



My Journey as a Writer— A Dozen Rewrites Later: Insights to Share with Students

Fresh from the barbershop, my one-year-old brother's closely sheared head gleamed and just begged for some kind of writing. I found a ballpoint pen, sat my brother down in front of me, and scribbled my name and a story I had composed filled with pictures. This was the first independent writing experience I remember. I was three-years-old, and I was writing for myself. Thus began my journey as a writer.

During this long journey, though I have learned a lot, I am certain there is more to learn, for there always is. After all, I am just a 65-year-old youngster.

This piece is entitled "My Journey as a Writer: A Dozen Rewrites Later" because as I write and explore my own writing, I know in my bones that I need to rewrite and work hard at rethinking—standing back and seeing again. Writing is never easy. Writing is hard work.

So, what have I learned about writing over the past 62 years to share with students?

1. Writing is discovery. I know that if my writing hasn't led me to some new discovery, then it isn't worth much. I uncover what it is I have to say—the hidden messages behind the words.
2. Like life, writing is the journey. So, when I write, I know I am sowing seeds, pushing forward toward the unknown. But this wasn't always the case. I was afraid that what I wrote would not be good enough. I was scared to expose myself. I didn't like the red marks and the fact that some of my teachers only saw the mistakes, not the meaning I was intending to communicate.

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3. When I write, I lower my expectations so I can let the words flow. I don't want to constrain myself so I take side trips hoping to discover what it is I want to say. I take heart in the wise words of Donald Murray: "Expect the unexpected" (Boynton, 1989).
4. Good writing takes not only doggedness, but also a willingness to expose oneself and be vulnerable, being vulnerable to criticism. It takes courage to be imperfect. It takes courage to embrace vulnerability when writing. Being willing to be vulnerable is necessary for good writing.
5. I write badly in order to write well. I allow myself to stumble around and make a mess. I let the words flow willy nilly, thoughts rambling from one point to another, taking side trips and going down dead ends. "It is dangerous to try to write it well the first time" (Elbow, 1981). Fear inhibits good writing, just as bad testing inhibits good learning. I take Peter Elbow's advice to heart and put my critical self aside. I allow myself to play, to put together words, take them apart, and rearrange them. Free writing in great quantity is a terrific way to discover new ideas and clarify thinking, but of course we owe it to our readers to be succinct in the final version.
6. While writing I often stop and I ask, "Does any of this make sense?" And I look for nuggets, willing and wanting to be surprised.
7. After writing heaps of words, letting ideas flow as Elbow suggests, I step back to organize, shape, and prune—my favorite part. I understand that clutter—using too many words—is an obstacle to good writing; writing less is writing more (Zinsser, 1988). So, I look for places where I can cut, places where I can use one word instead of more. I am ruthless.

8. I also hunt for places where I used the passive voice and change them to the active. “The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive” (Strunk and White, 2005). Using the active voice pushes the reader forward.
9. I write when I am not writing—observing, listening, mining the feelings and thoughts deep within me.
10. Writing helps me make sense of the discord in life. Writing crystallizes thought. Thought produces action. I write in response to what I notice in and about life.

Today, I still write for myself, like I did when I was three. However, now I write with others—to obtain feedback and to learn from different people. I take heart in knowing that I have to make myself vulnerable and open to suggestions in order to become a better writer and in the end a better thinker.

How far I have come from writing on my brother’s head.

Though I will never be like Thomas Wolfe who was so tall that he wrote standing, using the top of the

refrigerator as his desk, I do know that I will continue to pound out words on a keyboard, exploring what I know and don’t know, looking for surprises, and hoping for wisdom. Writing is a journey, not an end in itself. So, I am never quite sure how I will approach my writing from one day to the next.

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