

Getting Started

The very first thing I tell my new students on the first day of a workshop is that good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. Sheep lice do not seem to share this longing, which is one reason they write so very little. But we do. We have so much we want to say and figure out. Year after year my students are bursting with stories to tell, and they start writing projects with excitement and maybe even joy—finally their voices will be heard, and they are going to get to devote themselves to this one thing they’ve longed to do since childhood. But after a few days at the desk, telling the truth in an interesting way turns out to be about as easy and pleasurable as bathing a cat. Some lose faith. Their sense of self

and story shatters and crumbles to the ground. Historically they show up for the first day of the workshop looking like bright goofy ducklings who will follow me anywhere, but by the time the second class rolls around, they look at me as if the engagement is definitely off.

“I don’t even know where to start,” one will wail.

Start with your childhood, I tell them. Plug your nose and jump in, and write down all your memories as truthfully as you can. Flannery O’Connor said that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life. Maybe your childhood was grim and horrible, but grim and horrible is okay if it is well done. Don’t worry about doing it well yet, though. Just start getting it down.

Now, the amount of material may be so overwhelming that it can make your brain freeze. When I had been writing food reviews for a number of years, there were so many restaurants and individual dishes in my brainpan that when people asked for a recommendation, I couldn’t think of a single restaurant where I’d ever actually eaten. But if the person could narrow it down to, say, Indian, I might remember one lavish Indian palace, where my date had asked the waiter for the Rudyard Kipling sampler and later for the holy-cow tartare. Then a number of memories would come to mind, of other dates and other Indian restaurants.

So you might start by writing down every single thing you

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can remember from your first few years in school. Start with kindergarten. Try to get the words and memories down as they occur to you. Don't worry if what you write is no good, because no one is going to see it. Move on to first grade, to second, to third. Who were your teachers, your classmates? What did you wear? Who and what were you jealous of? Now branch out a little. Did your family take vacations during those years? Get these down on paper. Do you remember how much more presentable everybody else's family looked? Do you remember how when you'd be floating around in an inner tube on a river, your own family would have lost the little cap that screws over the airflow valve, so every time you got in and out of the inner tube, you'd scratch new welts in your thighs? And how other families never lost the caps?

If this doesn't pan out, or if it does but you finish mining this particular vein, see if focusing on holidays and big events helps you recollect your life as it was. Write down everything you can remember about every birthday or Christmas or Seder or Easter or whatever, every relative who was there. Write down all the stuff you swore you'd never tell another soul. What can you recall about your birthday parties—the disasters, the days of grace, your relatives' faces lit up by birthday candles? Scratch around for details: what people ate, listened to, wore—those terrible petaled swim caps, the men's awful trunks, the cocktail dress your voluptuous aunt wore that was

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so slinky she practically needed the Jaws of Life to get out of it. Write about the women's curlers with the bristles inside, the garters your father and uncles used to hold up their dress socks, your grandfathers' hats, your cousins' perfect Brownie uniforms, and how your own looked like it had just been hatched. Describe the trench coats and stoles and car coats, what they revealed and what they covered up. See if you can remember what you were given that Christmas when you were ten, and how it made you feel inside. Write down what the grown-ups said and did after they'd had a couple of dozen drinks, especially that one Fourth of July when your father made Fish House punch and the adults practically had to crawl from room to room.

Remember that you own what happened to you. If your childhood was less than ideal, you may have been raised thinking that if you told the truth about what really went on in your family, a long bony white finger would emerge from a cloud and point at you, while a chilling voice thundered, "We *told* you not to tell." But that was then. Just put down on paper everything you can remember now about your parents and siblings and relatives and neighbors, and we will deal with libel later on.

"But how?" my students ask. "How do you actually do it?"

You sit down, I say. You try to sit down at approximately

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the same time every day. This is how you train your unconscious to kick in for you creatively. So you sit down at, say, nine every morning, or ten every night. You put a piece of paper in the typewriter, or you turn on your computer and bring up the right file, and then you stare at it for an hour or so. You begin rocking, just a little at first, and then like a huge autistic child. You look at the ceiling, and over at the clock, yawn, and stare at the paper again. Then, with your fingers poised on the keyboard, you squint at an image that is forming in your mind—a scene, a locale, a character, whatever—and you try to quiet your mind so you can hear what that landscape or character has to say above the other voices in your mind. The other voices are banshees and drunken monkeys. They are the voices of anxiety, judgment, doom, guilt. Also, severe hypochondria. There may be a Nurse Ratched-like listing of things that must be done right this moment: foods that must come out of the freezer, appointments that must be canceled or made, hairs that must be tweezed. But you hold an imaginary gun to your head and make yourself stay at the desk. There is a vague pain at the base of your neck. It crosses your mind that you have meningitis. Then the phone rings and you look up at the ceiling with fury, summon every ounce of noblesse oblige, and answer the call politely, with maybe just the merest hint of irritation. The caller asks if you're working, and you say yeah, because you are.

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Yet somehow in the face of all this, you clear a space for the writing voice, hacking away at the others with machetes, and you begin to compose sentences. You begin to string words together like beads to tell a story. You are desperate to communicate, to edify or entertain, to preserve moments of grace or joy or transcendence, to make real or imagined events come alive. But you cannot will this to happen. It is a matter of persistence and faith and hard work. So you might as well just go ahead and get started.

I wish I had a secret I could let you in on, some formula my father passed on to me in a whisper just before he died, some code word that has enabled me to sit at my desk and land flights of creative inspiration like an air-traffic controller. But I don't. All I know is that the process is pretty much the same for almost everyone I know. The good news is that some days it feels like you just have to keep getting out of your own way so that whatever it is that wants to be written can use you to write it. It is a little like when you have something difficult to discuss with someone, and as you go to do it, you hope and pray that the right words will come if only you show up and make a stab at it. And often the right words do come, and you—well—“write” for a while; you put a lot of thoughts down on paper. But the bad news is that if you're at all like me, you'll probably read over what you've written and spend the rest of

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the day obsessing, and praying that you do not die before you can completely rewrite or destroy what you have written, lest the eagerly waiting world learn how bad your first drafts are.

The obsessing may keep you awake, *or* the self-loathing may cause you to fall into a narcoleptic coma before dinner. But let's just say that you do fall asleep at a normal hour. Then the odds are that you will wake up at four in the morning, having dreamed that you have died. Death turns out to feel much more frantic than you had imagined. Typically you'll try to comfort yourself by thinking about the day's work—the day's excrementitious work. You may experience a jittery form of existential dread, considering the absolute meaninglessness of life and the fact that no one has ever really loved you; you may find yourself consumed with a free-floating shame, and a hopelessness about your work, and the realization that you will have to throw out everything you've done so far and start from scratch. But you will not be able to do so. Because you suddenly understand that you are completely riddled with cancer.

And then the miracle happens. The sun comes up again. So you get up and do your morning things, and one thing leads to another, and eventually, at nine, you find yourself back at the desk, staring blankly at the pages you filled yesterday. And there on page four is a paragraph with all sorts of life in it, smells and sounds and voices and colors and even a moment

of dialogue that makes you say to yourself, very, very softly, “Hmmm.” You look up and stare out the window again, but this time you are drumming your fingers on the desk, and you don’t care about those first three pages; those you will throw out, those you needed to write to get to that fourth page, to get to that one long paragraph that was what you had in mind when you started, only you didn’t know that, couldn’t know that, until you got to it. And the story begins to materialize, and another thing is happening, which is that you are learning what you *aren’t* writing, and this is helping you to find out what you *are* writing. Think of a fine painter attempting to capture an inner vision, beginning with one corner of the canvas, painting what he thinks should be there, not quite pulling it off, covering it over with white paint, and trying again, each time finding out what his painting isn’t, until finally he finds out what it is.

And when you do find out what one corner of your vision is, you’re off and running. And it really is like running. It always reminds me of the last lines of *Rabbit, Run*: “his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs.”

I wish I felt that kind of inspiration more often. I almost never do. All I know is that if I sit there long enough, something will happen.

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My students stare at me for a moment. “How do we find an agent?” they ask.

I sigh. When you are ready, there are books that list agents. You can select a few names and write to them and ask if they would like to take a look at your work. Mostly they will not want to. But if you are really good, and very persistent, someone eventually will read your material and take you on. I can almost promise you this. However, in the meantime, we are going to concentrate on writing itself, on how to become a better writer, because, for one thing, becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader, and *that* is the real payoff.

But my students don't believe me. They want agents, and to be published. And they also want refunds.

Almost all of them have been writing at least for a little while, some of them all of their lives. Many of them have been told over the years that they are quite good, and they want to know why they feel so crazy when they sit down to work, why they have these wonderful ideas and then they sit down and write one sentence and see with horror that it is a bad one, and then every major form of mental illness from which they suffer surfaces, leaping out of the water like trout—the delusions, hypochondria, the grandiosity, the self-loathing, the inability to track one thought to completion, even the hand-washing fixation, the Howard Hughes germ phobias. And especially, the paranoia.

You can be defeated and disoriented by all these feelings, I

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tell them, or you can see the paranoia, for instance, as wonderful material. You can use it as the raw clay that you pull out of the river: surely one of your characters is riddled with it, and so in giving that person this particular quality, you get to use it, shape it into something true and funny or frightening. I read them a poem by Phillip Lopate that someone once sent me, that goes:

We who are
your closest friends
feel the time
has come to tell you
that every Thursday
we have been meeting,
as a group,
to devise ways
to keep you
in perpetual uncertainty
frustration
discontent and
torture
by neither loving you
as much as you want
nor cutting you adrift.
Your analyst is
in on it,

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plus your boyfriend
and your ex-husband;
and we have pledged
to disappoint you
as long as you need us.
In announcing our
association
we realize we have
placed in your hands
a possible antidote
against uncertainty
indeed against ourselves.
But since our Thursday nights
have brought us
to a community
of purpose
rare in itself
with you as
the natural center,
we feel hopeful you
will continue to make unreasonable
demands for affection
if not as a consequence
of your disastrous personality
then for the good of the collective.

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They stare at me like the cast of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Only about three of them think this poem is funny, or even a good example of someone taking his own paranoia and shaping it into something artistic and true. A few people look haunted. The ones who most want to be published just think I'm an extremely angry person. Some of them look emotionally broken, some look at me with actual disgust, as if I am standing there naked under fluorescent lights.

Finally someone will raise his or her hand. "Can you send your manuscript directly to a publisher, or do you really need an agent?"

After a moment or so, I say, You really need an agent.

The problem that comes up over and over again is that these people want to be published. They *kind* of want to write, but they *really* want to be published. You'll never get to where you want to be that way, I tell them. There is a door we all want to walk through, and writing can help you find it and open it. Writing can give you what having a baby can give you: it can get you to start paying attention, can help you soften, can wake you up. But publishing won't do any of those things; you'll never get in that way.

My son, Sam, at three and a half, had these keys to a set of plastic handcuffs, and one morning he intentionally locked himself out of the house. I was sitting on the couch reading

the newspaper when I heard him stick his plastic keys into the doorknob and try to open the door. Then I heard him say, “Oh, shit.” My whole face widened, like the guy in Edvard Munch’s *Scream*. After a moment I got up and opened the front door.

“Honey,” I said, “what’d you just say?”

“I said, ‘Oh, shit,’” he said.

“But, honey, that’s a naughty word. *Both* of us have absolutely got to stop using it. Okay?”

He hung his head for a moment, nodded, and said, “Okay, Mom.” Then he leaned forward and said confidentially, “But I’ll tell you why I said ‘shit.’” I said, Okay, and he said, “Because of the fucking keys!”

Fantasy keys won’t get you in. Almost every single thing you hope publication will do for you is a fantasy, a hologram—it’s the eagle on your credit card that only seems to soar. What’s real is that if you do your scales every day, if you slowly try harder and harder pieces, if you listen to great musicians play music you love, you’ll get better. At times when you’re working, you’ll sit there feeling hung over and bored, and you may or may not be able to pull yourself up out of it that day. But it is fantasy to think that successful writers do not have these bored, defeated hours, these hours of deep insecurity when one feels as small and jumpy as a water bug. They do. But they also often feel a great sense of

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amazement that they get to write, and they know that this is what they want to do for the rest of their lives. And so if one of your heart's deepest longings is to *write*, there are ways to get your work done, and a number of reasons why it is important to do so.

And what are those reasons again? my students ask.

Because for some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die. They are full of all the things that you don't get in real life—wonderful, lyrical language, for instance, right off the bat. And quality of attention: we may notice amazing details during the course of a day but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author *makes* you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift. My gratitude for good writing is unbounded; I'm grateful for it the way I'm grateful for the ocean. Aren't you? I ask.

Most of them nod. This is why they are here: they love to read, they love good writing, they want to do it, too. But a few of the students are still looking at me with a sense of betrayal or hopelessness, as if they are thinking of hanging themselves.

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Too late for a refund, I tell them cheerfully, but I have something even better. Next are the two single most helpful things I can tell you about writing.