home
in a fir. After I die
take me to a madrone.

Choose one red-boled, round-hipped
and open at the shoulders.
Wear pants good for climbing and
bring a few lengths of cord.
Help each other help me
up through the branches,
through rubbery leaves or dry ones,
and tie me supine toward the sky:
I don't want to fall in the first wind.
There are laws against this sort of thing
so choose a place far enough out
that you can't find it again.

After I die the softest places
will come unstitched
and even bitter secrets I kept in my belly
will sound raucous
in the mouths of crows.
Curling red bark of madrone
pulls back from the limbs each summer
and I'll peel too, unwinding from bone.
In rainstorms, hard white pieces,
knuckles and ribs, will drop from branches
through wet green salal. The best part
is being allowed to scatter.

For Further Reading

Lynda Barry, *What It Is*

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*

Your Moves

1. Find a spiral notebook (cheap ones from the drugstore work great) to use as a writer's notebook, and get a comfortable pen. Set aside the first several pages just for listing your prompts—ideas for things to write about—or write these on the inside front and back covers. Go ahead and begin your list now, building from the list earlier in this chapter. Add to it every time you think of a new prompt idea.
2. Turn your writing notebook upside down and flip it over. You can write from the back, toward the center, to keep your reading journal. Go ahead and crease or draw a line down some of the pages now. When you've filled the two ends of the notebook so they meet near the middle, you're ready for another notebook.
3. Write a list of all the ways you procrastinate. Use this list later to stay mindful of the actions that delay your writing practice—and maybe also use it to draft a piece about procrastination.
4. Make one entry called "words that attract" and another entry called "words that repel." List all the words you can think of to put into these categories, according to which attract or repel you. Need a push? Begin with some of these: *pustular, creamy, vomit, serendipity, fizzy, bubbly, giggle, scrumptious, masticate, phlegm, wince, chimichanga, Zamboni, fletch, lucid, diarrhea*. Add your own words to these lists. Do you like having entries with titles? Continue the practice, or just use the date for the heading of each notebook entry.
5. Violinist Pinchas Zukerman said in an interview, "If you think you are god, if you think you know everything, forget about it: vulnerability is essential to art."¹⁷ Write about what makes you vulnerable.
6. Peruse our anthology's table of contents by theme, and select one that interests you. What do *you* have to express on this theme?
7. "Ekphrastic" art means art that responds to other art—a song written in response to a sculpture, a painting in response to a ballet, glass designed in reaction to a story. Put on some music that inspires, haunts, or moves you (instrumental music often works best—soundtracks can be good). Free write to it without an agenda—just see how it sways your language. Experiment with changing the music every ten minutes—how does your writing change?
8. Carry your writer's notebook to a new setting—a library, park bench, busy lobby, beach, deli, the roof of your building. Write there. Start with what you notice; continue with what you will.
9. Write in public, eavesdropping on snatches of real conversation you overhear. Record the phrases accurately then write beyond them. Who are these people who say these things? Figure them out on the page.
10. Make an appointment with a friend to write together. Sit quietly and write in companionable silence for an agreed-upon amount of time (twenty minutes?). If you like, bring a "provocation"—a postcard, a song, a photograph, a handful of beads or feathers, a stone, a worn baseball, a shell.... Give one another the "provocations" as prompts.

11. Read Kathleen Flenniken's "What I Saw" and James Wright's "A Blessing"; then write about an unexpected sighting you had of a person or an animal. Make both the setting and character you witnessed vivid—even if your glimpse was actually fleeting. Reflect on why this sight has lingered in your mind.
12. Go online and look up your birthdate or the current day of the year on one of the "this date in history" sites. Use a factual detail from the entry as a writing prompt, weaving an historical event into your writing as my distance-learning student Carlos Mendoza does here in a short piece he titled "Young Don Juan":

It was the first bouquet of roses I had ever bought. Tonight was the big night. Although, at fifteen, every night was a big night. Tonight was Farah's birthday; Farah was going to have her fourteenth birthday party at her father's dance club. He owned a couple of businesses in Puerto Vallarta and arranged that the private room at the Mogambo be shut down so that thirty or so teenagers could celebrate his daughter's special day. I will never forget the summer of 1997, the same year Mike Tyson, the most devastating heavyweight boxer in history, bit off Evander Holyfield's ear. What a disgrace to the great sport of boxing. That summer I too chewed off more than I could handle.

Drafting

I do not write as I want to; I write as I can.

—Somerset Maugham ¹⁸

I've been drafting this chapter about drafting and revision for six or seven hours each day this week. I have a pretty good version of the first part—on drafting—but have nothing yet (but notes) on revision. Full of tangential ideas, I feel unsettled and nervous a lot of the time. It's a full marathon, and I'm at mile five.

The first two days on this chapter I wrote a whole different version of what I have now. Then I went to bed and my gut said, "I just don't like that tone. I sound too authoritative, negative, flippant, and boring. I sound like everything I hate about textbooks!" The next morning I had to start completely over—pushed everything down unseen below the lower margin on my monitor (unbearable to delete it yet!), then began the chapter again. After drafting for two more days (building four new double-spaced pages), I deleted everything I'd done in the first two days.

Each day now I begin by rereading everything drafted so far in the chapter. I fine-tune word choice (diction) and syntax (word order) for clarity, tone, and to sound good to my ear. I condense or cut the less necessary parts and reorganize what seems misplaced. Then I create today's new, rougher stuff. As I work, I'm surrounded by handwritten notes, and I keep rustling through them. Books I love and trust are near enough to reach out and touch, old friends I want to introduce you to. A yellow cat sleeps near me on this scratched red desk as I draft, try to find words for my instincts and thoughts, change my mind. (See the revision in the next chapter headnote.)

Running as Far as We Can

How writing happens, how something—a poem, a memoir, a play, a story, a song—is made in our minds and *becomes*, still seems a kind of magic. No matter how much we learn about the writing process, a sense of wonder about how it happens (and that it ever happens at all!) never dissolves. Perhaps wonder remains undiminished because generating new writing is a different journey for each writer, reinvented for each new project. No one can really teach us how and where to begin *this time*, but, as writers, we do have conversations about what conditions tend to foster creativity, how it feels during the generation process, and what habits tend to generate something viable in the drafting stage of creative writing.

Writers have discovered through these conversations that drafting is essentially a private experience that would look unproductive if observed by others. Fiction writer Lorrie Moore, for example, describes her drafting process this way:

... if a person were to watch me work—which I am grateful no one ever has—I suspect it might look like a lot of cutting and pasting of notes, stopping, starting, staring, intermittent flurries (as the weatherpeople say), sudden visitations (by invisible forces), the contemplation of the spines of various dictionaries and reference books stacked behind the computer, and much reheating of cold coffee (a metaphor and not a metaphor). But what it feels like is running as far as I can with a voice, a tuneful patch of a long, nagging idea.¹⁹

If you've had opportunities to write during class time and lifted your head to check out what other students are doing, you might have noticed something similar: the engaged students are each in an intimate bubble of personal space. Often their heads face something near (the back of another student, the surface of their own desk, the wall or board) but their eyes focus on some distant place. One might be jiggling a foot and another moving fingers to an internal rhythm she seems to hear. One poises a pen for whole minutes above a sheet of paper, perfectly still. It often looks like almost nothing productive is happening when we write! Yet, as Lorrie Moore said, it can feel like we're running as hard and far as we can.

Defusing Three Sources of Tension

Drafting is different from "writing practice" because now you have a project, an assignment, a deadline, an empty shape (maybe a sonnet or "55-word story") in mind to fill, or some specific content (a memory, a character in an interesting situation) to mold into a shape. But now suddenly you sit to write and nothing makes it onto the page. Or, no—you don't sit to write at all. You have to clean the sink! Change your shirt! Call mom! Make lunch! Update your profile! Wait until you *feel inspired*!

Most of us feel a tremendous *tension* when it's time to draft, and this tension can be debilitating. I think there are three main sources of this sense of anxiety:

1. **Drafting requires a form of silence and sustained attention that makes most humans deeply uncomfortable; silence and sustained attention are also hard to achieve in a practical way in our modern lives.** "The concentration of writing requires silence," says fiction writer Philip Roth, "... large blocks of silence. It's like hearing a faint Morse code—a faint signal is being given, and I need quiet to pick it up."²⁰ Nonfiction author Rachel Carson agrees: "The discipline of the writer is to learn to be still and listen to what his subject has to tell him."²¹ Some writers describe drafting as a personal violence to endure: "Writing is easy. You just open a vein and bleed" has been attributed to several (including Red Smith, Paul Gallico, and Ernest Hemingway). Although it's a myth that writers and artists must "suffer" to create, there's a shared sense that we all need *and yet resist* the difficult condition of silence necessary for new work—this tension is psychologically painful. "Before I write I must endure the silence, then the silence breaks out. In the beginning there was silence—no words. The word itself is a breaking out. The word itself is an act of violence; it breaks the silence" (Elie Wiesel).²²

Accept that you may feel uneasy in this silent place, alone with the possibility of what might be thought, what might be written. But know that many have occupied this restless place before you (in fact, thousands of writers are probably sitting right now, in silence, just as you are). Our unease means we are human and engaged in the condition necessary for our writing. When you try to draft but find yourself cleaning your oven instead, here are some techniques to help transition into the silence:

- **Do ten minutes of writing practice**, just as you normally would, to clear your mind's chatter and calm yourself. Don't write about the project you'll draft; it's just routine practice now.
- **Engineer your environment**: wear earplugs (they work like headphones plugged into the voice inside). Eliminate all the visual noise and static of pop-ups and messages on your screen. Clear your desk, turn off the devices, write facing a wall: do whatever's necessary to free you from distraction and cultivate *your own* form of quietude. For some, that might mean building a cozy nest in the comforting mess or generating a safe wall of white noise.

- **If your body must, go ahead and clean the oven.** But turn off the TV and music; ask your roomies to leave the kitchen. Clean (or do something else physical and private—a walk, a swim, yoga) in nothing but the monotony of the refrigerator’s hum or the traffic swishing by. Then go straight to your draft.
- **Allow significant amounts of time for drafting** (hours, not minutes), long enough that you can lose all sense of time passing and find the “zone” of sustained attention. Returning from this “zone,” you realize you haven’t heard or seen anything except the work—you’ve completely forgotten the clock. It’s hard to find this zone when we’re aware of time ticking away and our physical surroundings.

2. **Drafting has more tangible and defined goals than writing practice, which creates more tangible and defined risks and fears**, especially if you know you might show this writing to an audience. Some of us fear exposing something personal and private in the act of writing. Some of us believe the myth that great writing is inspired and arrives fully formed with very little effort: the writer is *a special person*. If we have a fantasy that writing can or will make us special, we experience terrible anxiety about losing that identity when we begin drafting and notice that our writing is not immediately awesome (writers, by the way, are not *special people*; writers are people who write). Some of us care so deeply about our material that we fear doing it an injustice by writing it badly. Fear of writing may never dissipate—even winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, such as Gabriel García Márquez, claim fear animates their writing process: “All my life I’ve been frightened at the moment I sit down to write.”²³ The natural response to fear is “fight or flight,” and your sudden need to distract yourself from drafting is a form of flight. Here are some techniques to help you stay:

- **Choose a tool that will be a companion in writing**—your favorite kind of pen with purple ink, the laptop plastered with stickers, the canary yellow writing pad. Don’t get OCD about having conditions perfect, but do have a sensual and physical partner in your work and perhaps even a ritual (lighting a candle, tapping a bell, sharpening a row of pencils, walking before writing, or making a warm drink) to signal you’ve begun. The tool and ritual can reduce fear when you sit to write.
- **Adopt Anne Lamott’s philosophy of the “shitty first draft.”** Erase your expectation for a perfect first draft—such drafts don’t exist anyway! Just start badly, as Toni Morrison describes: “I don’t mind writing badly for a couple of days because I know I can fix it—and fix it again and again and again, and it will be better.”²⁴ It may also help to draft at a time of day when your mind is less critical, less apt to call everything you write “shitty”—for this reason, many writers draft early in the morning (nearer the state of unconsciousness and dreaming) and revise in the afternoon when the mind is more judgmental. If you’re less a perfectionist late at night, that’s a good time for you to draft.
- **Try redefining fear as excitement or curiosity** about what might surprise you in your draft. (“The appeal of writing—of any kind of artistic activity—” says Joyce Carol Oates, “is primarily the investigation of mystery.”²⁵)
- **Invent ways to coach and reward yourself** for writing through fear. (What strategy worked to get you to leap off the high dive, to ask that “someone” to join you for coffee, to quit smoking, to touch a snake? Was the reward the experience itself, or something beyond the experience?)

- **Create a lockdown situation:** “Each morning I would thread my bathrobe sash through the spokes of the chair and tie myself in” (John McPhee).²⁶ Having an accountability partner helps. You can both work silently together at the library, at the kitchen table, or in separate locations for a set amount of time. No talking or messaging allowed—but sharing the results or a treat at the end of lockdown is a positive reward.
3. **We’re often hyper conscious of a need to juggle many things *simultaneously* as we draft.** John Gardner’s words from *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* are enough to chill the blood: the writer “must shape simultaneously (in an expanding creative moment) his characters, plot, and setting, each inextricably connected to the others; he must make his whole world in a single, coherent gesture, as a potter makes a pot.”²⁷ Awareness of the need to accomplish *so much at the same instant* can freeze us and arrest the drafting process as the mind scatters in a million directions at once. To thaw, try these strategies:
- Remember that Gardner’s advice is about how a revised and polished draft should *appear* to the reader—it’s unlikely the whole world of a draft will be fabricated in “a single, coherent gesture.” Rather, you prepare the clay and throw it many times—warping numerous pots along the way to the graceful yet sturdy vessel that makes it to the kiln for the fire. **See your early draft as clay to throw onto the potter’s wheel:** get your fingers into it; learn the feel of it. It can be scraped off and thrown again without harm.
 - What do you think *unifies* your draft—what aspect holds everything together? What part is essential? Begin your draft there. If you feel yourself pulled in many directions as you write, return to the question of unity, and **release what’s not part of *this* particular story, poem, or essay.**
 - **Use placeholders**—*blah blah blah*, ellipsis, or words that sound kind of like what you mean—to get you over the blocks or bumps in the road mid draft. (Paul McCartney composed the lyrics to “Yesterday” with the words “scrambled eggs” as a placeholder.) Move on after using placeholders to write what comes next.
 - Borrow a page from filmmakers: they almost never begin by filming the first scene that will appear in the edited movie. **Pick a modest part that feels less consequential as a place to start.** Novelist E.L. Doctorow said drafting is like driving at night: “You never see farther than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”²⁸ But the really amazing thing is you don’t even need to drive the trip in a particular order to create a draft. The arrangement may come at the revision stage.
 - **Start at the start, despite having no plan.** Many writers, including Joan Didion, free-fall into a draft this way: “I don’t have an outline or a logical sense of where to begin. I just start and hope things will fall into place. It kind of emerges as you go along. Maybe about a third of the way through I will begin to develop some general idea, probably nothing more specific than, say, three parts. Even this is open to change. This kind of inchoate groping seems to be the only way I can approach the thing.”²⁹

Habits of Hand, Habits of Mind

As you gain experience drafting, you’ll discover the habits that work best for you. In the meanwhile, here are some habits I’ve developed that you can feel free to adopt, modify, question, or toss out:

- **Keep copies of work in progress.** Save work regularly using the “save as” function and renaming or numbering subsequent drafts (save handwritten or typed drafts in physical folders). Saving copies is important if you’re a student because you’re likely to be asked later to reflect on changes in your work, to “show” your drafting stages in a portfolio, or as proof of originality if there’s any unfortunate question of plagiarism. Sometimes it’s good to find material shed during the drafting and revising process—to recover a freshness lost or some material to use in another piece. Regularly back up all your writing on a flash drive or the cloud. Your computer is mortal.
- **Draft on a laptop, in longhand, with a typewriter—whatever way most pleases you.** Of course drafting on a screen saves paper and makes it easy to revise and reorganize, but a surprising number of current writers (even novelists) draft using longhand or an old typewriter; they usually prefer to transfer material to a computer at the revision stage. This “old school” preference exists partly because the old tools feel more tangibly connected to our bodies, making writing an intimate and significant feeling for some:

Writing in longhand has a special kind of magic to it for me. You are so engaged in the manual work of fashioning the word which flows out of the end of your hand as though it were a secretion from your own body, and you watch it being spilled on the page in a certain calligraphy, and it has an energy of its own that carries you along. (Richard Selzer)³⁰

There’s also neurological evidence that doodling and forming letters by hand is more conducive to creative thinking and outside-the-box invention (the sort of mind we need for drafting) and that we see and read differently on the page than on the screen. The point isn’t that one way is *better* but that you may find ease or pleasure by experimenting with a variety of composition tools. You’ll also discover how equipment influences your work—the width of a screen or orientation of your page influences line lengths of your poems, MS Word capitalizes all your enjambed lines (changing tone) until you alter your program settings, and composing on unlined paper encourages free use of the visual field of the page.

- **Find a restriction.** We tend to think of art as an expression of freedom and individuality, *not* restriction. But the creator in us thrives on responding to restriction rather than to a vague invitation to “oh, just, do anything you like.” Those of us who love food know that the centuries-long restriction of cooking with local ingredients has resulted in an astonishing range of culinary creativity. “I think that having some limitations can be very, very good,” says chef Magnus Nilsson, who chooses to operate a restaurant in northern Sweden where it is winter six months of the year. Winter “naturally adds restrictions to the way we work,” explains Nilsson, who chooses to use only locally sourced ingredients. “If you have everything all the time,” Nilsson muses, “there’s very little motivation, for most of us, to create something new and possibly better.”³¹ Film director Lars von Trier investigates this idea in his documentary *The Five Obstructions*. Wondering why *his* favorite director, Jørgen Leth, can’t make a new film, von Trier challenges Leth to remake Leth’s own 1967 film *The Perfect Human* in five different ways. Each way has a set of “obstructions” or restrictions. In one, the film must be made in Cuba and no shot can last more than twelve frames. In another, it must be animated. In another, it must be set in the “worst place on earth,” but it cannot show the setting. These restrictions don’t limit Leth; instead, they serve to inspire him toward innovation. The most interesting part of the documentary comes when it’s revealed that one of the five “obstructions” is *no obstruction*. Leth can’t make anything in response to this and requests a restriction for inspiration. And so it is for us as writers. We might select a “given” restriction (a rhyme scheme, a 700-word “flash fiction”) or invent our own (an essay written

entirely with the collective pronoun “we,” a story in which three things are devoured). Restriction is to the creative writer what a silk handkerchief might be to bored lovers.

- **Work with or without an outline, as best suits your temperament or the nature of a project.** Projects that are narrative in nature do need what Raymond Carver calls a “scaffold”—a sense of the scope and plot of a short story—before the drafting stage. Lyrical projects accumulate as quilts or collages and are “sound-led”: drafted with the ear, using riffs or runs of sound to determine what best attaches to what. The former benefits from a “prewriting” outline; the latter benefits from no outline.
- **Know your genre early—or don’t.** Poems, stories, and essays each lend themselves to different drafting methods. For instance, if you know you’re writing a poem, you’ll jump right in and try line breaks. A story? Then you’ll think about your character’s desire and the plot early on. Essay? You’ll be aware of “truth” and your pact of honesty throughout the drafting process. But sometimes it’s okay to just begin and let the genre find you—or to refuse the idea of genre altogether. Writing that bends, combines, or resists genre is called a “hybrid text”; its author practices “hybridity.” Prose poetry is a hybrid form: it combines the highly lyrical sounds and brevity associated with poetry with the prose (paragraph shape and lack of line breaks) and emphasis on character associated with fiction. Lorna Crozier’s *small beneath the sky* is a memoir of growing up in the prairie city of Swift Current, Saskatchewan. It’s about a small girl, a small city, gender, poverty, alcoholism, and love. But twelve parts—are they chapters? sections? poems?—of this text are not essay or story. Here’s one:

first cause: light

You don’t know what light feels or how its thinking goes. You do know this is where it’s most at home. On the plains where you were born, there are no mountains to turn it back, no forest for it to shoulder through. A solitary tree marks its comings and goings like a pole sunk in the shore of the ocean to measure the tides. Here, light seems like another form of water, as clear but thinner, and it cannot be contained. When you touch it, it resists a little and leaves something like dampness on your skin. You feel it the way you feel a dog’s tongue lick your cheek in the early morning. After an hour or two of walking, you are soaked in brightness. When you shake your head and shoulders, you see the spray. If you stay too long in the open, you could drown, its currents carrying you to its source, your body bobbing, then going under, your lungs full of lustre. Nowhere else in your travels will you see light so palpable and fierce. It is too huge for dreams, too persistent for solitude. All day long it touches you with the smallest of its million watery wings.

Is Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” a song, a spoken-word poem, a small anthology of stories—or all of these? One of my favorite performers is Ivan E. Coyote, a storyteller originally from Whitehorse whose work I’ve seen and heard in performance, in print books and journals, on CDs, online, and in short films. What’s “told” there often has the cadence of spoken-word poetry, the conflict and arc of narrative fiction, and the sense of personal disclosure and searing honesty that comes when a transgender person says “this is who I am” in a personal essay. Not only have she/he pronouns shifted for describing Coyote on the book jackets over the years, but the fiction/nonfiction genre boundaries were crossed in marketing some of the books simply as “stories.” Hybridity, I think, is an important way for writers to express identities and experiences that do not fit simply into given categories of literature or life.

When the long, hard run of drafting gets to you, remember the wise words of Robert Cormier: “The beautiful part of writing is that you don’t have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon.”³² Play, experiment, take a risk—kick up your heels or do a cartwheel if the run loses its meaning or pleasure. Nobody’s watching.

For Further Reading

Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano, *The Daily Poet: Day-by-Day Prompts for Your Writing Practice*

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

Tara L. Masih (ed.), *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*

Brenda Miller and Holly J. Hughes, *The Pen and the Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World*

Your Moves

1. Start with your notebook, flipping through your accumulated writing to find a passage dominated by your attention to imagery and the way your language sounds. You were trying to word something *just so*—or perhaps being playful, even nonsensical—and the articulation of this imagery became interesting. Perhaps it’s just a list of interesting words. Transfer it onto a page and begin making a poem from this skeleton.
2. Start with your notebook, flipping through your accumulated writing to find a record of a memory: a scene from your past that, for some reason, you still remember. Transfer this scene onto your screen, adding more detail. Reflect. Why do you remember it, still? What power does it carry? You have started a personal essay. Continue.
3. Start with your notebook, flipping through your accumulated writing to find a line of dialogue overheard or a description of a person. Begin a file with the words “What if . . .,” posing a question about that person or about that line of dialogue. Begin drafting from the tension of this query: write a story to reveal your answer.
4. Start with your response to literature you’ve read. Writers are reading all the time, thinking, reacting to it. The world’s literature is a long and amazing conversation with writers “writing back” to one another—even if they’re not alive in the same generation. I’ve just visited a display of Japanese hanging scrolls showing the poetry of Fujiwara no Sadayori, who lived from 995 to 1045. His work consciously responds to a poem composed by another Japanese poet in the year 905. You might do something similar by writing on the theme of a work you admire or resist, or by choosing a minor character of a story to become the main character (a richer and differently understood character) in your own. Jean Rhys created *The Wide Sargasso Sea* in this way from *Jane Eyre*; Joyce Carol Oates invented her short story “The Lady with the Pet Dog” as a modern reaction to “The Lady with the Dog” by Anton Chekhov; Kamel Daoud built *The Meursault Investigation* through his resistance to the treatment of a minor character in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus.
5. Start with a speaking voice you can hear in your mind. Give this voice rein; let it speak on your page. Your story needs a narrator, your poem needs a speaker, and often your essay needs to sketch people and their dialogue. Let this received “character” tell your draft. You may later find this voice is one angle or side of yourself, a parent or family member, a figure from your community or childhood. But, at the drafting stage, just listen and write what this voice whispers or shouts.

6. Start with a photograph or a news story, then write your way to an understanding of these characters, the situation they face, their desires, actions, and perspectives. A family photo or picture you've saved for a long time can provide an entrance to a draft.
7. Start with an idea for writing that you've been saving "for later." Start with your best material. Don't worry about "using it up" early in your writing life—more ideas will come to you, and you can always revisit this great concept again later.
8. Start with a list: a list of words you associate with your favorite vacation spot, a list of hairstyles you have worn. List recipes you know by heart, people who lived in your apartment building when you were fifteen, all the species of trees you can identify, spices you have tasted, states and provinces or cities you have visited, ice cream flavors you have licked. List your allergies, phobias, and scars. Choose something from a list as a source of authority, a "way in" to your draft. Or make the list itself your structure for a "list poem" or collage-shaped piece of prose.
9. Start with a cliché or an example of idiom. My colleague Kami Westhoff gives students in her fiction class a list of clichés to select from; they must use one *literally* to create a fictional story. Try one of these: A loose cannon, cry your eyes out, bark up the wrong tree, have a bone to pick, a fly on the wall, egg on your face, one fry short of a Happy Meal, cool as a cucumber, go to the dogs, hold your horses, stop on a dime, see the light, made my blood boil, put two and two together, roll with the punches, brokenhearted, turn over a new leaf, a little bird told me, roll over in the grave, an albatross around the neck, hightail it out of here. Read Samuel Green's poem "Some Reasons Why I Became a Poet," and see how he twists nine such phrases to give each a new meaning.
10. Start with a dream. Lift some image, figure, or fear out of it to explore in a draft. Will you shape it into something surreal or explore the unconscious with your draft?
11. Start with some art that intrigues you. It could be a carving, a photograph, a painting, a song, a piece of blown glass, a necklace. Begin by describing what you notice; then see where the project might carry you—into a poem, a story, a personal essay. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is "ekphrastic"—art inspired by art: the poem's speaker describes viewing a sculpture of the god Apollo, which leads him to a new understanding about his own life.
12. Start with a pet—if you've known animals. Animals are complicated beings in their own ways, with concerns and personalities. My cat Bo is timid; he hides under the bed any time the doorbell rings. He has a pointy face like a ferret, and his head is disproportionately small for his silver-gray body. He mutters all day long. He is in love—totally, helplessly in love—with my other cat, Simon. Simon is Zen, pale as apricots and interested in everyone. He comes to the door when the bell rings, and nothing makes him happier than workmen reeking of tobacco, than lying on the floor with one to fix the stove together. Bo's greatest pleasure is to throw himself into Simon, to bury his nose in Simon's silken fur and sleep there. I imagine they are people—perhaps having dinner together at the Pepper Sisters restaurant downtown, in a red booth. How do they each react to their waitperson? Do they go clubbing after their meal? What human desire and conflict, what human resolution can I imagine extending from the personalities and yearnings I witness in my pets?
13. Start with an assignment or challenge devised by a peer. Writers dare, coerce, and cajole one another into projects. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* exists because a group of friends competed with each other to write the most frightening story. She won.
14. Start with collaboration. My friends Jim Bertolino and Anita Boyle have written three chapbooks of collaborative poems (the first called *Pub Proceedings*) by writing lines in

turn as they enjoy their microbrews.³³ I love to generate “exquisite corpse” poems in a circle in class: each person writes a first line of a poem then passes it to the right. Everyone writes the second line to the draft just received, folding the paper between the two lines so that only the last line is visible to the next writer. Repeat this all the way around the circle, everyone continuing to see and write “just one line.” Each line must include imagery and use sound in a playful way, and lines can enjamb. Reading the surreal results aloud is surprising and fun—and then each of us takes home the collaboration our first line started to revise into a personal draft.

We sometimes forget how productive collaboration can be for artists of all sorts—especially collaboration between people who don’t think or work alike. One of my favorite films is the noir *Double Indemnity* (best last scene!), coscripted by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler ... who didn’t get along. Wilder later reflected that discord, artistic tug-of-war, is necessary for collaboration: “If two people think alike, it’s like two men pulling at one end of a rope. If you are going to collaborate, you need an opponent to bounce things off of.”³⁴

Revision

I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published.

—Vladimir Nabokov³⁵

It's late July and my fingernails are stained dark purple. I bought fifteen pounds of dead-ripe black cherries today and have been washing them, removing their pits with a paperclip, and freezing them for smoothies to enjoy later. As I nudge the bent metal into each cherry, hook its pit and gently tug, I think about this manuscript. I've been writing this chapter about drafting and revision for six or seven hours each day for a week. I've created several pages of prose but the rest is a skeleton of notes and quotes. Tangential ideas pop into my head in clusters of inspiration or procrastination. I feel unsettled, nervous—I'm trying to grab something I can't quite reach or even see.

The first two days on this chapter I wrote something completely different from what exists now. But my gut said, "I just don't like that tone. I sound too authoritative, negative, boring—like everything I hate about textbooks!" The next morning I started over completely—pushed everything down unseen below the lower margin on my monitor (unbearable to delete it yet!) and then began again. After drafting for two more days, building four new double-spaced pages, I deleted everything I'd done in the first two days. It felt good to let the useless part fall away and discover I need to break this material into two chapters.

Each day now I reread everything drafted for the "Drafting" chapter. I fine-tune what's on the page for clarity and for sound. I condense or cut the unnecessary parts, reorganize what seems misplaced. Then I branch from the trunk of this reworked material and create today's new, rougher stuff. Every two hours or so—if I don't completely forget the time—I stretch, go to the kitchen, and pit a few more pounds of luscious fruit as my mind goes on writing. It's incremental work, for sweetness. (Compare this revised headnote to an earlier draft, the version printed as a headnote for the "Drafting" chapter.)

Writing Is Rewriting

New and practiced writers are “on the same page” emotionally when we draft: feeling tension and fear, we launch into a new project and squeeze out a draft. You might expect this anxiety to chase you all the way through the writing process. But, if you listen to the voices of experienced writers, you may be surprised (and relieved) to discover that revision is something authors enjoy. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison calls revision “the best part” of her work:

Because the best part of all, the absolutely most delicious part, is finishing it and then doing it over. That's the thrill of a lifetime for me: if I can just get done with that first phase and then have infinite time to fix it and change it. I rewrite a lot, over and over again, so that it looks like I never did. I try to make it look like I never touched it, and that takes a lot of time and a lot of sweat.³⁶

As Morrison points out, terrific writing carries *the illusion* that it arrived in the world perfectly formed, the result of spontaneity and genius. Experienced writers have lived our way to understanding the truth:

All writers write badly—at first. Nobel Prize winners, Pulitzer Prize winners, writers of blockbuster movies, writers with distinguished academic reputations, writers who influence and persuade, instruct and inspire, comfort and anger and amuse and inform, all write badly. Writers who write novels, speeches, news stories, screenplays, corporate memos, textbooks, plays, poems, history books, scientific reports, legal briefs, grant applications, TV scripts, songs—all write badly—at first.

Then they rewrite. Revision is not the end of the writing process but the beginning. First emptiness, then terror, at last one word, then a few words, a paragraph, a page, finally a draft that can be revised. (Donald Murray)³⁷

The delight and satisfaction published writers express about rewriting might seem suspicious to you now—wrung out from your experience of producing a draft. You may feel vulnerable about sharing your draft with a teacher, mentor, or peers, and protective or defensive about continuing to work with the material. Whether you feel proud or embarrassed of this draft, you may associate revision with failure, with punishment. Revision is not an anticipated delight for the novice writer.

If you're reading this book—whether for a class or on your own—you've made a decision to take writing seriously, to engage professionally in the art writers create. One of the most significant transformations you're likely to make as you take on the habits of a working writer is to fall in love with revision—or, at the very least, to learn to trust your capacity to rewrite.

The initial steps in revision are to gain distance from your draft (not look at it for a day or more) and then to adopt a new stance toward the draft: become its reader. This shift from “writer” to “reader” is an essential and imaginative task. Becoming an outsider to the text, you grow objective: you can recognize passages to cut and now the cutting doesn't seem to draw blood as it did when the draft felt like it was part of *you*. In revision, you see the material is trying to have a life without you—it does not exist to *say what you meant*. You spend hours helping the draft become the best possible version of its self for the strangers it will meet. Now that this work is no longer *you*, it no longer hurts to change it.

The Transition from Author to Reader

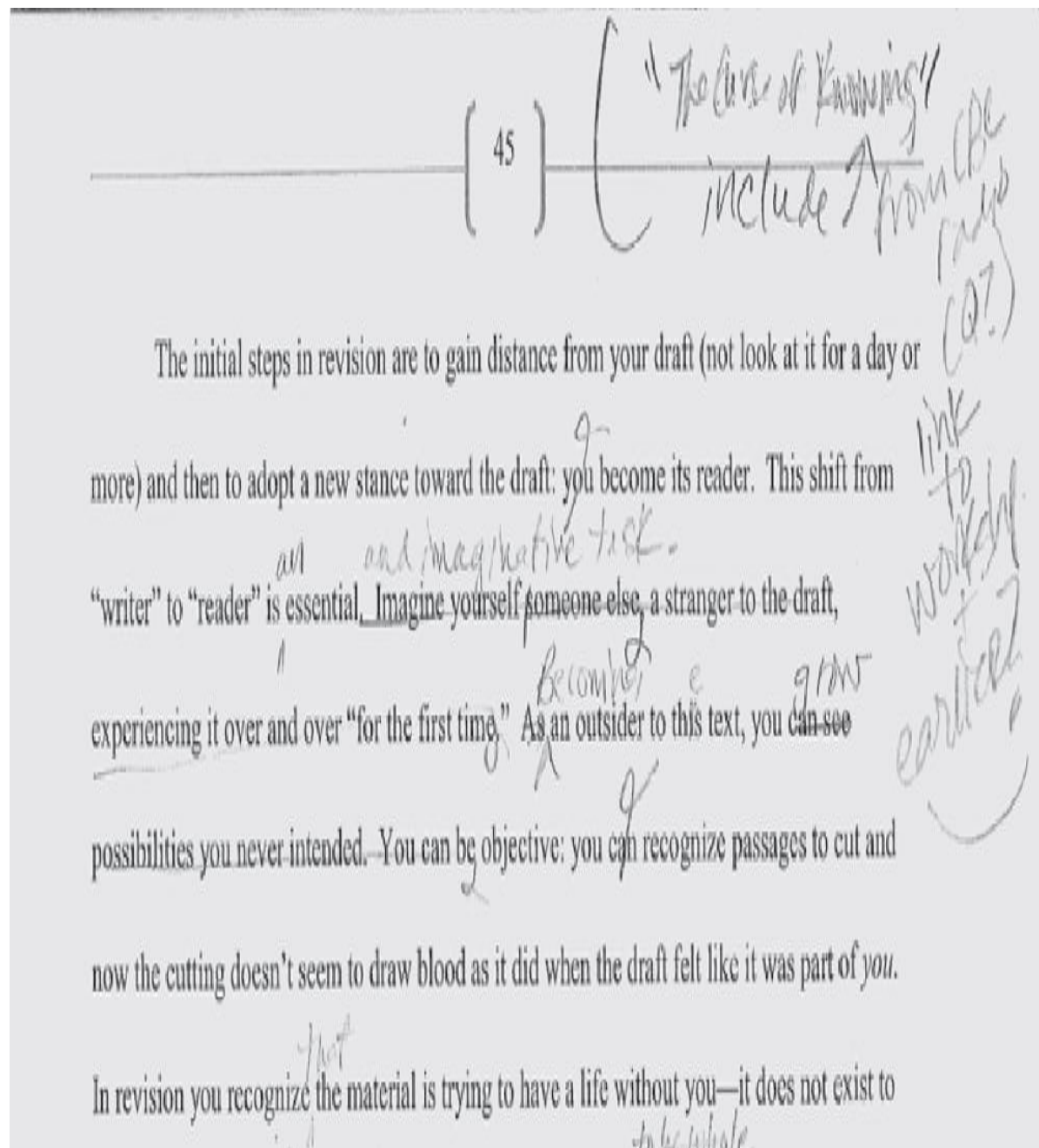
We edit language and rearrange text as we draft. In ye olden days of the twentieth century (or now, if you use a typewriter or pen to draft), a writer would reach a point when it became necessary to hand copy or retype a “rough draft” for legibility. From edited pieces physically taped together and from pages with arrows indicating where to move stuff, the writer made one new script of the full project. Crossed-out chunks of text were shed. This act marked the movement from “drafting” to “revising.” The writer read this clean new script from start to end, marking changes throughout (reading it many times in this way), and then copied or typed *again* a new, improved version. That's one “revision.” The writer read this revision through again from start to finish, marked changes throughout, and copied or typed it *again*. How many times? Raymond Carver did “as many as twenty or thirty drafts of a story” and at least “ten or twelve drafts.”³⁸ I drafted the page you're reading now on a computer, read through it and changed it substantially about fifteen times over the course of a year, and then printed out the book manuscript and began to revise on paper (later transferring the results into the file and revising more). On [page 51](#) is a scan of my first time through the printed draft with a pencil.

There's no correct number of revisions—but think days and weeks for short pieces, not minutes or hours (months and years for book-length projects).

Now that most of us write in a paperless environment, it's harder to tell when we've shifted from drafting to revising. But we still need to make the shift consciously, even if we aren't physically hand copying, retyping, or printing drafts. Otherwise, we're trapped in what Steven Pinker calls the writer's “curse of knowledge”: we know *what we know* about our draft, so, reading it as ourselves, we are unable to know *what our reader does not know* and needs to know for the piece to work. We can't see, for instance, that our reader can't hear our character, visualize our scene, or perceive the

symbolism perfectly obvious to us. Familiarity with our own work incapacitates us from revising it. When we transition from knowing our work as its author, to knowing it as a reader, our focus alters from “what I want to say,” to “how does this material work as a piece of art?” It’s an active choice to lift “the curse of knowledge”—and it’s wonderful because we no longer waste energy defending the choices we made while drafting and no longer feel wounded about big or little alterations.

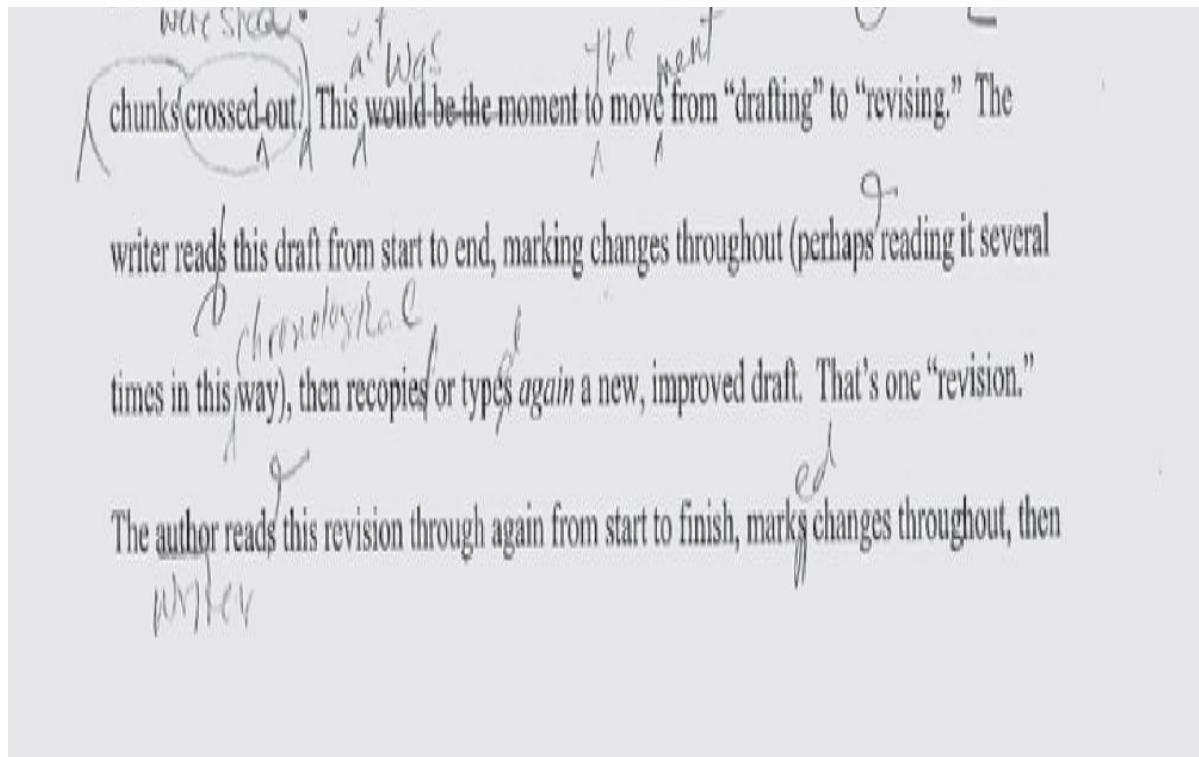
Try adopting physical changes to mark and enforce the transition into the act of revision. If you’ve been drafting on a screen, print your draft and revise on paper (if you’ve drafted by hand or typewriter, now switch to a screen). If you draft wearing a T-shirt and slouched on the sofa, enforce the new role by wearing an ironed shirt, a jacket, or a hat—or by working now at a library, café, or different room in your home.



say what you meant. (The draft is trying to tell you what it needs, what it can be, how it can
astonish you.) You spend hours with this draft, helping it become the best possible version of
itself for the strangers it will meet, for the readers who want to be moved by encountering it.
And in this way, your story or poem or essay is no longer you. It no longer hurts to change and
improve it. This work is so different from drafting. As you grow proficient, more confident,
perhaps rewriting becomes a pleasure.

The Transition from Author to Reader

Writers often edit language and re-arrange as they draft. In the olden days (or today, if you use a
typewriter or hand-write your drafts), a writer would reach a point when she would recopy by
hand, or type, a "rough draft"; make one continuous script of the full project instead of pieces
physically taped together or pages with arrows indicating where to move stuff and with large



Exceeding Your Initial Expectations

When revision begins, everything is up for negotiation and the draft is about to exceed your first expectations. How?

- **Let go of the trigger.** Drafts begin with what Richard Hugo called a “trigger”: your assumption about what started or caused your draft to be written. Revision is the time to let go of that assumption and explore what the draft can “really” be about—which is different and often greater or deeper than your original intent. In this sense, re-vision is re-seeing the possibilities of the project and letting go of what limits it: “I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out,” explained Raymond Carver.³⁹ “I’m happy when the revisions are big,” said Saul Bellow. “I’m not speaking of stylistic revisions, but revisions in my own understanding.”⁴⁰

It feels both exciting and humbling to see your draft change into something “it” seems to want, to take on a meaning and heft that surprises you, its author: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader,” Robert Frost famously spoke.⁴¹ Could your poem about your grandfather’s deathbed *really* be about the power of memory to lock us into a false identity? Could your story about a car trip *really* be about the care strangers give one another? Could your essay about your mom *really* be about our capacity to love?

- **Open to figurative possibilities.** When drafting, we usually wrestle to write in a manner that is clear and literal. But the revision stage allows us to open up to the possibilities of using images to find figurative meaning. The draft may have random metaphors or similes throughout, but revision enables us to group and shape these figures of speech to work together toward meaning. Yesterday, for example, I spent all afternoon drafting the note at the start of this chapter—and all evening revising it (and I will continue to revise it for months). I began with the intention to talk about some experience of my own with drafting;

my purpose was to ground this description of drafting in my real life. I mentioned cherries just because that's literally true: I did buy fifteen pounds of cherries yesterday, did work on pitting them in stages throughout the day (and today, too!). But, as I revised, I began to see figurative connections between picking cherries and drafting, pitting cherries and revising. The phrases "I nudge the bent metal into each cherry, hook its pit and gently tug," "ideas pop into my head in clusters," "I branch from the trunk of this reworked material," and "it's incremental work, for sweetness" were all added in revision. These are the parts that most satisfy me now, and I did not originally intend them.

- **Cut deep.** The power to remove is equal to the power to write, and nothing belongs in your draft just because it happens to be there *now*. "I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil," said Truman Capote.⁴² The first pages of a story or essay, passages of exposition, unnecessary scenes, clichés and vague words, instances of "passive voice" (using the verbs "is, am, was, were, are, be"), and unneeded articles and adjectives are the most likely candidates for excision in your first trip through your project with a knife. This cutting requires great patience and bravery. As Deborah Eisenberg writes, "For me, most writing consists of siphoning out useless pre-story matter, cutting and cutting and cutting, what seems to be endless rewriting, and what is entailed in all that is patience, and waiting, and false starts, and dead ends, and really, in a way, nerve."⁴³ Hemingway aimed to cut every word, letter, and punctuation mark not *absolutely* necessary. This kind of cutting strengthens by condensing language:

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (William Strunk, Jr.)⁴⁴

Having trouble revising an unwieldy paragraph or project? It sometimes helps to write it again without peeking at the original; we tend to forget the filler and recall the essentials.

- **Experiment with shape and perspective.** A draft can find a whole new life through a different arrangement. Take a story out of its present chronological order. Change a block-shaped poem into tercets or into lines of varied lengths. Transform a sonnet into free verse. Try a braided essay for a personal essay stuck in narration. To experiment with perspective, change a present-tense poem to past tense, make the minor character in a story its narrator, or try second-person point of view for your essay. In revision, think about how different structures and perspectives can alter your work's relationship with the reader and change or deepen its present meaning. By adopting the epistolary shape of a series of thank-you letters to the men in her life, Mary-Louise Parker transforms her memoir *Dear Mr. You* into a book about gratitude; it moves beyond a simple account of her experiences with men. Sometimes we don't discover a meaningful shape until the revision stage.
- **Tighten beginnings and endings.** Arguably the most important—certainly the most judged and remembered—bits of any project will be the first and last passages. Work particularly on the cadence, word choice, imagery, and tone of these moments. A good lead doesn't just present your reader with information; it seduces us into continuing and contains the kernel or seed that will bloom to make the ending satisfying to reach. Endings, agree writers of all genres, should feel both inevitable and surprising. Unlike academic papers—which often start and conclude predictably with versions of a thesis—creative writing demands the unexpected, delivered in original language:

HEMINGWAY: "... I wrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied."

INTERVIEWER: "Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had you stumped?"

HEMINGWAY: "Getting the words right."⁴⁵

Novice poets and prose writers often add a moral, summation, or restatement of their *point* at the draft's end; it's usually better to delete such abstractions.

- **Play with your title.** If you haven't yet drafted or are ambivalent about the title, it's a sign that you haven't known or committed to what your draft is really about yet. So try on some titles—the attempt could reshape your whole understanding of your project. A title that refers to something literal in the draft ("Simple Recipes") tends to lift it into figurative possibility (directions not just for cooking, but for living). Imagery ("Father Holding Baby") makes a memorable and inviting title. Puns are often put to good use in titles ("Out on Main Street" refers to being outside walking on a street but also to being outed as queer and made to feel a cultural outsider in public). Clichés or worn phrases also work when they're delivered with a wink or a twist (*Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*). Titles can succinctly explain an expository context ("Car Crash while Hitchhiking") or offer an abstract idea ("Power") without interrupting the narrative or structure of the draft itself. A title can establish a mood ("Eulogy"), identify the main character or speaker ("The Cinnamon Peeler"), or cite song lyrics or other art relevant to your work (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*). Titles can tease and intrigue ("The Day I Sat with Jesus on the Sundeck and a Wind Came up and Blew My Kimono Open and He Saw My Breasts"), pose a question (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), or use irony (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* seems to ironically reference overzealous book blurbs). Compressed as a line of poetry, titles often play with sound (alliteration in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*) and cadence (iambic tetrameter in *Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off*).

Feedback and Workshop

Many writers prefer the creativity and discovery of revision over the drudgery of drafting:

I like to mess around with my stories. I'd rather tinker with a story after writing it, and then tinker some more, changing this, changing that, than have to write the story in the first place.... Maybe I revise because it gradually takes me to the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. (Raymond Carver)⁴⁶

"Workshop" is collaboration during the revision process; it means giving and getting feedback within a community of writers, then returning to your draft individually to choose which feedback to use and how to apply it. If you take a creative writing class, your teacher may design a workshop or series of workshops so peers can read one another's drafts and learn how to offer constructive criticism (if you're writing without a classroom, you might want to create a local or virtual group of people interested in responding to one another's writing).

There are many styles of workshop, including

- Distributing and reading work in advance to prepare, or reading and responding "cold"
- Working in small groups, or having a whole class look together at one draft
- Reading and responding anonymously, or openly

- Allowing the writer to explain and question, or asking the writer to remain silent and listen
- Meeting in a classroom, leaving the class to workshop in a less formal space, or meeting online

Regardless of the workshop format, here are a few notes that may help you make the most of these experiences:

PREPARING FOR WORKSHOP

- **Ready your draft for engagement.** Double space all work, and use a large enough (12 point) easily readable (such as Times New Roman) font. Readers inevitably (if unconsciously) give single-spaced text and writing with obvious sloppiness less consideration. Use page numbers—necessary during discussion of your work.
- **Be considerate of others' time.** If the group agreed to exchange one poem or four pages of prose, don't bring more. If you've set a deadline for an online exchange, don't post your contribution late. If you're assigned to read each other's drafts in advance, set aside plenty of time (and not *just before* the meeting). If you're bringing printed copies, don't leave the task until the last minute and arrive late.
- **Commit your reactions to paper.** Make brief notes as you read (before or during workshop). Be sure to share this thinking in workshop, even if a charismatic peer has a totally different response than your own. Notes are to remind *you* of your honest response—not corrections to pass on to the author.

DURING WORKSHOP

- **Convey your experience as a reader.** Indicate where you engage and disengage from the draft and point out the sources—the moments in the draft itself—that inspire those reactions. Use the vocabulary of craft to be explicit and professional. It can help the writer if readers summarize their perceptions of “what the work is about” and then tell which parts of the draft led to these understandings.
- **Don't explain or defend your work.** The goal of workshop is to help each writer lift the creator's “curse of knowledge” and identify how the draft is functioning now *from the point of view of readers*. Explaining your draft (sharing the context or “what you meant”) infects your readers with your own “curse of knowledge.” Defending your draft disables you from hearing your reader's full response; it's a defense mechanism to defer receiving feedback. Just listen. Later, transfer the urge to explain and defend into energy for revision: let the revised work speak for itself.
- **Resist the urge to advise or overshare.** Describe what you notice as a reader, what the draft does accomplish, what seems incomplete or unfinished. But try not to tell any writer what the draft *should* do. You aren't in workshop to build a draft by committee! If a draft reminds you of a personal experience, resist the urge to share your story. It will take away from time meant for giving feedback and will suggest your critique is personal rather than about the text itself.
- **Avoid saying “I like it,” “I can relate.”** The use of “like” is rampant due to Facebook, and we have a natural and kind urge to put one another at ease during workshop by saying we

“like” something. Peers sometimes react to content in drafts by saying they’ve had a similar experience and can “relate.” These phrases lead away from considering the draft itself. Minimize your judgment (liking or not liking) and remember: writing that engages and moves us even though we *cannot relate* (that is, we don’t have personal experience with this subject matter) is really terrific writing.

- **Try not to suggest change just for the sake of change.** “No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else’s draft,” wrote H.G. Wells.⁴⁷ Resist the urge to make a draft *your* draft, to suggest adopting your style. Also resist the urge to copyedit or proofread for correctness (called “line editing”) until the draft has already been revised many times and is about to be submitted for a final grade or publication.
- **Remember it isn’t a competition.** “A good workshop continually signals that we are all in this together, teacher too,” says teacher and poet Marvin Bell.⁴⁸ Understand that we’re all participating in workshops to grow as writers, to learn more about our craft. Compassion, tact, honesty, and a sense of humor are all strengths here. Pointing out that you appreciate or notice a *risk* a writer has taken with a draft is perhaps the most valuable move to make in workshop.

AFTER WORKSHOP

- **Note and assess the feedback you received.** While feedback is still fresh in your mind, write about what you heard and what ideas come to mind and excite you now (you might do this as a brainstorm or as notes on your draft). Useful details from workshop will quickly dissolve from your memory! It’s likely you’ll have received several *contradictory* critiques. Rather than dismiss them as “cancelling out” one another, focus in particular on the aspects of your draft that caused disparate reactions: these are areas where your draft is sending mixed messages. Brainstorm to understand *why* readers perceived these cues in different ways. Doing so will lead you toward decisions about where and how to revise.
- **Take back the reins.** During workshop, discussion is out of your control. When you return to your draft afterwards, you’re back in control and under no obligation to do what anyone suggested. You now understand how readers experience your work, and you can measure their responses against your goals for the project—and fine-tune those goals. In the revision stage of this textbook, four clever and caring teachers read it and gave detailed feedback. One said I should take out all the quotations by writers; another said the quotations were an asset and I should *add* quotations by other kinds of artists too. One said I should shrink or eliminate the “Practice” aspect and expand “Craft”; another said my attention to practice is what makes the textbook different from others and therefore unique and valuable. After receiving this contradictory feedback, I had to think about what my audience needs, what my purpose is, and what I can and want to mean with this book. *All* their feedback was ultimately helpful—even the suggestions I thoughtfully rejected—because these contradictory reactions forced me to better define what book I was writing. I made many revisions based on this new understanding of my own work.
- **Take stock of the feedback you gave.** Workshops aren’t just to *get* feedback but to practice your skills at critique. Even if—worst case—you got no viable feedback from peers, your experience as a reader improves your ability to critique your own work. Given that the things that irk us in the drafts of others tend to be *the very things we ourselves have some trouble with as writers*, apply the feedback you gave others to your own draft.

Line Editing and Polishing

Revision is “complete” when the content and structure of your revision is set. Now you turn your full attention to line editing and polishing before submitting your work for credit or for publication.

- **Line Editing** is examining your text slowly, line by line, for grammar, spelling, and punctuation correctness. You’re reading only on the level of the sentence: is each sentence complete, comma and semicolon used correctly, dash formatted right, word spelled correctly? Is that fiancé or fiancée—blond or blonde? Should dialogue be indented there? Some writers read their draft backward—last sentence to first—to stay focused on the level of the sentence and not slip into revising (for content) or editing (for clarity and style). When examining a poem, check whether it uses sentences (if so, all should be grammatically correct; if not, then there should be *no* periods, no sentences).
- **Polishing** is making certain the formatting and visual aspects are consistent throughout the work. Here you are working to fulfill the practical submission requirements of the assignment and to use professional standards (page numbering, double spacing, one-inch margins, consistent indentation format for paragraphs). Check that nothing superficial can distract the reader. Has the printer run low on ink, causing light pages, blank spots, odd colors, or bars across the page? Should page breaks be inserted to eliminate widow and orphan lines (a first or last line of a paragraph or quotation stranded as the first or last line of a page) or to reunite poems with their titles? Save work as a PDF and check it before printing; writing can look different on the page than it appeared on screen. Check work on the page a final time before submitting it in print or online.

When you line edit and polish, *you’re not actually reading for content at all*: it’s impossible to pay close attention to these nitpicky but crucial details when you’re also thinking about what the text says. If you’re considering the topic of your essay or the imagery in your poem as you line edit and polish, you have slipped back into revising. This recursive approach is normal—nobody does all the revising, then all the line editing and polishing. But it’s important to *end* with line editing and polishing so as to eliminate errors introduced in revision and ensure your final piece is as strong as possible. This last push has the effect of making your grammar, spelling, and formatting invisible—they will recede, so the real work of your creative writing can impress and touch the reader. Every instance of writing “peaked” when you meant “piqued” bursts the bubble of illusion and wrenches your reader out of the world of imagination and into the world of correction. Each tiny oversight dilutes the artistic and emotional effect of your work; line edit and polish so your creative writing is as potent and engrossing as you want it to be.

Many writers need support with line editing and polishing—it’s almost impossible to see the errors we’ve made, because we tend to read what we *meant to write* rather than what is actually there in black and white. Try this:

- **Exchange drafts with peers** in class for a line editing and polishing workshop—don’t discuss revision or content at all, just correct the revised draft before a due date.
- **Rely on a trusted reader** (a roomie, parent, classmate, friend, mentor) to play this role and mark up the errors on your draft. As you make these corrections in the file, be sure to ask for explanation of fixes you don’t understand.
- **Use your campus writing center** for support. Your reader there will not line edit your manuscript for you but can help you find *patterns* of errors and explain them. Seek and repair each instance of these errors, knowing how to avoid them next time. You may be asked to

read your draft aloud; the support staff member can help point out where you have verbally corrected yourself and not read what's actually in print, and then can help you get your real message into your written work.

- **Search online for “common sentence errors”;** you'll find a multitude of university resources to help you identify and correct mistakes at the sentence level. Lists such as the “20 most common sentence errors” are useful.
- **Attend to those colorful squiggles** in Microsoft Word—they can draw your attention to flubs you don't notice. But be sure you do not accept these suggested revisions without investigating whether they are actually useful corrections.
- Long term, **take a course in grammar and editing**, or brush up on the topic using a text such as *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*. Your effort will pay off when you self-publish or submit work to editors for their consideration.

For Further Reading

Claire Kehrwald Cook, *Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*

Donald M. Murray, *The Craft of Revision*

William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*

Your Moves

1. Give your draft a yellow highlighter test: highlight every word and phrase that can be imagined using the five senses (seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched). The passages marked are “showing”; passages unmarked are “telling.” All creative writing is predominantly showing. Reduce the telling.
2. Remove nonessential passages, whether telling or showing. Much of what's written at the drafting stage is necessary to find traction and momentum but unneeded in the final work; these parts dilute and weaken the project. In an essay, remove what you've included “just because it happened”; in a story, cut the exposition before the action and the narrative unrelated to the story's meaning; in a poem, delete the abstractions and concluding “thesis.”
3. Divide your entire draft into segments (usually paragraphs—but segments can be stanzas, sentences, or lines for poems). Rearrange these parts and notice how the emphasis and meaning of the project changes with each new shape. Set aside leftover parts. Note in the spaces between parts where new writing is needed.
4. Track the arc of your main character, narrator, poem's speaker, or essay's “I” by making an outline of what that person experiences. Revise so that your human figure experiences a conflict, question, or desire early, and experiences change or discovery by the end. Revise minor characters beyond “types” or stereotypes.
5. Eliminate “poor me” complaints and mean-spirited passages written with a “poison pen”; both are signals to a reader that you haven't gained mature or artistic perspective on your material.
6. Experiment with point of view and perspective. Try rewriting with a secondary character as narrator in your story; try second or third person instead of first person in your poem; try past tense instead of present for an essay (this creates a “now” from which to look

back on experience). Consider how these shifts change what your project is about and can make it deeper or more original.

7. Play with alternate forms and structures. Plot your story in a new order; change a poem from a visual block into couplets; change a narrative essay into a lyric essay. Open yourself to a new or more complicated understanding of your material that may emerge.
8. Be ruthless in your elimination of every cliché and each instance of tired wording. Cut every phrase you've seen before in someone else's writing.
9. Decrease or eliminate adjectives (the *pretty*, *fluffy*, *happy*, *dark*, *foreboding*, and *ominous* clouds). Increase figurative language that adds to atmosphere and mood: for instance, "Midwestern clouds like great grey brains" (Denis Johnson, "Car Crash while Hitchhiking") or "the clouds open their white blouses" (James Bertolino, "The Blouses").
10. ~~Passive sentences are in need of revision.~~ Revise passive sentences into active sentences. (Find passive sentences by looking for the verb "to be"—*is*, *am*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*—coupled with another verb and sometimes with "by." Passive: The boy was bitten (by the dog). Active: The dog bit the boy.)
11. Count. Count the number of words in each sentence. Do you get 10, 10, 11, 9, 9, 10? Monotony is deadly in prose; better results are 10, 23, 5, 12, 2 (or any variation of your choice). Try counting stressed and unstressed syllables (usually in poetry, but it's helpful in prose too). If you find three or more consecutive unstressed syllables, you've found a patch of dry, "prosaic" language. Interrupt this effect by rearranging the syntax, altering the diction, and cutting unnecessary syllables.
12. While you are counting words in sentences, look at how sentences are structured. Do most follow a subject-verb-object order? Are there questions, exclamations, commands? Varying sentence structure also helps avoid dull prose.
13. "Kill your darlings" has been attributed to Ginsberg, Faulkner, Wilde, Welty, Plath, and other authors who quoted and believed Arthur Quiller-Couch (who first said "murder your darlings" in the early twentieth century). The advice is sound, regardless of debate over its source: delete your pet, precious, and self-indulgent passages for the greater good of this work (or save them in a file called "Darlings" for another day).
14. Brainstorm a list of at least twenty alternate titles for your piece. Notice how each title shades and contextualizes the work in a different way. Find a title you love, and revise the project to suit this new direction.

Notes

- 1 Donald Morison Murray, *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990), 4.
- 2 Oliver Sacks, *On the Move: A Life* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 383.
- 3 Raymond Carver, "A Small, Good Thing," in *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories*, ed. Tess Gallagher, 308–32 (New York: Atlantic Monthly P, 1991), 325.
- 4 Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (New York: Norton, 1979), 72.
- 5 "Don't Like to Write, But Like Having Written," *Quote Investigator: Exploring the Origins of Quotations*, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/10/18/on-writing/>.
- 6 Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 53–54.
- 7 Denise Levertov, *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1998), 96.

- 8 Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th edition, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 161–71 (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2015), 167.
- 9 Levertov, *Conversations*, 96.
- 10 Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*, 131–41 (1968; repr. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 133.
- 11 Lynda Barry, *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (Montreal, PQ: Drawn & Quarterly, 2014), 182.
- 12 Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1978), 200.
- 13 Lia Purpura, "On Looking Away: A Panorama," in *On Looking: Essays*, 123–36 (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2006), 128–29.
- 14 Donald Morison Murray, *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990), 2.
- 15 Margaret Atwood, quoted in Murray, *Shoptalk*, 47.
- 16 William Stafford, quoted in Mary Rose O'Reilly, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998), 47.
- 17 Paul Kennedy, "Playing Mozart with Pinchas Zukerman," *Ideas*, CBC, Tuesday, January 14, 2014.
- 18 Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up* (London: Vintage, 2001), 40.
- 19 Lorrie Moore, "The Art of Fiction No. 167 [interview by Elizabeth Gaffney]," *The Paris Review* 158 (Spring–Summer 2001), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/510/the-art-of-fiction-no-167-lorrie-moore>.
- 20 Michiko Kakutani, "Is Roth Really Writing about Roth?" *The New York Times*, May 11, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-really.html>.
- 21 Rachel Carson, letter written in 1956, quoted in Geoffrey W. Chase, *Critical Reading and Writing in the University Community: The Environment* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 110.
- 22 Elie Wiesel, quoted in H.A. Walker, "How and Why I Write: An Interview with Elie Wiesel," *Journal of Education* 162, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 57–63.
- 23 Quoted in Marlise Simons "Love and Age: A Talk with García Márquez," in *Conversations with Gabriel García Márquez*, ed. Gene H. Bell-Villada, 141–47 (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005), 147.
- 24 Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard, 65–80 (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008), 79.
- 25 Quoted in Michael Schumacher, "Joyce Carol Oates and the Hardest Part of Writing," in *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. Lee Milazzo, 135–46 (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989), 139–40.
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- 27 John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 46.
- 28 E.L. Doctorow, "The Art of Fiction No. 94 [interview by George Plimpton]," *The Paris Review* 101 (Winter 1986), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2718/the-art-of-fiction-no-94-e-l-doctorow>.
- 29 Quoted in Murray, *Shoptalk*, 150.
- 30 Quoted in Murray, *Shoptalk*, 61.
- 31 PBS, "Winter," *The Mind of a Chef*, season 3 episode 9, October 21, 2014.
- 32 Quoted in Yvonne N. Bui, *How to Write a Master's Thesis* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 94.
- 33 James Bertolino and Anita K. Boyle, *Pub Proceedings* (Egress Studio P, 2001). Note: The second and third chapbooks of poetry from these collaborators are *Bar Exams* (2004) and *Lit-Wads* (2013).
- 34 John Gregory Dunne, "The Old Pornographer: Billy Wilder," *New Yorker*, November 8, 1990, 90.
- 35 Vladimir Nabokov, "Interviews: Anonymous (1962)," in *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 2.
- 36 Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 79.
- 37 Donald Murray, *The Craft of Revision*, Anniversary edition (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013), 1.