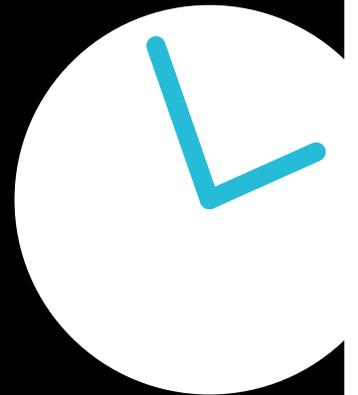
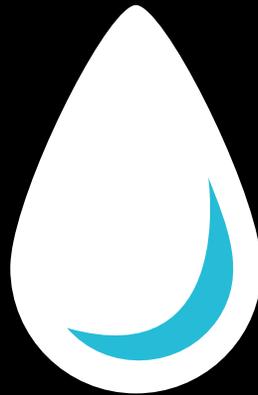
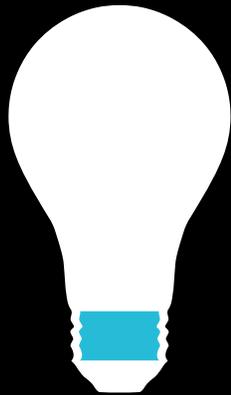


# ReVisions:

A Zine on Writing at Queens College

Inside the Writing Process

Issue 6, Spring 2009



# Inside the Writing

# Process:

Inspiration  
Perspiration  
Procrastination

•••CUNY Writing Fellows•••



CUNY Writing Fellows (from left to right): Ken Nielsen, Pamela Burger, Carlos Penaloza, Cheryl Dym, and Tim Recuber

CUNY Writing Fellows (CWFs) are Doctoral Candidates at The CUNY Graduate Center who have earned a competitive fellowship and who receive specialized training in the teaching of writing. These six CWFs are central to the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Queens College. They are also largely responsible for the conception, development, and production of Revisions. Take a look at their biographies to learn more about this year's CWFs.

**Cheryl Dym** is a doctoral candidate in the Neuropsychology Ph.D. subprogram at Queens College. Her graduate work focuses on the genetic and pharmacological contributions to preference of sugar and fat. Next year, she will start her psychology internship at AHRC where she will be working with developmentally delayed individuals.

**Carlos Penaloza** holds a Masters of Philosophy in Biology and is a doctoral candidate in the Biology Ph.D. subprogram at the CUNY Graduate Center. His graduate work focuses on the molecular mechanisms leading to sex dimorphic cellular sensitivity and is based at the Queens College Biology Department.

**Ken Nielsen** is finishing his dissertation in Theatre Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. His work focuses on the performance of gay male sexuality in Western Europe through the import of American plays. When he is not doing this, he is working on a play that may be titled *After the Burning*.

**Tim Recuber** is a Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology, currently at work on a dissertation examining the depiction of disasters in mass media and popular culture.

**Pamela Burger** is a Ph.D. Candidate in the English department at the CUNY Graduate Center. When not procrastinating, she sometimes writes poetry, essays on poetry, and a dissertation focused on women in twentieth-century literature.

**Jeff McLean** is a Ph.D. Candidate in the CUNY Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology program in Dr. Zakeri's cell death lab at Queens College. His research focuses primarily on Influenza A and Dengue virus manipulation of mammalian cancer-related (cell death) biochemical pathways.

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Visit <http://blogs.qc.cuny.edu/blogs/revisions> to read and comment on the online version of this year's Revisions.

# Revisions: inspiration

## Inspiration: Can It Be Taught?

**Mindy Altman**  
Faculty, Department of English

Can inspiration be taught? Students, especially those who are less experienced writers, often believe that they cannot write if they are not inspired, and that they somehow must wait to be so. It is as though inspiration is passive and external to them, something that will strike them, alter their mood, spark their imagination, and generate energy for them to write, so that they can then stare down the blank page and get started—and finished as well.

But this kind of passivity often runs counter to the writing process itself, which allows us to actively create anew at any given moment. This is a lesson that I learned many years ago from Marie Ponsot, a teacher, poet and rhetorician; it is one that I have incorporated into every class I have encountered.

After many years of teaching English 110: College Writing — i.e., “freshman comp”—I have come to believe that yes, inspiration can be taught. Essentially, what we can teach is a set of skills and techniques that students can use over and over and which will allow them to feel inspired because they will see that they are getting somewhere; that they can write with ease and be productive in putting words to paper and forming ideas. This is especially true of free writing, the technique of writing non-stop whatever comes to mind.

**After many years of teaching English 110: College Writing—i.e., “freshman comp”—I have come to believe that yes, inspiration can be taught.**

When students realize they can jump into a subject through free writing, they are thrilled to find that they have plenty to say. By writing, they find out what they think, as well as the point they want to make. Of course they will need to develop and revise. But they can write and rewrite and realize that they, themselves, are an infinite source of

words and ideas, both independently and in response to the material with which they are working. Use free writing, get started, get going, don't stop. The words will come. Inspiration is ultimately a function of practice. We can generate our own inspiration. ■

## The Honest Professor: a Manifesto

**Ken Nielsen**  
CUNY Writing Fellow

*Is pretence of simplicity implicit dishonesty?*

Yes, it is.

Outline, draft, draft, revise, proofread; Standing in front of the blackboard explaining how to write an academic essay: the professor suddenly realizes that this is not how writing happens. And, most certainly not in that professor's own ivory colored room piled high with drafts, crumbled pages and unruly dust-bunnies. I'll bet you, most college instructors of writing have had that feeling at some point or another. I certainly have. This manifesto asks that particular writing instructor, who looks suspiciously like me, to come out in the writing classroom as a struggling writer. Would that inspire the students? Would it make them procrastinate less (or at least more productively)? Would it make them work harder on understanding their writing and, through that, the content of their analysis? Or, would it simply give everybody license to be imperfect?

The intelligent and aware reader has of course guessed by now where this is leading. It's time to consider strategic self-revealing in the writing classroom. I am wondering whether or not outing myself as a writer whose process does not usually follow any sort of model except that of unfettered anarchy could help my students become more comfortable with their own writing process and—why not?—maybe inspire them to reflect on how their own processes are related to their thinking. It's time to inspire our students to write and revise more productively by discussing our own labyrinthine and labor-intensive writing process.

*Is it possible that our students' sudden recognition of themselves in us would open up an exploration of their thinking's interconnectedness with their processes of ongoing drafting?*

Lately I have been thinking about how my work as a Writing Fellow will influence my future teaching. It's now obvious that the workshops I conduct at Queens College convey something about writing that I actually do not believe: that academic writing is a neat, organized, and stringent endeavor. It certainly isn't for me. The model I offer students in the classroom does not influence my own practice. There is a serious disconnect between my words and my actions.

Maybe it's a case of me not taking the medicine I prescribe? Maybe I just lie to my students because it's easier? Maybe it is that I would like to follow the model I propose but find myself unable to do so? If the latter is the case, maybe it would be good for my students to know that?

I might do a workshop on outlining when—I admit—I very rarely actually outline anything. I lecture on the utmost importance of letting oneself “just write” to keep the engine going and to develop ideas, even though I never develop ideas in that way myself.

How does my initial message about the complexity of the writing process square with the neat model that I subsequently ask students to follow?

Feminist scholar bell hooks has written in “Engaged Pedagogy” that “Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any that way I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their own experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators.” Though hooks here contemplates more personal narratives, her thoughts also resonate with the academic writing process, particularly in W-classes dedicated to the very process of learning and exploration.

By letting our students assume that we don't struggle with our own writing (simply because we are their professors and thus in an immediate power relation to them), are we indeed exercising power in a way that sharing our own struggles would undo?

Simply admitting that our own writing process contains the same challenges that our students face (on a different level, albeit) puts us in a position where our students will be more open to start writing (which I often find to be hard) and then judge, instead of the other way around. If they don't assume we immediately judge their process, maybe

they won't either.

Hooks's suggestion to eliminate myself as an all-knowing expert of everything has led me to contemplate sharing a draft version of a piece of my book in its different phases: the draft I sent to my reader, the version I received back with its many (many!) corrections and suggestions, the revised piece I sent to the editor, the version I got back from the copy editor, and finally the published chapter. This would let my students see the stark differences a published piece of writing undergoes and understand the changes in both content and tone that occur along the way. We must realize that our students do not know how the publishing process works. They believe they are supposed to mimic the articles they read, articles on which much red ink has been put to use by multiple readers and capable copy editors. Showing my students that I, too, receive feedback (sometimes hostile feedback, not unlike what they might receive) might corrode my power, but it enhances my authority as someone who knows what the writing process feels like. And, here, I use feeling deliberately in an attempt to acknowledge that in the writing classroom we deal not only with critical thinking. We also deal with how that thinking gets expressed through writing which, as this issue of *Revisions* undertakes to show, is a combination of emotions, psychology, and thinking. We should realize that if we are honest about it, writing, thinking, and feeling are interconnected for us as writers. It's time to let that be the case as professors as well.

Another way to do this is to develop a paper alongside our students on the same topic as them, participating in our own demands.

What would that feel like?

Obviously we bring to the seminar table a radically different set of skills, but it might help our students understand the academic process in greater depth if we investigate our own thinking alongside them. Honestly.

Doing this would for sure make us come up with more interesting assignments (since we would have to answer them as well) but besides that, what would it do?

I think, again, that like sharing the publishing process we would allow our students a peek behind the curtain of meaning-making that they find in their textbooks, critical articles, theoretical texts, and our brilliant lectures. If we employ one or both of these possibilities, we make education the collective production of new knowledge. Showing our students that we, their professors, too are writing laborers would help to eradicate the developing

sense that students are simply consumers in a factory of knowledge.

Might we actually end up rewarding the academic and intellectual process instead of its product, the insightful paper, by acknowledging our own imperfections and struggles with academic writing?

Lately I have pondered these questions with a colleague, and the main objection (or at least the one we got to the fastest after “oh, how very interesting”) is how truly to evaluate the process through the grading system we all categorize within. The objection seems to be that an evaluation that puts value upon the academic process and self-reflections on writing (a meta-process, if you will) would be devaluing the importance of the correct and masterful managing of content.

If so (and I am doubtful that the managing of content wouldn't also improve with the process, in fact, I am sure it would) is that always bad in classes constructed as writing intensive? Can we truly ignore toil and effort when grading papers in a W-class and if we do, aren't we actually maintaining the distinction between form and content that we attempt to break down? Can we disregard the progress made in the writing itself on behalf of content? Shouldn't the writing process in itself be part of the learning objective of such a class? I believe it should. Should it be all that the student is evaluated on?

Absolutely not! But, in the balanced classroom, in which a true community of writers has been created (the students and the professor together), it becomes impossible to rigidly separate the managing of content from writing.

***Can we truly ignore toil and effort when grading papers in a W-class and if we do, aren't we actually maintaining the distinction between form and content that we attempt to break down?***

So, ultimately, this is what coming out to my students about my own writing does. It makes our (my students and my own) classroom into a community of struggling writers who take their process very seriously, but who also knows that sitting down to write every morning is not all

sunshine, mariachi bands, and balloons. It creates authority while undoing power. It allows us to trace our own development in writing while we create new knowledge and insights. Most importantly, however, it ultimately makes writing a shared experience, which, I believe, imbues the writing with meaning for the individual as it slowly becomes more of a way to think than a task to excel at. ■

<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, “Engaged Pedagogy,” in *Women/Writing/Teaching*, ed. Jan Zlotnik Schmidt, (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 231–38. 237

## Saturation

**William Blick**  
Graduate student, School of Library and Information Studies

The discussion of how to attain inspiration has been the subject of mythology, fiction, and textbooks, as well as a source of concern for scholars, poets, musicians, and artists. For the writer, the question of how to locate creative impetus and the wherewithal to complete a successful piece of writing is timeless. To successfully overcome obstacles to creativity, the contemporary writer should look to great pieces of writing, music, art, and cinema for inspiration. Saturation of the writer by immersing his or herself into a variety of media is an essential method to derive inspiration.

When I was 12 years old, I was captivated by science fiction. Later my tastes became more refined and advanced, but as a fledgling writer at age 12, I fancied science fiction and its seemingly endless possibilities. I rather liked one television show. It was a cheaply made Canadian production which based its episodes on the writings of Ray Bradbury. It was entitled, aptly enough, *The Ray Bradbury Theater*. Each episode was introduced by a signature narration by Ray Bradbury, wherein he addressed the fact that people were always asking him where he got his ideas. He then explained that he had a workshop surrounded with posters of far-away lands, models of spacecrafts, and an eclectic assortment of paraphernalia meant to stimulate his imagination. He would say, “I look around and everything I have is here.” I tried to emulate this procedure by looking around at household objects like soap, and constructing tales of soaps whose lathers produced everlasting beauty and life. I would look at the blender and manufacture a story that dealt with an appliance that allowed its users to go back in time. While the stories were somewhat hackneyed and ridiculous, I latched onto Bradbury's premise of immersion to create stories and it remained with me.

The crux of inspiration lies in the stimulation of imagination, as Bradbury discovered. For Stephen King, a similar process took hold. He maintained a series of odd jobs washing hospital sheets and performing janitorial duties at a local high school. It was there that he developed the character of Carrie, a high school misfit with destructive powers of telekinesis. King, like Bradbury wrote about what he knew and then added his own creative spin. King was a proponent of mining the commonplace and the mundane for inspiration. He too was saturated with comic books and dime-store novels at a young age. The combination of his own experiences in common places, combined with the saturation of other “arts” is arguably what made him so successful.

The old adage directed to writers holds true: write about what you know...and then of course add a little of your imagination that reflects the darkest and most fantastical reaches of your soul. I always write about what is in my immediate vicinity, but I always add little snippets of other writers. Here the other adage holds true: good writers borrow, great writers steal. While I never aim to steal anyone’s work, I do find that my writer’s block, when I experience it, is assuaged by viewing a fantastic movie, or reading a great short story, or listening to an excellent piece of music. If ever I can’t come up with ideas, I will sit at an empty keyboard listening to Bobbie Gentry’s “Ode to Billie Joe” while simultaneously watching my favorite part of Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets*. I will then conclude my day and read a great minimalist piece by Raymond Carver. When I then lay my head on the pillow, I allow all the stimulation to permeate my brain. It is in the minutes between consciousness and sleep that my ideas take hold, and very often before I drift to sleep I will wake up and jot down these ideas. Often I fall straight to sleep, but most times I remember my ideas.

**If ever I can't come up with ideas, I will sit at an empty keyboard listening to Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billie Joe" while simultaneously watching my favorite part of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*.**

The equation is simple: If one is seeking the stimulus

to write a critical evaluation and discussion of creative works or seeking to write a creative work, one should surround oneself with the creative outputs of successful artists that have come before. Writing works harmoniously with literature, music, art, and cinema and one is attained through the other.



Robert Conley, “William Shakespeare.”  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/yelnoc/>

If one were for example seeking to write cultural criticism on pulp fiction, one should seek to surround oneself with the best of that field: Charles Willeford, Jim Thompson, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler. One should seek out filmmakers such as John Huston, Sam Fuller, Sam Peckinpah, and even Quentin Tarantino. By observing and reading such material, the imagination is sparked and the writer’s cultural criticism is fueled by the enormous emotional impact of these works.

I speak of saturation. Saturation is what I find to be the single most effective tool when overcoming block. I speak of the saturation that involves immersion into the great works of others. Brahms, Beethoven, Fellini, Shakespeare, Dante, Dostoyevsky—these artists should be the staples of any struggling writer. Notice that I did not limit the inspirational figures to just those who preside in the literary realm, but rather took into consideration composers and even filmmakers. The key is not only to stimulate but, in the case of writer’s block, to over-stimulate the senses.

The French Symbolists like Rimbaud and Baudelaire attempted to achieve a prolonged derangement of the senses. In many ways saturation with a cross section of a variety of pop-culture and high-brow artistic sensibilities helps the writer to achieve and then convey this derangement of the senses. Additionally, it has been said that there is no such thing as true originality, only what we can do to rearrange old ideas and make them our own.

When we are constantly stimulated by the “greats” we can cross reference them and create a new type of art from familiar plot lines and artistic directions.

It is ambiguous exactly what “great” art is, and it has been the source of dispute among critics. I suggested that writers saturate themselves with “great art.” While it is hard to pin down what successful art is, I think that a writer, for the sake of inspiration, should seek to immerse his or her self into the kind of art that moves him or her the most. For example, if a writer is particularly moved by classic rock or by comic books, I suggest a steady diet of these. Perhaps disco music of the 70’s fueled by stream-of-consciousness rants by Bukowski or Kerouac will stimulate the writer’s imagination.

**The key is not only to stimulate but, in the case of writer’s block, to over-stimulate the senses.**

I suggest mixing and matching different eras of music, film, literature, and art. Try to engulf *Notes from Underground* in its fullness and then listen to Charlie Parker or maybe Guns N’ Roses. In many ways, the modern author/critic needs to be a glutton: a glutton for song, image, thought, idea, concept, axiom, principle, story, nostalgia, and art. By imbibing in mass quantities of pop culture mayhem, mixed with high-brow sensibilities, and balancing it out with a healthy dose of folk music, art, and storytelling, the writer has no choice but to generate a multiplicity of conflicting emotional states. The author is forced to do two things: come up with a criticism or conflicted emotion about what he or she has seen, heard, or read, or to come up with his or her own ideas or concepts. The thing to note is that writing and criticism is an extremely personal experience. Only the writer will know what type of art will fuel his or her imagination.

To overcome writer’s block and to achieve a successful work, the writer must seek to entrench his or her sensibilities into the work of others. Saturation of the senses must occur to break through this rather intense emotional experience of being psychologically blocked. It is an extreme experience and it is through the extreme measures of fueling the imagination through the works of others that the writer has no choice but to form an opinion or come up with an original thought. This is the gold treasure for which we writers strive and it will come if we feed the creative beast that is imagination. ■

## Music Performance in New York: In Their Own Words

**Cathy Callis**  
Faculty, Aaron Copland School of Music

*In the following essay, Cathy Callis describes how a professor can help tailor a syllabus to help students find inspiration for assignments.*

In the words of the great pianist, conductor and author Daniel Barenboim, “the person who wants to listen actively will get more out of the music than the person who just sits there waiting to be inspired.”<sup>1</sup>

Such, in part, was a premise for the design of the course Music Performance in New York, offered during the Fall 2008 semester. With the entire concert world of the City of New York serving as a potential listening laboratory, class members (the majority being non-music majors) acquired a base of musical experience in the classroom, and then ventured forth. Not only did we hear a variety of concerts in a number of different venues, we reviewed and critiqued them, sharing our thoughts and honing our critical skills.

For those whose passion is listening to music, and for those who are interested in writing as a way of connecting more deeply to music, the following experiences, observations, and checklists, as well as quotes from class members, may be of interest.

### **I. Experiences in Comparative Listening: Sharpening the Ear.**

An early classroom project, comparative listening to two performances of Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 15 in B-flat, K. 450, developed aural skills and introduced basic music vocabulary necessary to evaluate and understand both the music—the structure, the style, the composer—and its interpretations. Class members then attended a live performance of the same piece at Juilliard on September 21.

*“Michael Brown, the first competitor on the program, played with a free and expansive personality...He floated with the notes like a ballet dancer...The third competitor, Liza Stepanova, my absolute favorite of the three competitors, played with robustness. Yet there was a gracefulness about her. By the way, she won first place!”*  
Jennie Blackwell

## II. In One's Own Words: Refining the Writing Process.

The initial writing exercises were simple—one- or two-word responses describing moods, feelings, and character evoked or observations made upon first hearing and subsequent repetitions. Musical terms were written about with precision; essays, blogs, and class discussions centered on topics such as: “In this age of technology, is there a need for live performance?” “How does the structure of a piece support the music?” “How does the aesthetic philosophy of saxophonist Antonio Hart influence his performance style?” Ultimately, students read articles, learned terminology, shared views, and became clearer, through writing, about personal philosophies, attitudes, and preferences.

*“I finally started to see music as an all encompassing sphere instead of just a flat surface.”*

Ely Moskowitz (Queens College Concert, Maurice Peress, conductor, 9/24/08)

## III. “Critiquing” the Critics: Learning from the Professionals.

A further step in the evolution of our writing was learning from current and historical reviews. We read pieces from master critics such as Olin Downes; heard from the composers themselves as reported in *Composers on Music*, edited by Joseph Fisk; and surveyed accounts of historical performances included in *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres*, by Thomas Forrest Kelly.<sup>2</sup> During one of the classes’ favorite experiments, “critiquing” the critic, students broke into small groups or teams, each team consisting of both non-music and music majors. Teams were asked to analyze and “grade” reviews written by the pros (a big hit). The class used basic criteria to evaluate them, including:

1. Clarity, focus, and follow-through from the opening paragraph to the end of the review.
2. The use of historical or relevant background information about the composer, composition, performer, or programming.
3. The quality of the performance and the communicative effectiveness of the performer.
4. Audience response; emotional and critical response of the reviewer.
5. Specifics that might be relevant to the performance about the venue.

6. Marketability: Is this review a promotional piece for the artist, concert, or forthcoming musical event of a similar nature? Does it serve the critic?

By “grading” and reporting what worked or didn’t on the part of the professional critic, students gained in confidence and understanding of the reviewing process.

From these activities, the qualities of a good review soon became apparent: those receiving the highest marks from the students were well-crafted, engaging, concise, and informative. It was further determined that a good reviewer be knowledgeable about the subject matter, be a good listener (have a trained ear whenever possible), and be both subjective (by putting his or her emotional responses into the review) and objective (by holding to high standards).

*“You could see that he wasn’t simply singing his lines, he was living them!”* Alvaro Echegaray (about John Relyea as Mephistopheles, *The Damnation of Faust*, Metropolitan Opera Production, 11/22/08)

*“I loved Mulgrew Miller on the piece ‘Fast Track.’ His piano added a capricious and swingy quality to it, making comprehensible what would have been an indecipherably modern jazz composition. His approach to the piano seemed to be proportionate to his physique: as a big man he could pull off anything from little Mozartian riffs and sequences solely in the right hand to spontaneous lush orchestrations of whatever his mind was attuned to at that very moment.”* Joseph Martin (David Holland Sextet, Birdland, 10/11/08)

## IV. The Rewrite: Finding One’s Own Voice.

The process of rewriting an essay or article is similar to a performer’s task in the practice room, and the composer’s task in the studio: there is a polishing of ideas, an examination and a seeking out of clarity, intent, form and structure.

Prior to the exercise of “critiquing the critic,” students had attended violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter’s concert at Carnegie Hall in October and written preliminary reviews or reports of their experiences. They now were able to compare their work to the professional reviews critiqued in class after that concert, including a professional review (that was scrutinized in detail) of Ms Mutter’s concert by *The New York Times’* critic Vivien Schweitzer.<sup>3</sup>

Thus began the process of the rewrite, or revision. Approximately eight concerts were attended by each class member, with summaries, reviews, and a choice of

rewrites of their reviews as a part of their assignments. A personal style began to immerge. Usually, the initial review captured the essence of the concert; the rewrite a further embellishing of the same.

*“I just wished to close my eyes and listen to the alien and mechanical sounds and create the foreign worlds in my imagination.”* Emily Dinger (Electronic Music Concert, CUNY Graduate Center, 11/08)

*In rap style:*

*“...As the story goes, it basically depicted life  
From the times of joy, loneliness, and those of strife.  
The orchestra was small, just a six member ensemble,  
But brought life to actions, and emotions to sample.”*  
Alvaro Echegaray (excerpt from rap review, *Who Speaks for Wolf*, dance and music event, NYU, 11/23/08)

## V. A Checklist for Writing and Listening: Pulling it all Together.

1. The following are suggestions that can help make the most out of listening and writing about music:
2. Develop your ear by listening to all sorts of music.
3. Get in to the mindset of the performer.
4. Notice your emotions and feelings as you listen.
5. Develop a working vocabulary of music.
6. Learn about the composer.
7. Put the music and composer in historical and stylistic context.
8. Consider elements of programming.
9. Immerse yourself in the environment or venue of the performance.
10. Put the performance into a meaningful context.
11. Write from your experience.

*“It is hard to say why the music feels more vivid to me now. Perhaps the spark of imagination burst into flames when I saw and understood how music affects everyone. Making music is a passionate act and watching it take place, as we have through live performances, is a little bit like looking through a window into human nature. We can see these deeply rooted feelings and, in them, we see a reflection of ourselves. Yet, none of this is written explicitly*

*into the music; rather it is something I take away from this experience.”* Jennifer Louie (on writing about music, 12/08)

In his book, *Writing to Learn*, William Zinsser makes the point that “ultimately, every critic is an outsider, one step removed from the creative spark.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Jennifer Louie infers, it is a creative spark of the imagination that sets us on a path to learning and discovery. In that regard, as the class professor and facilitator, I suspect both Mr. Zinsser and Mr. Barenboim would have been pleased with the initiative and perseverance displayed by the students as they sought to get inside the music, and to discover for themselves the essence of the musical experience.

*“There is a lot of music I can’t even begin to imagine out there, and experiencing it will teach me something new, every time I venture out to a concert.”* Emily Dinger (on writing about music 12/08) ■

<sup>1</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “A Whirlwind Named Barenboim,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/arts/music/23k.mm.html/>.

<sup>2</sup> see Josiah Fisk, ed. *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writing*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997) and Thomas Forrest Kelly, *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Vivian Schweitzer, “Playing Bach with Nods to Two Centuries,” *New York Times on the Web*, October 14, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/15/arts/music/15mutt.html>.

<sup>4</sup> William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 226.



Boone Gorges, “Lefrak Auditorium, Queens College.”

## Inspiration

Story by Ugo Eze

Drawing by Eugene Henderson



## The Virtues of Noise

Javier Berzal

Graduate student, Department of Philosophy

Descartes insulated himself to write his *Meditations*. The outcome: an untold number of thinkers arguing that he neglected our basic interactions with the world. Were Descartes to have written in an Amsterdam tavern, his conclusions would have been different. Of course, it is hard to blame him: it is easier to focus in a calm environment than in a chaotic one. Nevertheless, what makes a quiet space ideal is also what makes a cacophonous, busy location a great place to write.

Let's take an F subway train, with its arrhythmic palpitation and its abrupt stops; with its mariachi musicians and the loud albeit futile attempt of three teenagers to pick up a girl. Writing on that train, the challenge is not just forging an idea, but committing it to paper. Not that this is an exercise in concentration: the objective is not detaching yourself from the external world. Rather, the importance of loud and uncomfortable spaces is that they create an

environment through which the writing must emerge. Sure, writers are a common view in coffee-shops. They percolate their writing, shielded by laptops and earphones.

**Nevertheless, what makes a quiet space ideal is also what makes a cacophonous, busy location a great place to write.**

Yet a coffee-shop is an inviting location; the subway train, the busy bar and the crowded street, on the other hand, want you to go write somewhere else. Nevertheless, their amorphous noises disclose what is shapeless in the writing. The rhythm and composition of the words that emerge from their inharmonious nature has to be strong enough to structure all the stimuli that overwhelm your

mind. Besides, if to write is to write somewhere, isn't it impolite to forbid the words from enjoying their original ecosystem? ■

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## The Psychology of Writing: Sometimes a Pen is Just a Pen

Cheryl Dym  
CUNY Writing Fellow

Although I am a graduate student in psychology, I'm no Freudian. However, I believe that inspiration can be found anywhere, even within the realm of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud had a knack for finding deeper meaning in basic ideas; taking a page out of his book, I will attempt to do the same with regard to writing. It should be familiar to anyone who has ever taken Psychology 101 that, according to Freud, the structural model of personality is comprised of the Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id is the basic seat of one's impulses and is concerned only with one's immediate wants and needs. The Superego is the moral part of people – the part that keeps us on the straight and narrow by responding to societal expectations. The Ego's job is to focus on the present reality by satisfying the Id as much as possible while still pleasing the Superego. How does this all apply to writing? The Id has no fear of failure, gives no apologies for its thoughts and has no concern for the pressure of deadlines. When I find myself at a loss in the course of writing, figuring out ways to let my Id free often leads to inspiration and permits creative ideas to surface. I remember the time a fellow Writing Fellow offered a tip that he used to get started on his own writing. He recommended sitting in a dark room with a glass of wine and a computer in order to get the words flowing. I have found that this technique frees my mind and allows me to open up to my ideas without worrying about what others may think. Free-writing—writing continuously without

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**When I find myself at a loss in the course of writing, figuring out ways to let my Id free often leads to inspiration and permits creative ideas to surface.**

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concern for proper syntax or structure—has also been recommended to me as a useful method for letting one's thoughts flow. So find a way to unshackle your Id, and inspiration will follow. But don't forget—the Superego is great for editing. ■

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## Approximating Muses

Jason Tougaw  
Faculty, Department of English and Director,  
Writing Across the Curriculum

You can't count on inspiration, but with a routine of constant, informal writing, you can *approximate* inspiration. That's why I ask students to author blogs in the courses I teach. Constant writing is like physical exercise, or practicing an instrument. The more you do it, the closer it becomes to automatic. The closer writing becomes to automatic, the more room there is for a writer

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to develop and experiment. I used to ask my students to do this writing in private reading journals, which they'd use to respond to course texts, communicate with me, and work through ideas. Blogs, on the other hand, require students to write for an audience larger and more varied than a single teacher. As a result, student bloggers start to inspire each other. Inspiration is sometimes described as if it's magical, bestowed by a benevolent muse. It sometimes feels this way, but that feeling is ephemeral. The image of a writer consorting with a muse suggests a private, quasi-mystical process that a writer experiences in solitude. Writing a blog is much less romantic. But authoring a blog makes a writer into an author, one who is making the practice of writing—in all its unromantic messiness—public. In the process, both inspiration and publication are demystified a little. My experience with course blogs has convinced me that students' writing improves as a result. ■

# ReVisions: perspiration

## A Writer's Habit

Sean O'Toole

Faculty, Department of English, Baruch College

How-to manuals on writing inevitably talk about the importance of good habits: a regular schedule (morning, noon, or night), a comfortable place to work (quiet, noisy, or somewhere in between), and the discipline of knowing that writing is often hard work (a certain number of words each day, a pre- or post-writing ritual like going for a walk or napping or making a note about where to start the following day). The important thing, they say, is finding out what works best for you.

But rarely is there a good explanation of *why* habits are important, or just how important they really are. For this, we can turn to the real lives of fiction writers.

Charles Dickens knew something about habit, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer's recent biography *Knowing Dickens* makes clear. Dickens had a habit of walking the streets of London, ten miles—sometimes as much as fifteen and twenty miles—often at night. To walk for physical release from strenuous mental labor, to roam in search of scraps of new material or whole new fictional worlds, to calm the effects of his intense engagement with his characters, to allay the restlessness of artistic uncertainty: Dickens intimately knew another side to habit than the static repetition and unconscious compulsion that typify many of his characters. His walking impelled, through its very regularity, a shift in perspective and forward movement—down into the London streets, in composition, in life.

**His walking impelled, through its very regularity, a shift in perspective and forward movement—down into the London streets, in composition, in life.**

In his fifties, Dickens's already fragile health began to decline, and stories of the pain in his left foot and his walking in spite of it proliferated, as Bodenheimer tells us:



Charles Dickens (*The Boston Daily Advertiser*, 1868).

... in February 1865, he reported being laid up with a “wounded foot” that he explained to friends as “a frost-bitten foot, from much walking in deep Kentish snow.” Forster got a full-blown explanation: he had perpetually wet feet in boots that swelled and shrank; he had repeatedly forced his boot onto a swollen left foot, and continued his rituals of work and walking, until he found himself lame in the snow, three miles from home. The dogs, he reported, were terrified. The pain, causing “sleepless agony,” went on for two months. Then he returned to his ten miles a day, but he could not wear shoes or boots in the evenings, and he ordered the first of several extra-large boots for his left foot. “Work and worry, without exercise, would soon make an end of me” he exclaimed to Forster.<sup>1</sup>

On the ninth of June 1870, Dickens was dead of a stroke. In the prior weeks, his correspondents all heard how he had been “dead-lame” for three weeks: “I have been subject for a few years past to Neuralgic attack in the foot, originating in over walking in deep snow and revived by a hard winter in America... Deprivation of my usual walks is a very serious matter to me, as I cannot work unless I have

my constant exercise”<sup>2</sup> Bodenheimer, who focuses on the connection to *Bleak House* (1852) concludes, “Somewhere in Dickens’s inner world Lady Dedlock had triumphed, walking to her death through the snow.”

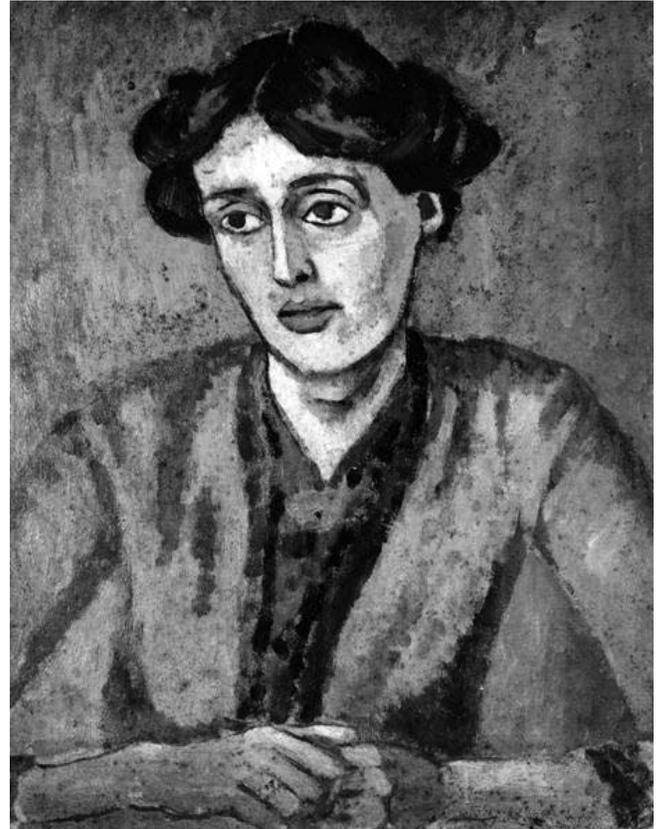
Virginia Woolf also knew about habit’s potential as a matrix for creativity. In her memoir *Moments of Being*, Woolf writes of exceptional moments that stand out in memory and lend themselves to story-telling, moments in which something real makes itself known and life seems vivid and shocking and true. Yet these clear, discrete shocks or “moments of being” are embedded in many more “moments of non-being,” the dull cotton wool of everyday life, the unconscious parts of each day in which one “walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner.”<sup>3</sup>

For Woolf, the capacity to receive violent shocks is what made her a writer; in her case, a shock was followed by a desire to explain it. The shocks, however, are dependent on all the boring, forgettable things that wad our everyday lives, the dull background against which surprise, laughter, revelation—and writing—emerge.

To put an image to this idea, here is what Woolf had to say about the importance of habits in accessing the depths of a writer’s material, in this case her earliest memories and childhood experiences:

**For Woolf, the capacity to receive violent shocks is what made her a writer; in her case, a shock was followed by a desire to explain it.**

*The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the*



Roger Fry, Portrait of Virginia Woolf (1917).

*film on the camera reaches only the eye. But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary. The present must be smooth, habitual. For this reason—that it destroys the fullness of life—any break—like that of house moving—causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth into hard thin splinters.*<sup>4</sup>

Surely, sometimes we have to move house, and much of daily life is anything but peaceful. But is the “present” of your writing life as smooth as it can be? Habitual enough to bare your feet and descend into the stream? ■

<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 2007), 204.

<sup>2</sup> qtd. in Bodenheimer, 204.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, 98.

## Ten Ways of Looking at My Writing Habits

**Nicole Cooley**  
Director, MFA Program in Creative Writing and  
Literary Translation

### 1. If you have writers' block, lower your standards.

The most useful piece of advice a professor gave me while I was working on my MFA in fiction writing. Very simple yet incredibly liberating. I know that while I can't always write a good poem, I can absolutely write a bad one. And when I tell myself to write a bad poem, I can begin writing. As I tell my own students, if the worst thing you do all day is write a bad poem, you are having a very, very good day.

### 2. Forget about inspiration.

If I only wrote when I was inspired I never would have written my books of poetry, my novel, my dissertation, my critical essays. I think I've been "inspired" perhaps twice in my life. In fact I don't believe in inspiration as a category or a driving force.

### 3. Write anywhere.

I love writing in ugly places. I've done some of my best work in IHOP and Mister Donut and on the E train. Once I let go of wanting a beautiful space to write—once I gave up the idea of a nice pen, fancy notebook, and a view—I felt free to write anywhere.

This wasn't always the case. At first, my ideal writing space was an artists' colony, like Yaddo in upstate New York, a turn of the century mansion with antique furniture in all the writing studios and an entirely silent day. Even if you saw a fellow writer in the hall of the mansion, you were not supposed to talk. Of course, this is a wonderful setting for writing, and I have done a huge amount of work at the colony.

But it is also unreal. The demands of my regular life—teaching, family, commuting, being part of a community—made this way of working untenable on a daily basis.

### 4. Writing is about practice, practice, practice.

If you play the piano, you practice every day. If you participate in a sport, you work on it every day. To me, writing is no different.

I remember my poetry writing teacher in college telling us, "Somerset Maugham said a professional is someone who works when he doesn't want to." I don't know if Maugham actually said this, but the idea has sustained me ever since. When I sit down to write, I often don't want to be doing it, but after fifteen or twenty minutes of forcing myself to write, I want to do nothing else, ever.



Brad Dunn, "The Writing Process."  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jesterhoax/>

### 5. All writers are readers first and foremost.

There is no writing without reading. For example, I read as much poetry as I can, all the time, because I want to know: What is a poem? How does poetry employ language to convey meaning? How do sound and rhythm affect the meaning of a poem? Why do poets write poetry? Why do we read it? What is the connection between poetry and larger social issues? What is the purpose of poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

And I read poetry because reading is what made me want to write poems when I was a child and what continues to make me want to write them now.

### 6. Revision is the real act of writing.

Much of my writing—maybe all—takes place in revision. I try to not think too much in a first draft, with the knowledge that I will go back and do that work in revision many, many times. I let my first drafts be awful because

I know no one will ever see them. Because I know I will revise the draft over and over.

The poet Donald Hall has talked about a poem he has been revising for 30 years. He keeps it in a desk drawer; every once in a while, he takes it out and works on it. It's still not done.

### **7. You should always be trying to write the book you are unable to write.**

Simply put, write what you feel like you can't write. What do you feel incapable of writing? What seems impossible? What appears to be too ambitious? This is what you should write.

### **8. And write what you don't want to write.**

Similarly, I try to experiment with writing what I don't want to write.

This is different from # 7.

Towards the end of each semester, I assign my students in my poetry writing classes the following task: write the poem you have been avoiding all semester. And I don't explain any more than that. They might be avoiding certain subject matter or fixed forms or titles or ways of breaking lines; it's very, very subjective and individual. I let the students decide how they want to interpret the assignment. Each semester, this assignment inevitably generates the best writing of the semester.

### **9. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.**

Robert Frost said this, and while it may not be universally true, it is well worth considering when thinking about writing. I love the moments when I write something that scares me, shocks me, makes me question myself.

### **10. Writing is incredibly fun.**

This seems self-evident but is easy to forget—with familiar adages about writing fiction being analogous to opening a vein. I've never believed this to be true. Or, at least, it is not the whole truth.

To me, writing is very much like childhood play—much like rearranging my dollhouse for hours when I was a little girl. I think of Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, speaking of “language lined with flesh.” I think of Gertrude Stein, reveling in linguistic play—“a rose is a rose is a rose”—and finally these are the reasons I want to write. To

play with language, to try out voices, to experiment with images and forms and lines and sentences. Writing is an absolute pleasure and delight. ■

## **Process Changes**

**John Troynaski**  
**Director, Queens College Writing Center**

Throughout high school and college, writing was difficult for me—a condition shared by many, I'm sure. I don't know if I was taught it (an AP test exempted me from College Composition) or if I devised it myself, but I followed a two-step writing process: planning/outlining and writing. A fear of not presenting my ideas logically grounded me in this process. I would plan meticulously, doing, I thought, all my “thinking” in the outlining/ planning phase. For example, if I had to write a ten page research essay, I would craft a detailed five page (at least) outline that included sources and quotes and how I would incorporate these into my argument.

**However, even with such scrupulous planning, I would encounter obstacles as I “fleshed out” my outline in words, sentences, and paragraphs, trying to write as perfect a draft as possible.**

However, even with such scrupulous planning, I would encounter obstacles as I “fleshed out” my outline in words, sentences, and paragraphs, trying to write as perfect a draft as possible. Stopping to find the right word, or to figure out how to structure or punctuate a sentence, or to cross out a sentence I'd just written (we're talking the pre-PC era here), I'd lose my train of thought. Frequently, referring to my outline would not put me back on track. I would discover inconsistencies in my planned argument. At times, new ideas would come. Some of these ideas were better than what I'd planned, so I'd happily insert them. At other times, though, the new ideas were good, sometimes very good, but didn't “fit,” and I'd be faced with a quandary: totally rewrite what I had written so far or guiltily ignore what I'd newly discovered, knowing that what I had initially planned would be sufficient,

if not as good as what I had just stumbled upon. This ethical dilemma was the worst of the trials I had to confront whenever I worked on extended writing projects. Composing a draft under such pressures made writing seem like self-torture.

And there was yet another layer to these difficulties. Many times, after preparing one of these painstaking outlines, solving argument/idea problems, I'd say to myself, "It's all right here; too bad I can't just turn this in." Of course I knew I couldn't and would set out, tired and somewhat bored, to complete that perfect draft. But, with almost all the excitement of discovering and connecting ideas over (except for the instances noted above), the writing felt like drudgery. It was boring to then find those words, structure them into sentences and punctuate them, while being as careful as possible to be correct and precise. And that mood was manifest in the texture, tone, and "style" of what resulted. While I almost always received good grades for these efforts—I had much to say, with many good insights, and presented it all in cogent arguments—few of my professors had much good to say about the style of my writing. Indeed, a few even pointed out the "less than lively" quality of my prose.

One would think that at some point during these years of struggle I would have stopped and asked myself how I might change things to improve this situation. But I didn't. Everyone constantly spoke of the inherent difficulty of writing, so I attributed my troubles to that cause rather than to the way I went about the act of writing. In those days no one talked about the writing process or how there might be different ways to go about it.

**Composing a draft under such pressures made writing seem like self-torture.**

It wasn't until very late in my graduate school career, as I began to teach composition myself, that research in writing processes began to surface, revolutionizing the way composition would be taught and changing forever how I would go about writing and how I felt while I wrote. Especially revealing was Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers*. My spine tingled in recognition as he described the two-step process I employed as a "formula for failure"<sup>1</sup> and delineated the myriad problems entailed by such a process.<sup>2</sup> It was as if he had been looking over my shoulder or recording my shouts of exasperation and

growls of frustration all those years! This perfect reflection of what I had endured easily persuaded me to adopt and adapt his advice and change the way I went about composing.

**The additional phase of revision—real revision this time, where I focused on reading what I had written while still concentrating on ideas as much as possible, but now from the reader's perspective—added newfound excitement as I wrote.**

Realizing (thanks to Mr. Elbow) that writing itself can be an act of discovering what I wanted to say, I set out to "break down" my process to more (not exactly discreet) phases—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading—and soon discovered that there was no way I could not be logical as I put down my thoughts. Continuing to follow the author's guidance, I spent less time on the planning stage and concentrated on getting my ideas down on paper as I put together a first draft, not worrying about anything but the ideas. Consequently, these drafts sometimes resembled Swiss cheese, blanks holding place for missing words and phrases—just enough language to capture my ideas. I would put off for later drafts the problem of finding the right word or phrase or sentence structure, procedures that used to hang me up and torture me in my old process. The additional phase of revision—real revision this time, where I focused on reading what I had written while still concentrating on ideas as much as possible, but now from the reader's perspective—added newfound excitement as I wrote. Revision now involved reordering or further developing ideas, excising others, and creating whole new sections of discourse. Revision of this sort resulted in multiple, developing versions of any piece of writing. Best of all, it was liberating to save concerns about the right word or placement of a comma or semicolon to the later stages of editing or proofreading.

Since I've adopted this process of writing, I almost enjoy the prospect of writing something. I've been much more

at ease when I write, which, among other things, makes it easier to think. Much of the stress has disappeared from my composing process. And, especially because revising is central to the entire process, I feel I succeed better in communicating with the reader. Having been so profoundly affected by this approach to writing, I make the writing process and the writer's consciousness of it central to any writing class I teach. Likewise, it's an ever-present and necessary subject of discussion at tutor training sessions and staff meetings at the Writing Center because, I've found, the lessons taught in Mr. Elbow's classic work, now thirty six years old, are insights to which every new generation of inexperienced writers need exposure. ■

<sup>1</sup> Peter Elbow, *Writing without Teachers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Elbow, *Writing without Teachers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5-7, 12-16.

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## To “She” or Not to “She”: Writing Philosophy and Feminisms

**Jessica Polish**  
**Student (Queens College Class of 2008),**  
**Department of Philosophy**

Even seemingly mundane choices in the writing process can have serious implications. Writers choose between gendered pronouns when writing in English; philosophically, the selection of these parts of speech is politically potent.

Some philosophers contend that by substituting “she” for “he” in invoking an abstract moral agent, we’ve solved a basic problem of feminism in philosophical writing. Or, at the very least, we’ve followed the APA guidelines for political correctness. In either case, the idea is that “she” automatically ushers in all the ladies who are excluded through the writing of the G.O.W.P. (Great Old White Philosophers). Poor Kant, if only he had chosen “she” instead of “he,” he would have revealed the feminist potential of his universalistic ethics.

Language itself can and does exclude. But using feminine pronouns is a lame attempt at being politically correct, not a serious effort to engage social inequalities. I will never, when critiquing Aristotle, use “she” instead of “he” as if this divests a philosophical system of its “sexism.” Mere “inclusion” by way of pronouns does not change power networks. “She” remains the neutered universal “he” of old precisely because it “includes” indiscriminately, as if lived experience, corporeality, ethnicity, and class do not matter. Inclusion itself is a political problem in writing that often reads out politically potent difference; I’d rather forge

alternative political ontologies through the economies of written discourses. Examples of this approach are found in the fundamental subversions of language employed by writers like Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray.

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**Language itself can and does exclude. But using feminine pronouns is a lame attempt at being politically correct, not a serious effort to engage social inequalities.**

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The upshot: as much as we all adore him, Spinoza did not like women, and women cannot “fit” into his philosophical system just by changing pronouns. Ironically, his political ontology has radical feminist potential, but that does not involve grafting the “she” anachronistically and mindlessly onto his writing. When Spinoza wrote the “essence of man” he meant—albeit unwittingly, perhaps—the “essence of man.”

Again, why would women want to “fit” into a man-made hole in language or philosophical thinking, anyway? As if all we strive for is to fit into the shoes of the Man; as if the same exploitative position but different genders makes it equal and good?

Just because the product says “she” doesn’t mean it’s “feminist.” Just because the product says “Yes, we can” doesn’t mean we’re in a post-racial society, whatever the ahistorical, neoconservative hell *that* is. When crafting feminist subversions, let’s venture beyond the superficiality of language and engage the deeper relationship between political realities and writing. ■

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## Writer’s Rock

**Areti Tsiola**  
**Faculty Biology**

Writing can be a daunting task for some of us. If I could draw myself in front of a writing assignment, I would sketch myself as a figure the size of an ant in front of an enormous rock. The goal is to break the rock into smaller pieces and create a meaningful mosaic.

The beginning of the process always involves a long phase of procrastination. The prevailing thoughts focus on how large the rock is and how difficult it will be to make something out of it. I am fully capable of maintaining a blank 'New Document' for hours. Then, the brainstorming begins, typically at a late hour. Random hits on the big rock break off pieces that lay in no particular order on the ground. Ideas come to mind, often at casual moments such as while taking a shower or waiting for the bus. Phrases and terms are jotted on any piece of paper. With additional processing enough stones have accumulated to form an outline. Enough notes are written down to serve as a push beyond an imaginary threshold and the words begin to flow more readily off the keyboard. The details are filled in and the text is constantly revised.

There are two strategies that have proven immensely useful. The first is letting go of the text and getting back to it after a few hours or a day. This is where I often find myself wondering 'What was I thinking?' The second, as embarrassing as it might be, is giving the work-in-progress to others. In this case, they wonder 'What were you thinking?' A fresh look from another reader can be insightful. After wiping that last drop of perspiration off your forehead you may just have created something that you and others will like. ■

## The Art of Creative Writing

**Raymond Pun**  
Graduate student, School of Library and Information Studies

A few years ago, the youth pastor at my local church asked if I could serve the church community by teaching English to a few high school students who were new arrivals to the country. I agreed, assuming I was going to teach basic grammar and composition. After a few sessions, I realized that these students, by no means untalented—a few were studying calculus in their junior high school days in Korea—struggled with writing to the point that they had built up a fear of it. I thought the best way to fight this phobia was to introduce them to the idea of creative writing. Perhaps by nurturing the idea of writing as an informal activity, I could help them improve their English. For the first session, we reviewed basic syntax and style; I planned a few creative writing exercises for the second. I wanted to engage the students' imaginations and interest in writing. My plan was to get them to write freely without fearing the grammar rules that hindered their inner creativity.

## Perspiration

**Story by Ugo Eze**  
**Drawing by Eugene Henderson**



I went to my local library and headed straight to the art section. Looking at art has always been a good way to spur creative expression. I leafed through a few books of paintings by famous artists like Van Gogh and Picasso and checked them out immediately.

I told my students to look through the books. Afterwards, I asked them to pick a painting. One of my students selected Van Gogh's "Cafe at Arles." I told him to write a story based on the picture and not to analyze or describe the picture. It was challenging for him at first, but soon I could hear the scratching of his pencil on the paper. Twenty minutes later, the student handed me a short story about two random strangers meeting in the cafe through an internet dating service. It was funny and thoughtful. He enjoyed the assignment very much and I was reminded of the inner joy of unleashed creativity that writing can bring. We reviewed what he had written with an eye to grammar and syntax. The immediacy of catching the errors in their own writing was highly effective in helping students improve their English.

It may seem elementary to grab an art book and form a story based on an image, but selecting the right book is key. It might be too challenging to write based upon a book of abstract expressionist paintings, though I have not yet tried this. In any case, I have used these techniques to encourage students to write freely, initiate creative thinking, and overcome writer's block. ■



## Blog Your Way to Better Writing

**Deonne Kahler**  
Graduate student, MFA Program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation

Published authors say you've got to write regularly, that you need a practice that puts your butt in the chair more often than not. So you've tried writing in the morning, then at night. You've given yourself deadlines, and you've had friends give you deadlines. You've written at home, at the coffee shop, standing up, to music, and still, you're not writing as often as you should be. Your practice is more sputtering spigot than rushing river.

Productivity experts say the trick to cementing any new habit is going public with your intentions, and the most public announcement you can make is on a little thing called the Internet, with its six billion potential writing buddies ready to hold you to your word(s).

For about a year I've been posting to my blog ([www.lifeonthehighwire.com](http://www.lifeonthehighwire.com)), where I've shared my

experiences as a new New Yorker and MFA student. It's forced me to focus on craft and content—story, writ tiny—in a way that random deadlines and made-up assignments never have.

With a blog there's no waiting for overworked editors to decide your fate; you just hit post and voila! You're published. Plus, it's obvious when your writing is working (or not), because readers let you know. Murky message or sagging language? Radio silence, my friend. But if the post is laugh-out-loud funny, heartbreakingly honest, wildly informative, or simply beautiful, you get comments and kudos—instant gratification for a job well done—and whether you have six or six thousand readers, that kind of feedback is invaluable (and addictive). Blogging keeps you writing, and that's the point. ■



## The Writing Muscle

**Tejas Desai**  
Graduate student, MFA program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation

Does the professional storyteller need inspiration to write? Will the muse arrive during a morning jog? I find she does visit me while I exercise—my pen.

Writing is like working a muscle. I exercise it regularly.

As Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." Success at any craft requires routine practice. This is true for artists, marathon runners and serial killers alike.

Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner, when asked about his writing habits, said, "I only write when I am inspired. Fortunately I am inspired at 9 o'clock every morning." Though Faulkner was notoriously untruthful, this message is valid: if you want to be a successful creative writer, get to work daily.

This discipline of labor has also transformed my own stories. When I was younger, I wrote when I felt like it. I produced plenty, but my content was unrefined. I rarely revised, so my work never reached a greater standard. Now that I have a schedule, I tend to orient myself toward craft as well as creation. And with all the distractions of adult life and the modern world, routine is more important than ever for consistent production.

I don't write at the same time every day. I vary it for fear of making my art too regimented. That's a personal superstition. But it doesn't stop me from writing—every day. ■

## Habits, Writing and Brain Chemistry

**Carlos Penalosa**  
CUNY Writing Fellow

As described in other features of this publication, writers expend a great deal of energy on the writing process: planning, writing and rewriting, verifying facts, getting feedback, revising, and editing. Often, finding the motivation to begin is nearly impossible, proofreading is boring, re-writing seems onerous, and feedback is harsh. And while many writers extol the virtues of formulating good habits, few consider the brain chemistry involved.

Writing habits, while seemingly superficial, may have profound effects on brain chemistry. Various studies have shown that ordinary habitual procedures, such as sleeping and eating, can profoundly influence brain chemistry. Consciously creating habits can instill a recurrence of actions that come naturally, leading to the manipulation of one's brain chemistry, which can have significant implications on various aspects of one's lifestyle. Multiple studies have shown that habits, as in the case of writing, are engraved in the brain in the form of paved biochemical milieu, allowing for faster response, given the proper cues.

Dr. Lee Rice, from the Life Wellness Institute, believes that one can rewire one's brain in as little as 14 days.<sup>1</sup> The rewiring process encompasses believing in yourself, getting rid of mistrust, writing down what you want, and announcing your changes to the world. These are reiterating tasks; thinking, analyzing, writing, announcing, while trusting, are all reassuring and positive reinforcements to the brain that can lead to biochemical changes over time.

**The rewiring process encompasses believing in yourself, getting rid of mistrust, writing down what you want, and announcing your changes to the world.**

Creating a habit can be difficult; however, numerous studies have shown the long-term benefits of doing so. Ann M. Graybiel et al. showed that the process of learning

a habit can require much effort but once engraved, the habit displays a rapid response that is easily recovered after a period of absence.<sup>2</sup> Graybiel's study demonstrated that acquisition and extinction of a learned response alters the firing patterns of projection neurons. When training rats to navigate through a T-maze, the spike activity of the rats was spread throughout the task time, a condition they termed neural exploration. With time, the rats became accustomed to the maze and the auditory cues that signaled

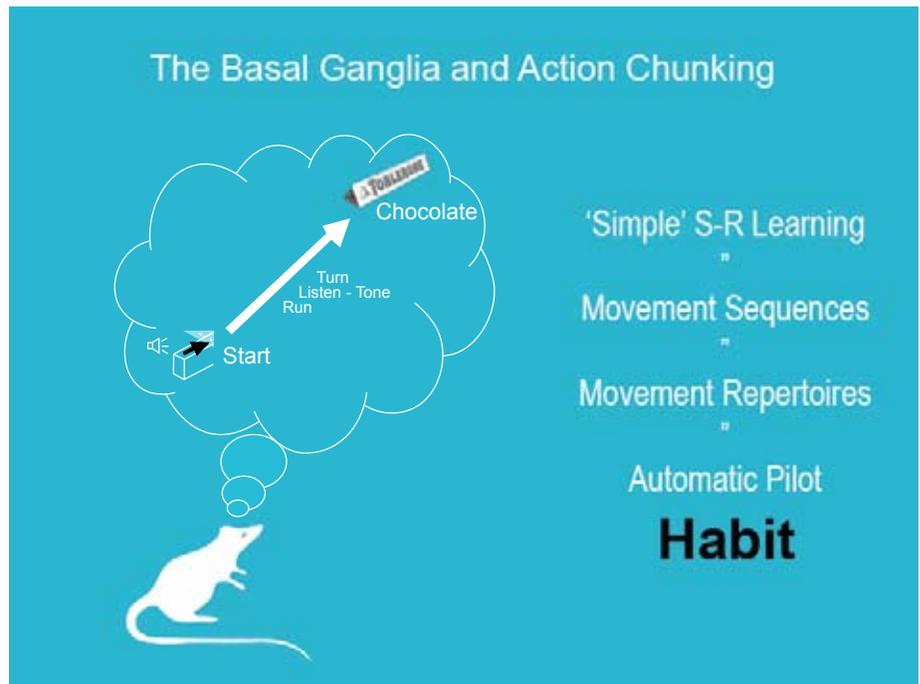
**Somewhat like Pavlov's dog, the brain retains the information of habitual actions, in the form of chemistry, as demonstrated by Graybiel et al.**

them to navigate toward the left or right and their neuronal activity became focused, a condition they called neural exploitation. After a long period of desensitization, the rats more rapidly remembered and re-habitualized themselves to the cues originally learned. When tracing neuronal signals and synapses of rat brains in learning studies, a clear correlation between habit formation and brain electrochemistry is observed. Somewhat like Pavlov's dog, the brain retains the information of habitual actions, in the form of chemistry, as demonstrated by Graybiel et al. This indicates that the brain is subject to molecular and biochemical modification through the changing of habits. The sequence goes like this: habit influences the brain, which ultimately influences overall performance.

The circadian system, also referred to as the biological clock, can be trained to allow the body to perform certain functions at certain times of the biological day. For anybody who has attempted to shift sleep schedules to match work schedules, it may have become clear that it takes nearly twice the amount of sleep during the day to match the rejuvenating rest achieved during sleep at night. This is due to the fact that the body is not conditioned for such functions during the daylight hours. The efficiency of writing is likely to follow a similar pattern. Lisa C. Lyons et al, demonstrated biochemically that circadian clocks are influenced by long-term sensitization.<sup>3</sup> Key brain-related proteins are repressed or activated for prolonged periods of time after the cue has stimulated, allowing for the biochemical modification of the brain, which functions as memory. This indicates that depending on the time of

day, our brain chemistry is such that certain actions will be performed with greater efficiency than others, as a result of modified brain activity. On this same note, reading and writing can continually influence the activity of certain brain regions and their chemistry, leading to altered functions over time.

The process of writing paves brain biochemistry, such that through each consecutive period of writing, the overall process becomes a routine. Those who are constantly writing have much less difficulty in beginning and completing writing projects, while most of us have this very specific weakness. Many of us can start, but have difficulty developing ideas; others can go as far as to develop ideas, but cannot manage to complete the work; and yet others are very creative when presented with preliminary ideas already in existence but cannot start their own. The way we have trained our brains will dictate consequent performances. As mentioned previously, habit sensitizes the brain to perform recurring tasks with little effort, similar to the immune system's recognition of pathogens after repeated encounters. The brain must first be trained to respond by habitualization, and this habitualization results from iterating actions.



Ann Graybiel, "Paving Habits" (2006): Graybiel's illustration of the cognitive architecture of habit formation in rats may have implications with regard to the development of effective habits for (human!) writers.

and procrastination. Most of these suggestions describe specific repetitions, which over time shape brain circuitry. These are actions which influence the biochemistry in our brains and allow for significantly faster response and more efficient writing habits. Once the circuitry of the brain has been established and a habit has been engraved, repetition comes naturally, and ceasing the action is all that more difficult. For writers, habit is important: Develop productive habits in writing in order to re-circuit your brain. ■

<sup>1</sup> Rice, Lee. "Break Bad Habits: Rewire Your Brain in 14 Days." Paper presented at The Academy for Chief Executives' first global CEO Conference, "Inspire 2006" (October 30 - 31, Stanmore, England).

<sup>2</sup> Graybiel, Ann M., Terra D. Barnes, Yasuo Kubota, Dan Hu, Dezhe Z. Jin. "Activity of Striatal Neurons Reflects Dynamic Encoding and Recoding of Procedural Memories." *Nature* 437.7062 (2005), 1158-61.

<sup>3</sup> Lyons, Lisa C., Maria Sol Collado, Omar Khabour, Charity L. Green, and Arnold Eskin. "The Circadian Clock Modulates Core Steps in Long-Term Memory Formation in Aplysia." *Journal of Neuroscience* 26.34 (2006), 8662-8671.

**Many of us can start, but have difficulty developing ideas; others can go as far as to develop ideas, but cannot manage to complete the work; and yet others are very creative when presented with preliminary ideas already in existence but cannot start their own.**

In this issue of Revisions, multiple articles deal with tricks and suggestions for how people deal with inspiration

# Revisions: procrastination

## Confessions of a Procrastinator

**Pamela Burger**  
CUNY Writing Fellow

I used to be a great writer. That is to say, I used to do all the things a writer is supposed to do, practice all the “good habits” laid out in this issue of *Revisions*. When I was in high school, I was the model student; if a paper was due Friday, I started it Monday. In college, I wrote a poem the moment an idea struck me. I sat in coffee shops free-writing. I filled notebooks. I was collegiate cliché, complete with hardcover journals and an earnest look in my eye. But something has changed for me, and now, after twenty-five years of being a student in one capacity or another, I have perfected a new, stranger art: procrastination. If a paper is due Friday, I start it the following week. If I have an idea for a poem, I turn on the TV and try to forget about it. As the stakes of production have gotten higher, as the isolation of writing has intensified, I have become a bad writer.

I always have the best intentions of getting work done. After all, I committed myself to a life of writing, so on some level I do want to produce. I make up schedules and lists and sign up for workshops, but when it comes to the moment of actual writing I find a way out. How could I possibly work, when there are so many other important things to get done: don't I have to read every article in the *New York Times* to be a fit member of society? If I don't watch that episode of *Law and Order*, who will? People, that can of Pringles isn't going to devour itself! But to be a great procrastinator, one must understand that distraction need not come from external stimuli. You can disconnect from the Internet, throw out the TV, isolate yourself in a quiet office, but there is no escaping your own mind. I can't number the hours I've spent in a library, nothing but a pad and paper in front of me, obsessing over questions like what will I have for dinner? Do I hate *Coldplay*, or do I love them? Why didn't I listen to my mother and just go to law school? I've hung around enough writers to know that I'm supposed to get past my own thoughts by writing them down, writing anything down, heed the advice “just write.” But if that blank piece of paper is terrifying, it can't compare to the terror of a completed work.

You will rarely hear an English professor admit this, but writing is a terrible burden. It's lonely, thankless work that produces the worst kind of anxiety and self-doubt. There

is always a point in the writing process when the writer understands *this might fail*. What failure means depends on the piece: maybe the work will earn a bad grade, or fail to get published, or simply not accomplish what the writer intended. For me, and I suspect for other great procrastinators, this threat of failure is intolerable. If I put everything into my writing and it fails, doesn't that mean at my very core I, too, am a failure? When questions like this are spoken aloud, it's easy to dismiss them as useless, self-indulgent, crazy. But for the writer sitting alone in front of the computer, without any contact with the outside world, these questions can loom large. Writers are notoriously self-obsessed, but I think few people realize how much of that self-obsession is based on self-loathing.

**Writers are notoriously self-obsessed, but I think few people realize how much of that self-obsession is based on self-loathing.**

Back when I was a good writer, I forced others to take on some of the writer's burden. Every time I wrote a paper in high school, I made my mother sit on my bed while I read it out loud to her. She would stare off into space, clearly bored to distraction, while I would essentially read aloud to myself. When I finished she would nod, say, “Great. Do you want me to check the punctuation?” At this point, I would usually throw a fit and scream, “Great? Don't you see, the conclusion doesn't accurately reflect my larger point! This is terrible! I hate myself!” My mother's answer was always the same. “So fix it.” For some reason, I found this ritual incredibly soothing. On those nights my mother, in the great tradition of mothers, showed me that I didn't have to sit alone with my doubts.

When I got to college, I started to email my papers to my mother. To her credit, she would read some of them, but her comments were less than helpful. “I don't understand a word of this. What is *Phallogentrism*, and why are you so obsessed with it?” I had to find others to help me out. Because I lived on campus, I was surrounded by friends going through the same academic trials. We could write

papers side-by-side, in dorm rooms or computer labs, all night long. We could go get snacks at two in the morning, complain about how hard it was to write five pages on a book we hadn't read. When I got to that inevitable point in the process where I begin to think, *this essay is the worst piece of shit anybody has ever written*, I had good friends on hand to advise me. "Just finish it," they would say. "Get it done. I'm sure it's fine." Then I could throw my fit: "Don't you see, the conclusion doesn't accurately reflect my larger point! I hate myself!" My friends' answer was always the same. "Who cares? Just hand it in, and then you can go home for Christmas break."

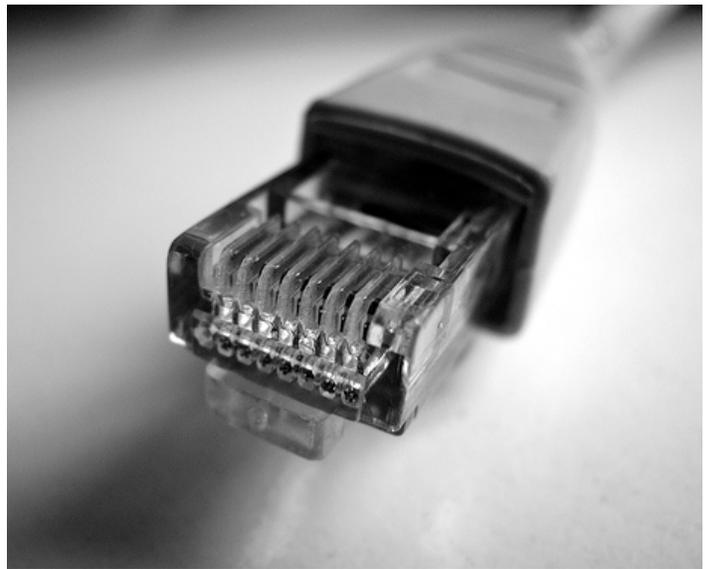
This is not an advisory essay. I'm not here to tell you to find somebody to sit with you while you write, or to yell at your mother that you are a terrible writer (although you might want to try it; it's oddly satisfying). I point to these experiences because they show how dependent a writer is on contact with the world outside of herself, outside her work, outside her fears. I believe that the procrastinator's reaching out for distraction is a way to reconnect to that outside world and, in so doing, avoid confronting the potential for failure that is always part of writing. So-called low-stakes writing, like freewriting, is supposed to help us get past our hang-ups, but what happens when you have hang-ups about freewriting? All writing has some stakes. Which is why, no matter how many great tips you can get from great writers, there is no easy out for the procrastinator.

I am beginning to think that the only way out of my patterns of procrastination is to regress a little. When I was an earnest college student, I truly believed that completing my work was worth all the trouble, all the self-doubt, all the fear. Being a great writer requires some amount of faith that whatever you are writing, that the very act of writing itself, is worth failing over. Before I became a lonely graduate student, desperate for love and money, I had this faith, most likely because I had people with whom I could share the act of writing. When I wrote, I saw beyond the page people who believed in me and valued my ideas; now when I write I see only judgmental committees who will never publish my work or offer me a job. Perhaps I will only become a good writer when I can, again, look beyond the possibility of failure and remind myself that there are so many other writers out there who believe, as I must somewhere deep down, that writing in and of itself is a worthwhile endeavor, even if, in the end, it fails.

## Distracting Networks

### Boone Gorges Instructional Designer, Educational Technology Lab

There's something romantic about the image of René Descartes locking himself in a cabin to write his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. His project is to examine his beliefs one by one, in order to determine which of them are impervious to doubt. He reports, in the very first paragraph of the work, that he only finds himself able to approach this task because "I have opportunely freed my mind from all cares, and [...] I am in the secure possession of leisure in a peaceable retirement." When I first read this passage in Philosophy 101, I got it into my mind that this kind of self-imposed, distraction-free isolation was necessary for the production of really excellent writing.



Saschaaa. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/saschaaa>

The idea haunts me, though. Descartes had the money to finance a sojourn in Bavaria, while I most certainly do not. Moreover, the distractions that Descartes strove to avoid in 1641—backgammon, books, and beer—seem both qualitatively and quantitatively different from the distractions I find on my desk in 2009. On my desk sit two computers. One shows an email account, my instant messaging client, and my Twitter feed; the other displays another email inbox, my calendar, some spreadsheets, and a collection of blog posts I mean to read before the day is over. My phone has been ringing all day. And when I get home, TiVo and Facebook beckon. On top of this, I enjoy

the same sorts of games, reading, and socializing that Descartes did. If good writing requires a distraction-free environment, then Descartes and his contemporaries were, all other things being equal, much more likely to write well than I am. That's a depressing thought.

An obvious way out of the modern predicament is to tune out the distractions. However powerful their allure might be, electronic temptations all share the vulnerability of an off switch. Window blinds, a locked bedroom door, and a good set of ear plugs can replicate, in a noisy New York apartment, the isolation of Descartes's cabin. Every distraction we manage to block out gets us one step closer to the Cartesian ideal of perfect concentration.

**As the speed of information flow through our own networks approaches the speed of thought, the notion of an individual author who alone is responsible for a text becomes less well defined.**

A more radical approach is to question the assumption that distraction is unequivocally bad for writing. Where does the assumption come from? Here's a theory. Out of the Cartesian mythos grows the idea that within the mind of every great writer is a font from which wisdom emanates. Scholarship is an art of thought, and thought exists not in the ether between us but within the confines of an individual mind. Thus if we want to engage in scholarship, we need to pare away all those things which are outside of our own thought.

So goes the mythos. To what extent has this ever really been true, though? Descartes himself was a well-read scholar, and the work that he did can be seen as part of a larger conversation that took place within a network of like-minded scholars. We might visualize his network in the following way: Descartes is a node, a nexus, a point; the scholars with which he directly and indirectly corresponded through books and letters are also nodes; and the books and letters by which their communication took place are like the lines that connect the points of the network to each other. We can tell the nodes apart from the connections because the connections are static and

slow-moving (books that take years to be written and disseminated through a community of thinkers) while the nodes are vibrant and fast-moving (the mind of the scholar is constantly in flux). Insofar as the thinking that happens throughout this community affected the content of, say, the *Meditations*, a convincing argument might be made that the work of Descartes is not the product of Descartes at all, but rather is an emergent feature of his network. Of course, the pen that put the thoughts to paper was held in a hand attached to the man we call Descartes, but when we ask about the authorship of his ideas, the source is not so clear-cut.

If Descartes's works arose out of a network to which he belonged, then clearly it was to his benefit to allow himself to be "distracted" by the other nodes in this network, at least in some ways. And if this was true for Descartes, it is far more true for us today. The features that distinguished the nodes of Descartes's network from the connections between those nodes were technological in nature - the technologies of the printing press, the delivery of mail, and so on. As new technologies develop, these distinguishing features tend to fade. The speed of communication used to depend on how quickly a book could be published; now it depends on how quickly you can type your Facebook updates. As the speed of information flow through our own networks approaches the speed of thought, the notion of an individual author who alone is responsible for a text becomes less well defined.

To take the point a step further, it might be argued that each subsequent generation stands to gain even more from the kinds of internet distractions that plague so many of us. Technology is, of course, constantly changing. But people are changing too—becoming more accustomed to the constant hum of distraction around them, unable to work without it, in much the way that a city person might not be able to get to sleep in the quiet countryside. An individual who grows up with Facebook, for example, might find it easier to appreciate how the network can serve as an extension of the five senses, a more or less natural way to collect and process information.

All this is not to say that there are no bad distractions. Certainly the Internet has multiplied many times over the number of alternative subjects for our attention. But there is a real argument to be made for a new kind of thinking about the distractions that the Internet provides, and how they differ from the distractions that Descartes faced. When you think with your fingers on the computer keys, you do not think alone, but in pulse with the multitudes who write Wikipedia, who comment on your blog entries, who sit waiting on Facebook or Twitter to workshop your arguments with you. Leveraging the network for the

purposes of writing requires the writer to develop a set of skills different from those that Descartes possessed, of course, and this is easier said than done. In order to differentiate between those uses of the network that are productive and those that truly are distractions, one must be able to make some difficult but fundamental value judgments. What is the goal of writing? How do traditional methods of writing, like Cartesian solitude, contribute positively to that goal? Can the distinguishing features of new media—the speed of communication it allows, for example—replicate or improve upon the benefits of traditional methods? If not, are the benefits of the new media worth the sacrifice? It's easy to skirt these hard questions altogether by simply shutting off the computer, thereby shutting off the distractions. But this strategy, if adopted without first addressing the kinds of questions just raised, threatens to deprive our writing of the richness that lies dormant in the network around us. ■

## The Twelve Steps to Revision

**Ann Podracky**  
Graduate student, MFA Program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation

1. Admit that you are powerless when it comes to revision.
2. Come to believe that a power greater than yourself will help you revise work that has haunted you for months, perhaps years.
3. When you start, ask the higher power to ensure that you won't become distracted with stains on the wall beyond your computer screen and spend an hour looking for the right cleaning product which you find and rub vigorously on the stains until all the paint is removed from the wall so you get dressed and go to the local paint store which is five blocks from where you live, spend another hour choosing the right color for your wall, return home and realize it is the wrong color, go back to the local paint store where the store clerk refuses to exchange the paint which agitates you until you scream, "When did you revise your policies!" which brings up a word that reminds you of your goal for the day so you scream some more, pick up the paint and posture to throw it until the store owner tells you to leave, at which point you walk home, open the door and see the stains and your work waiting for you. But you are hungry, you go to the refrigerator. You see a smudge on the shelf.
- 4.—12. Repeat steps 1–3. ■

## Helping Those Who Help Themselves: A Review of Writing Guides

**Tim Recuber**  
CUNY Writing Fellow

Writing is often a quixotic task. Like the adventures of Don Quixote, one's attempts to explore ideas in writing are frequently full of peril and self-deception, and they very rarely end as successfully as one had hoped. Perhaps that's why a large body of "how-to" and "self-help" literature has sprouted up in the past two decades offering advice to aspiring or struggling writers. Of course, self-improvement literature has proliferated in American culture since the 1970s, and popular culture today is saturated with all kinds of books offering all sorts of advice about life, death, love, and parenting, as well as a host of much narrower topics. There is even a self-help guide to writing self-help books, Jean Marie Stine's *Writing Successful Self-Help and How-To Books*. Still, as a graduate student about to embark on the writing of my own dissertation, I figured it would be a good idea to review some of the self-help books about writing to see if they had any worthwhile advice for academic writers like myself.



Andrea Joseph, "Sigmund Freud."  
<http://andreajoseph24.blogspot.com/>

Written in 1992, Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* is perhaps the most well-known and probably the best-selling self-help guide geared towards artists. Cameron, herself a recovering alcoholic, imagined her book as a kind of twelve-step program for struggling artists, complete with daily affirmations of one's own artistic power and a belief that true creativity comes from God, the Divine, or whatever one might wish to call a higher spiritual power.

While not geared specifically to writers, her techniques for recovering one's creativity include "morning pages," a daily exercise in which, immediately upon waking, the struggling artist writes down three pages of whatever

**In placing so much emphasis on the routine, mundane practice of writing, the authors of self-help writing guides seem to betray a lack of trust in their own notions of creativity.**

comes into his or her mind, with no attempts at editing and no concern for the quality or content of the writing. This technique, often known as "free-writing," is at the core of most self-help writers' programs. Although the frequency and duration of free-writing exercises varied from book to book, all of the books I read during my research touted the benefits of free-writing. In fact, this kind of writing advice dates back at least as far as an 1823 essay by Ludwig Borne entitled "The Art of Becoming an Original Writer in Three Days," which argued that a single three-day period of intense free-writing was the key to successfully accessing the hidden life of the mind. In a wonderfully circular piece of history, the article is said to have inspired Sigmund Freud's ideas about free-association and the unconscious mind, while Freud's ideas have in turn gone on to inspire the modern self-help movement.

Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*, believes that timed free-writing exercises allow aspiring writers to access the "tremendous energy" of first thoughts without the usually toxic influence of ego. Goldberg's zen-like free-writing exercises, while not producing much good writing at first, are intended to provide the compost of ideas and creativity from which good writing will eventually bloom. This sentiment is echoed by Bonnie Goldberg (no relation to Natalie) in *Room to Write*, a book of two-hundred short writing exercises designed to foster creativity and break down a writer's inhibitions. Her book has four fundamental rules: "1. The most important action you can take is to show up on the page; 2. The more you can give up control over what you write, the more genuine your writing will be; 3. Making room in your life to write generates even more room for your writing; 4. The only true obstacle to writing creatively is a lack of faith that

appears as fear and self-judgment" (xi-xii). These and other similar guides promote a daily, free-associative writing routine as the way around the kinds of self-criticism and doubt that, according to the authors, are the real causes of bad writing and writer's block. These books promote the idea of mundane writing practices as the gateways to some transcendent, spiritual connection with one's inner self.

Of course, these same books say very little about what actually constitutes good writing. For them, good writing seems, simply enough, to be the inevitable result of getting past one's fears. While there are many well-regarded nuts and bolts guides to writing such as Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* that deal with this subject outside the self-help paradigm, one book that straddles the line between the two is Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*. Lamott is somewhat pessimistic about the chances that all of her students or readers will become happy and successful writers, but she believes that the simple act of writing truthfully is a difficult and worthwhile goal in and of itself. She, too, emphasizes that sitting down and writing at the same time every day is "how you train your unconscious to kick in for you creatively" (6). But rather than providing themed writing exercises or ways of managing free-association, Lamott tailors her advice to writers already working on their own projects. Lamott goes over her opinions on what constitutes good character development, how to decide on a plot, and how to know when you are finished writing, but most of the advice is similar to that found in other books: break your ideas down into short writing assignments; don't be afraid to write what she calls "shitty first drafts;" avoid perfectionism, and so forth. What she does add, however, is at least a little discussion of the revision process in which she urges her readers to find others who will read their drafts and give honest critiques.

In any case, all of the guides that I read peppered their advice with personal anecdotes and a vaguely New Age spirituality. They all agreed on the importance of writing as practice, but framed this practice not simply as a means of inducing small, incremental improvements in one's writing over time, but as a way to commune with a higher power, achieve greater self-awareness, or overcome fear and self-doubt. My own fear is that aspiring writers who read these guides and undertake their programs will either come away feeling disappointed at the lack of transcendent experience that results, despite the amount of time and effort they've put in, or will be goaded into a false sense of the quality and power of their own writing. After all, one could argue that the real heavy lifting in the writing process is not the initial writing itself, which these guides all focus on, but the process of editing and revision that is

not only the titular inspiration of this magazine, but also the most consistently overlooked subject in these guides. It is difficult enough to write, but writing well requires one to develop a sense of one's own voice, learn the stylistic conventions of particular genres of writing, and understand how to convey ideas not just truthfully, but effectively and efficiently as well. This often requires a healthy dose of the self-criticism and doubt that is universally bemoaned by self-improvement guides. What's more, these skills come just as much from reading the writing of others, and tirelessly revising one's own writing, as they do from sitting down at a desk each day and free-associating. In placing so much emphasis on the routine, mundane practice of writing, the authors of self-help writing guides seem to betray a lack of trust in their own notions of creativity. Natalie Goldberg argues that "writing is not a McDonald's hamburger" (37); it is a long slow process. Yet, in urging aspiring writers to fill a notebook per month with free-writing and assuring them that this is the key to writing creatively, she is adopting an approach that puts quantity over quality, removes mystery for the sake of predictability, and routinizes what was formerly seen as a capricious aspect of artistic life. Sociology students should recognize this as an example of what George Ritzer calls the "McDonaldization of society."

Still, there is valuable advice to be found in writers' self-help guides. In academic writing, we are not necessarily looking to find our inner selves or commune with the Divine, but we are usually in need of more practice than most of us allow ourselves. Making time in one's schedule to consistently work on one's craft is good advice for every kind of creative activity, and writing is no exception. But writing well also requires the ability to look critically at one's own work and figure out how to make it better. It is a delicate balancing act between self-pride and self-criticism that no one ever completely masters, and there is no secret formula or twelve-step program that can really teach it to you. Luckily, it does get easier with practice. ■

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## Procrastination

Story by Ugo Eze

Drawing by Eugene Henderson



# Revisions: thanks

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Please contact the Faculty Partner(s) in your Division if you have questions about teaching writing. See the WAC web site for more information: <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Writing/facultypartner.htm>. Contact Jason Tougaw ([jason.tougaw@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:jason.tougaw@qc.cuny.edu)), Director of WAC, if you are interested in becoming a Faculty Partner during future semesters.

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