Imaginative Writing

The Elements of Craft

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2003

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Invitation to the Writer

> I just realize that we start out in these very awkward ways, and we do look a little stupid as we draft, and that's all right . . . You have to be willing to go into the chaos and bring back the beauties.
>
> *Tess Gallagher*

You . . .

You started learning to write—at the latest—as soon as you were born. You learned within hours to recognize an "audience," and within a few days that expressing yourself would elicit a response. Your basic desires created the fundamental form of story—I want, *I want*, I WANT!—with its end in gratification (comedy) or denial (tragedy). Within a year you had begun to understand the structure of sentences and to learn rules of immense subtlety and complexity, so that for no precisely understood reason you would always say "little red wagon" rather than "red little wagon." You responded to rhythm and rhyme (*One, two. Buckle my shoe)*. You matched images and explained their meanings (*This is a giraffe. Dog is hungry)*. You invented metaphors (*My toes are soldiers*). By the time you could speak you were putting together personal essays about what you had done and what had happened to you and forecasting fantasies of your future exploits. By the time you started school you had (mostly thanks to television) watched more drama than the nobility of the Renaissance, and you understood a good deal about how a character is developed, how a joke is structured, how a narrative expectation is met, how dramatic exposition, recognition, and reversal are achieved. You understood the unspoken rules of specific traditions—that Bugs Bunny may change costume but the Road Runner may not, that the lovers will marry, that the villain must die.

You are, in fact, a literary sophisticate. You have every right to write.

This needs saying emphatically and often, because writing is one of those things—like public speaking, flying, and garden snakes—that often calls up unnecessary panic. Such fear is both normal (a high percentage of people feel it) and based in reason (some speakers do humiliate themselves, some planes do crash, some snakes are poisonous) and irrational (statistically, the chances of disaster are pretty low). Nevertheless, people do learn to speak, fly, and garden. And people learn to shrug at their dread and write.

. . . and writing . . .

All writing is imaginative. The translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process. Although there is certainly such a thing as truth in writing, and we can spot falsity when we encounter it in print, these qualities are hard to define, hard to describe, and do not always depend on factual accuracy or inaccuracy. Often what is *most* original, that is, imaginative, is precisely what "rings true."

Aristotle said that when you change the form of a thing you change its purpose. For example, the purpose of an algebra class is to teach algebra. But if you take a photo of the class, the purpose of the photo *cannot* be to teach algebra. The picture would probably serve the purpose of commemorating the class and the people in it. On the other hand, if you wrote a short story about that class, its purpose might be (not to teach algebra or to commemorate the class, but) to reveal something about the emotional undertow, the conflict in or between students, the hidden relationships in that apparently staid atmosphere.

It's impossible to tell *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth* in words, because words are of a different form than experience, and their choice is determined by the vast array of cultural and personal influences. Writers learn very quickly that a thing is not necessarily credible because it "really happened" and that saying so is no defense of the unconvincing. When you write about an experience, you cast it in a new form and therefore furnish it with a new purpose. Part of the hard work and the pleasure of writing is discovering what that purpose is. You will never exactly "catch" an experience you have lived, but you may both discover and reveal new insights in the recasting of that experience.

All writing is autobiographical as well as invented. Just as it's impossible to write the whole and literal truth about any experience, so it's also impossible to invent without drawing on your own experience, which has furnished your brain. Your view of yourself, the place you live, the people you know, the institutions you live with, your view of nature and God or the gods will inform not only your dreams and daydreams, what you say, wear, think, and do, but also everything you write. What you write will ineluctably reveal to a certain extent both what you think the world is like and what you think it *should* be like.

The two impossibilities—of perfectly capturing your experience and of avoiding it altogether—offer great freedom if you accept them in that light. Begin by writing whatever comes to you, recording your observations, trying out your ideas, indulging your fantasies. *Then* figure out what you want to make of it, what its purpose is, and what it means. Then work toward making it "work"—that is, toward making it meaningful for the reader who is your partner in the imaginative act.

. . . and reading . . .

At the same time, you yourself need to become a reader of a writerly sort, reading greedily, not just for entertainment but also focusing on the craft, the choices, and techniques of the author; "reading the greats," in novelist Alan Cheuse's words, "in that peculiar way that writers read, attentive to the peculiarities of the language . . . soaking up numerous narrative strategies and studying various approaches to that cave in the deep woods where the human heart hibernates."

Reading as a writer involves not asking *What does this mean?* so much as *How does it work? Why has the author made this choice of imagery, voice, atmosphere? What techniques of language, pacing, character contribute to this effect?*

Reader/writers sometimes become impatient with this process. "How do you know the author didn't just want to do it that way?" The answer is: you don't. But everything on the page is there because the writer chose that it should be there, and the effectiveness of the piece depends on those choices. The British critic F. R. Leavis used to observe that a poem is not a frog. In order to understand the way a frog works you must kill it, then splay out the various respiratory, digestive, muscular systems, and so forth. But when you "take apart" a piece of literature to discover how it is made, it is more alive than before, it will resonate with all you have learned, and you as a writer know a little better how to reproduce such vitality.

. . . and this book . . .

My creative writing workshop exchanged a few classes with a group of student choreographers. The first time we came into the dance theater, we writers sat politely down in our seats with our notebooks on our laps. The choreographer-dancers did stretches on the carpet, headstands on the steps; some sat backward on the chairs; one folded herself down into a seat like a teabag in a teacup. When they started to dance they were given a set of instructions: *Group A is rolling through, up and under; Group B is blue Tuesday; Group C is weather comes from the west.* The choreographers began to invent movement; each made up a "line" of dance. They repeated and altered it. They bumped into each other, laughed, repeated, rearranged, and danced it through. They did it again. They

adjusted. They repeated. They danced it through. Nobody was embarrassed and nobody gave up. They tried it again. One of the young writers turned to me with a face of luminous discovery. "We don't *play* enough," she said.

That's the truth. Writing is such a solitary occupation, and we are so used to moiling at it until it's either perfect or *due*, that our first communal experience of our writing also tends to be awful judgment. Even alone, we internalize the criticism we anticipate and become harsh critics of ourselves. "The progress of any writer," said the great poet Ted Hughes, "is marked by those moments when he manages to outwit his own police system."

Imaginative Writing assumes that you will play before you work—dance before performing, doodle before fiddling with, fantasize before forming, *anything goes* before *finish something.* This is not an unusual idea among writers and teachers of writing. ("Indulge yourself in your first drafts," says novelist Jonathan Lethem, "and write against yourself in revisions.") But it is easier to preach than to practice.

Nevertheless, most of the techniques that writers use are relevant to most forms of imaginative writing and can be learned by playing around in any form. So the first five sections of this book talk about some techniques that are useful in any sort of writing, or relevant to more than one genre, and suggest ways to play with those techniques. The purpose of these chapters is to free the imagination. The sixth chapter talks about ways to develop and revise your experiments into a finished piece. The last four sections discuss what is particular to each of four forms: Personal Essay, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama; and how you can mold some of what you have written toward each of them.

There is a lot of "do this" in the following pages, but a good deal more of "try this." The overriding idea of the book is *play*—serious, strenuous, dedicated, demanding, exhilarating, enthusiastic, repeated, perfected play. It is the kind of play that makes you a superior swimmer or singer, a first-rank guitar, pool, polo, piano, or chess player. As with any sport or musical skill, a writer's power grows by the practice of the moves and the mastering of the instrument.

Insofar as writing is a skill, it can only be learned by doing. Insofar as writing is "inspired," it may pour out of you obsessively, feverishly, without your seeming to have to make any effort or even without your seeming to have any responsibility for it. When that happens, it feels wonderful, as any writer will tell you. Yet over and over again, writers attest to the fact that the inspiration only comes with, and as a result of, the doing.

. . . and your journal . . .

While you use this book you will be writing one—a journal that should be, first of all, a physical object with which you feel comfortable. Some writers keep notes

in a shoebox or under the bed, but your journal probably needs to be light enough to carry around easily, sturdy enough to stand up to serious play, large enough to operate as a capacious hold-all for your thoughts. Think of it as a handbag, a backpack, a trunk, a cupboard, an attic, a warehouse of your mind. Everything can go into it: stuff you like and what you paid too much for, what Aunt Lou gave you and the thing you found in the road, this out-of-date what-sit and that high-tech ware. You never know what you're going to need; absolutely anything may prove useful later on.

Try This

In other words, write any sort of thing in your journal, and write various kinds of things:

- An observation
- An overheard conversation
- Lists
- Longings
- Your response to a piece of music
- A rough draft of a letter
- Names for characters
- Quotations from what you are reading
- The piece of your mind you'd like to give so-and-so
- An idea for a story
- A memory
- A dream
- A few lines of a poem
- A fantasy conversation
- Titles of things you are never going to write
- Something else

Your journal is totally forgiving; it is one hundred percent rough draft; it passes no judgments.

Throughout *Imaginative Writing* there will be prompts, trigger lines, and ideas for playing in your journal. Here are a few general suggestions:

- **Freewrite.** Gertrude Stein called this "automatic writing." Either on a regular schedule or at frequent intervals, sit down and write without any plan whatsoever of what you are going to write. Write anything that comes into your head. It doesn't matter what it is *at all.* This is the equivalent of volleying at tennis or improvisation at the piano; it puts you in touch with the instrument and limbers the verbal muscles.

- **Focused freewrite.** Pick a topic and then do the same thing: focusing on this topic, write for five or ten minutes saying anything at all about it—*anything at all*—in any order.
- **Cluster.** This is a technique you may have learned in composition class, and it helps focus and shape a freewrite. Write the word that represents your subject in the middle of a blank page. Circle it. Free-associate on the page around that word, absolutely anything that pops into your head. When you see a connection between two words, circle them and draw a line connecting them. When your associations come at longer intervals than it takes to write them down (the kernels slowing down in the popcorn bag), stop. Look over what you have. Freewrite.
- **Brainstorm.** A problem-solving technique that can also generate ideas for an imagined situation. Whatever problem the characters might face, whatever idea might be struggling to surface in this poem or essay, brainstorm it—free associate a list of ideas, connections, solutions, no matter how bizarre. Then use these as prompts for your writing. Brainstorming is also useful for coming up with fresh ideas. Start with the question "*What if . . . ?*" and let your mind loose on the rest of the question.

Make a habit, rather than a chore, of writing in your journal. If you skip a day, it's not the end of the world, but it may well be that, as with a physical workout, you have to coax or cajole yourself into writing regularly before you get to the point when you look forward to that part of your life, can't wait for it, can't do without it. You will know some of the patterns that help you create a habit. Write first thing in the morning? At the same hour every day? After a shower? With a cup of coffee? Before you fall asleep? Use your self-discipline to make yourself sit down and write, but once you get there, tell your inner critic to hush, give yourself permission to write whatever you please, and *play*.

Try This

Here is a list of lists. Pick any one of them to generate a list in your journal. Write a single line about each item on the list; is this the start of a poem? Then pick a word from your list and write a paragraph on the subject; is this a memoir or a story?

- Things on which I am an expert
- Things I have lost
- Signs of winter
- What is inside my body
- Things people have said to me
- What to take on the journey
- Things I have forgotten
- Things to make lists of

Only part of the journal habit is the writing of it. Perhaps more important, knowing that you are going to write every day will give you a habit of listening and seeing with writing in mind. A writer is a kind of benevolent cannibal who eats the world. Or at least, you'll begin to observe and hear the world with an eye and ear toward what use you can make of it.

. . . and your workshop.

Many of us think of the primary function of a writing workshop as being to criticize, in order to improve, whatever piece of writing is before us. This is, again, absolutely natural, not only because of the way the writing workshop has evolved over the years but because nothing is more natural than to judge art. We do it all the time and we do it out of a valid impulse. If you tell me you've just seen a movie, I don't ask the plot, I ask: *how was it*? Art *sets out to* affect us emotionally and intellectually, and whether it has achieved this is of the first interest. The poet and critic John Ciardi said of literature that "it is never only about ideas, but about the experience of ideas," and the first thing we want to know is, naturally, "how was the experience?"

But if the first thing you expect of yourself as a writer is *play*, and if in order to play you banish your inner critic and give yourself permission to experiment, doodle, and dance, it doesn't make a lot of sense to subject that play to immediate assessment. I'm going to suggest that for most of the time this book is being used, you avoid the phrases, *I like, I don't like, this works, this doesn't work*—and all their equivalents. It may be harder to forgo praise than blame, but praise should be a controlled substance too. Instead, discipline yourself to explore whatever is in front of you. Not *what I like*, but *what this piece is like.* Interrogate it, suggest its context, explore its nature and its possibilities:

- *Is there a drama in this situation?*
- *I'm wondering what this word suggests.*
- *This reminds me of . . .*
- *It's like . . .*
- *I think this character wants . . .*
- *What if . . . ?*
- *The rhythm is . . .*
- *Could this be expanded to . . . ?*
- *Is the conflict between . . . ?*
- *Does this connect with . . . ?*
- *The atmosphere seems . . .* and so forth.

This kind of descriptive, inquisitive, and neutral discussion of writing is *hard.* It will pay off in the freedom that each writer feels to write and in the flexibility of critical response you're developing in the workshop. In the later part of the course, when everyone is writing in a particular form and revision is the legitimate focus of the work, there will be a time to discuss not only *what this piece is trying to do* but also whether it succeeds. At that point, critique will help.

Try This

Make use of these prompts or trigger lines for easy freewrites. Pick one of them—quickly; don't think about it too much—write it down and keep writing. Anything at all. Whatever the prompt suggests. Keep going. A little bit more.

- This journal is
- My mother used to have
- There was something about the way he
- The house we lived in
- In this dream I was
- She got out of the car
- The first thing I want in the morning

More to Read

Brande, Dorothea. *Becoming a Writer.* Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1981.

Friedman, Bonnie. *Writing Past Dark.* New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

CHAPTER SIX

DEVELOPMENT AND REVISION

Developing a Draft
Revision and Editing
The Workshop

Ultimately my hope is to amaze myself.

Jerry Uelsmann

Imaginative writing has its source in dream, risk, mystery, and play. But if you are to be a good—and perhaps a professional—writer, you will need discipline, care, and ultimately even an obsessive perfectionism. As poet Paul Engle famously said, "Writing is rewriting what you have rewritten."

Just as a good metaphor must be both apt and surprising, so every piece of literary work must have both unity and variety, both craft and risk, both form and the unpredictable. Having dreamt and played a possibility into being, you will need to sharpen and refine it in action, character, and language, in a continual process of selection and arrangement. This will involve both disciplined work and further play, but it won't always be that easy to tell one from the other. Alice Munro describes the duality of a process in which seeking order remains both mysterious and a struggle:

> So when I write a story, I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure...There is no blueprint for this structure . . . It seems to be already there, and some unlikely clue, such as a shop window or a bit of conversation, makes me aware of it. Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together. Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes, bits of speech). I see how this material might go together to

make the shape I need, and I try it. I keep trying and seeing where I went wrong and trying again . . . I feel a part that's wrong, like a soggy weight; then I pay attention to the story, as if it were happening somewhere.

Developing a Draft

Your journal is now a warehouse of possibilities, and you probably already have a sense of the direction in which many of its entries might be developed.

- If you wrote of a memory or an event that seems to you to contain a point or to lead toward reflection, if you came up with ideas that mattered to you and that you wanted both to illustrate and to state, then you probably have a memoir or personal essay in the works.
- If a journal entry has a strong setting, with characters who engage each other in action and dialogue, whose thoughts and desires may lead them into conflict and toward change, perhaps a short story is brewing.
- If the sound and rhythm of the language seem integral to the thought, if the images seem dense and urgent, if the idea clusters around imagery and sound rather than playing itself out in a sequence of events, then a poem is probably forming.
- If you have characters who confront each other in dialogue, especially if they are concealing things that they sometimes betray in word or action, and if they face discovery and decision that will lead to change in one or more of their lives, then you very likely have a play.

Chapters 7 through 10 of this book will discuss the techniques peculiar to each of these four forms, and you'll want to look at those chapters as you work toward a finished draft. In the meantime there are a number of ways to develop your ideas in order to find your direction. Some of these are repetitions or adaptations of ideas you have already used for play.

Try This

Take a journal entry you like and highlight any word that seems particularly evocative, that seems to capture the spirit of the whole. Cluster that word. Freewrite.

"Befriend" another journal piece. Read it over, set it aside, and begin writing, starting every thought with the words "it's like . . . it's like . . . it's like . . . " Some of the thoughts will suggest colors, some memories, some metaphors, and so forth. Keep writing, fast, until you're moderately tired.

Pick a journal entry that does not depend on setting, and give it a setting; describe the place and atmosphere in detail. Think of "setting" loosely. Perhaps the setting of a piece is someone's face. Perhaps the weather is internal.

When I was eight or nine, my brother, who was four years older, made up wonderful stories with which he used to pass the hot boring afternoons of Arizona summer. I would whine and beg for another episode. At some point he got tired of it and decided I should make up stories on my own. Then he would drill me by rapping out three nouns. "Oleanders, wastebasket, cocker spaniel!" "Factory, monkey bars, chop suey!" I was supposed to start talking immediately, making up as I went along a story about a dog who used to scrounge around in the garbage until one day he made the mistake of eating a poison flower . . . or a tool and die worker who went to a Chinese restaurant and left his son on the playground . . . My brother was the expert writer (and eventually went on to become an editor at the *Los Angeles Times*). I myself had not considered storytelling—I wrote ill-advised love letters and inspirational verse—and was amazed that I could—almost always—think of some way to include his three arbitrary things in a tale of mystery, disaster, or romance.

Neither of us knew that my brother had stumbled on a principle of literary invention, which is that creativity occurs when things not usually connected are seen as connected. It is the *unexpected* juxtaposition that generates literature. A more sophisticated version of this game is used in film writing. Screen writer Claudia Johnson tells me that she and collaborator Pam Ball once went to a restaurant to celebrate the finishing of a film script. They had no idea what they were going to write next and decided to test the nimbleness of their plotting by outlining a film based on the next three things they overheard. The three conversations turned out to concern a cigarette, a suicide in Chicago, and origami. By the time they had their coffee they had a treatment for the next film.

Novelist Margaret Drabble describes the same process as organic and largely unconscious. "It's an accumulation of ideas. Things that have been in the back of my mind suddenly start to swim together and to stick together, and I think, 'Ah, that's a novel beginning.'"

Try This

Pick, without too much thought about it—random would be fine—three short entries in your writing journal. Take one element from each (a character, an image, a theme, a line of dialogue; again, don't think about it too hard) and write a new passage that combines these three elements. Does it suggest any way that the three entries might in fact be fused into a single piece and be enriched by the fusion?

or:

Take one of your journal entries and rewrite it in the form of one of the following: an instruction pamphlet; a letter to the complaints department; a newspaper item; a television ad; a love song. Does the new juxtaposition of form and content offer any way you can enrich your idea?

Basically, there are two ways to go about structuring a piece of writing, though they are always in some way used in combination.

At one extreme is the outline. You think through the sequence of events of a story or drama; the points of an essay; the verse form of a poem. Then when you have an outline roughly in mind (or written down in detail), you start at the beginning and write through to the end of a draft.

Do not underestimate the power and usefulness of this method. However amorphous the vision of the whole may be, most writers begin with the first sentence and proceed to the last. Though fiction writer/essayist Charles Baxter has mourned the "tyranny of narrative," his stories and novels show the most careful attention to narrative sequence. (That one of them, *First Light*, presents its events in reverse order makes precise sequencing all the more necessary.) E. M. Forster spoke of writing a novel as moving toward some imagined event that loomed as a distant mountain. Eudora Welty advised a story writer to take walks pondering the story until it seemed whole, and then to try to write the first draft at one sitting. Though playwrights may first envision a climactic event and poets may start with the gift of a line that ends up last in the finished poem, still, the pull is strong to write from left to right and top to bottom.

Try This

Bring your research skills to your imaginative work. Identify something in a piece that you aren't sure about. You don't know the facts, don't understand the process or the equipment, aren't clear on the history or the statistics, don't know the definition. Find out. Consult books, reference works, newspapers, the internet; interview someone, email someone, ask the experts.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the outline is quilting, or "piece work," in which you carry on writing without attention to shape or structure. To use this method, you decide that this paragraph or verse or incident is the kernel of the thing you're going to write, and you continue to doodle and noodle around it, seeing what will emerge. You freewrite a dialogue passage, sketch in a description of the setting, try it in this character's voice and then in the omniscient, let yourself go with a cascade of images. Two or three time a day, sit down and dash out a potential section of such a piece—a few lines, a paragraph, a monologue, images, a character sketch. Talk to yourself in your journal about what theme or idea matters to you, what you'd like to accomplish, what you fear will go wrong. If you do this for several days, you will have roughed out a sizeable portion of your project.

When you have a small mountain of material (I like to write or copy it into a single computer file I label a "ruff," then identify each paragraph by page num-

ber so I can find it easily), you print it, chop it into sections, spread it out on a large surface, and start moving pieces around till you seem to have a composition. Tape the sections together and make notes on them, discarding what seems extraneous, indicating what's missing, what needs rewriting, where a transition is in order, and so forth. Then cut-and-paste on the computer to put them in that order, noting the needed changes. When you print out this version, you have a rough shape of your piece.

Try This
Doodle a series of lists—of the characteristics of someone you have written about, or of phrases and idioms that character would use; or of objects associated with a person, place, profession, or memory you have written about. Generate, rapidly, a list of metaphors for some central object in a piece you want to develop.

This cut-jot-and-sort system can work for any genre, and it's worth getting used to the process. However, sometimes it works better than others, and sometimes it just isn't the best way. The advantages of the outline method tend to be clarity, unity, and drive; of the cut-and-paste method richness, originality, and surprise. The problem with writing from an outline is that the piece may seem thin and contrived; the trouble with piece work is that it can end up formless, diffuse, and dull.

You will already have a sense of which method is your natural tendency, and I'd urge you, whichever it is, to work in the opposite direction. The methods are not mutually exclusive, and each can benefit from the particular discipline of the other.

If you start with a clear sense of direction, a determination to follow a plan, then detour from time to time. Too tight a rein on the author's part, too rigid a control of where the imagery is headed, what the protagonist will do next, how the remembered event exactly happened—any of these can squeeze the life out of the work. When you feel the action or the language becoming mechanical, stop and freewrite a monologue, a list of images, an exploration of character, or conflict, or the weather. One freeing trick, if you find your piece flat, is to go through and put some arbitrary line or sentence in each paragraph or verse, something that absolutely does not belong and that you would never put there. Then go away from it for a while, and when you go back, see if there's anything in the nonsense that might in fact improve the sense.

If, on the other hand, you can generate lovely stuff but have trouble finding a through-line for it, if you find yourself in successive drafts generating new possibilities and never settling on a form or sequence, then you probably need to focus on a plan and push yourself through one draft based on it. Set your quilt

aside and consider the questions of unity and shape: What is the heart of this piece? What is its emotional core? What, in one word, is it *about?* How can I focus on that, make each part illuminate it, raise the intensity, and get rid of the extraneous?

And don't give up. "The big secret," says fiction writer Ron Carlson, "is the ability to stay in the room. The writer is the person who stays in the room . . . People have accused me . . . 'You're talking Zen here.' And I just say, 'Zen this: The secret is to stay in the room.'"

Try This

Practice in brief form each of the methods above. Pick an entry in your journal—not one you intend to make into a finished work. Before lunch, write an outline of a piece based on that entry. In late afternoon or evening, take *no more than one hour* to write a draft of the piece that covers the whole outline. Your work will have holes, cracks, and sloppy writing. Never mind; get through to the end. Leave it for a day or two, then make marginal notes on what you would want to do in the next draft.

Pick another entry and over the next two or three days, freewrite something or other about it every four hours. Print, cut, and arrange into a sequence or shape. Print out the result and make marginal notes on what the next draft would need.

Discuss in class what you learned from the two methods. Which would suit you best when you come to write an essay, a story, a poem, a play?

> Interviewer: Was there some technical problem? What was it that had stumped you?
>
> Hemingway: Getting the words right.

Revision and Editing

Most people dread revision and put it off; and most find it the most satisfying part of writing once they are engaged in it and engaged by it. The vague feelings of self-dissatisfaction and distress that accompany an imperfect draft are smoothed away as the pleasure of small perfections and improvements come.

To write your first draft, you banished the internal critic. Now make the critic welcome. The first round of rewrites is probably a matter of letting your misgivings surface. Focus for a while on what seems awkward, overlong, undeveloped, flat, or flowery. Tinker. Tighten. Sharpen. Let that small unease surface and look at it squarely. More important at this stage than finishing any given page or phrase is that you're getting to know your story in order to open it to new possibilities.

Development and revision are not really two separate processes but a continuum of invention and improvement, re-seeing and chiseling. Sometimes the mere altering of punctuation will flash forth a necessary insight. Sometimes inspiration will necessitate a change of tense or person. To find the best way of proceeding, you may have to "see again" more than once. The process involves external and internal insight; you'll need your conscious critic, your creative instinct, and readers you trust. You may need each of them several times, not necessarily in that order. Writing gets better not just by polishing and refurbishing, not only by improving a word choice here and image there, but by taking risks with the structure, re-envisioning, being open to new meaning itself. Sometimes, Annie Dillard advises in *The Writing Life*, what you must do is knock out "a bearing wall." "The part you jettison," she says, "is not only the best written part; it is also, oddly, that part which was to have been the very point. It is the original key passage, the passage on which the rest was to hang, and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin."

There are many kinds of work and play that go under the name of "rewriting." It would be useful to go back to the film metaphor—long shot, middle shot, close-up—in order to think of ways of re-visioning your work. You will at some point early or late need to step back and view the project as a whole, its structure and composition, the panorama of its tones: does it need fundamental change, reversal of parts, a different shape or a different sweep? At some point you will be working in obsessive close-up, changing a word to alter the coloration of a mood, finding a fresher metaphor or a more exact verb, even changing a comma to a semicolon and changing it back again. Often you'll be working in middle shot, moving this paragraph from page one to page three, chopping out an unnecessary description, adding a passage of dialogue to intensify the atmosphere. Read each draft of your piece aloud and listen for rhythm, word choice, unintended repetition. You'll move many times back and forth among these methods, also walking away from the piece in order to come back to it with fresh eyes.

Try This

Make a list of things a character or persona in your piece might fear. Add a scene, line, or image in which a character or persona is in great fear.

or:

Show the character doing something genuinely dangerous. But the character/persona is not afraid. Why not?

If you feel stuck on a project, put it away. Don't look at it for a matter of days or weeks, until you feel fresh again. In addition to getting some distance on

your work, you're mailing it to your unconscious. You may even discover that in the course of developing a piece, you have mistaken its nature. I once spent a year writing a screenplay—which I suppose I thought was the right form because the story was set in an Arizona cow town in 1914—finally to realize that I couldn't even *find out* what the story was until I got inside the characters' heads. Once I understood this, that story became a novel.

As you plan your revisions and as you rewrite, you will know (and your critics will tell you) what problems are unique to your piece. You may also be able to focus your own critique by asking yourself these questions:

What is this piece about?

Try This
State your idea in a single sentence. Reduce it to a word. Express it in an image. Express it in a line of dialogue that one of your characters might say. Probably none of these things will appear in your finished piece, but they will help you focus. Are you clear about what you're writing about? Does it need thinking and feeling through again?

Is the language fresh?

Try This
Go through your work and highlight generalizations in one color, abstractions in another, clichés in a third. Replace each of them with something specific, wild, inappropriate, far-fetched. Go back later to see if any of these work, in fact. Replace the others, working toward the specific, the precise, and the concrete.

Is it clear?

Try This
Go through your manuscript and highlight the answers to these questions: *Where are we? When are we? Who are they? How do things look? What period, time of year, day or night is it? What's the weather? What's happening?* If you can't find the answers in your text, the reader won't find them either. Not all of this information may be necessary, but you need to be aware of what's left out.

Where is it too long?

Try This
Carefully save the current draft of your piece. Then copy it into a new document on which you play a cutting game—make your own rules in advance. Cut all the adjectives and adverbs. Or remove one line from every verse of a poem. Delete a minor character. Fuse two scenes into one. Cut half of every line of dialogue. Or simply require yourself to shorten it somehow by a third. You will have some sense of what tightening might improve your work. Compare the two drafts. Does the shortened version have any virtues that the longer one does not?

Where is it underdeveloped?

Try This
In any first, second, or third draft of a manuscript there are likely to be necessary lines, images, or passages that you have skipped or left skeletal. Make notes in your margins wherever you feel your piece is underdeveloped. Then go back and quickly freewrite each missing piece. At this point, just paste the freewrites in. Then read over the manuscript (long shot) to get a feel for how these additions change, add, or distort. Are some unnecessary after all? Do some need still fuller expanding? Should this or that one be reduced to a sentence or image? Do some suggest a new direction?

Is your copy clean?

Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are a kind of magic; their purpose is to be invisible. If the sleight of hand works, we will not notice a comma or a quotation mark but will translate each instantly into a pause or an awareness of voice; we will not focus on the individual letters of a word but extract its sense whole. When the mechanics are incorrectly used, the trick is revealed and the magic fails; the reader's focus is shifted from the story to its surface. The reader is irritated at the author, and of all the emotions the reader is willing to experience, irritation at the author is not one.

There is no intrinsic virtue in standardized mechanics, and you can depart from them whenever you produce an effect that adequately compensates for the attention called to the surface. But only then. Unlike the techniques of narrative, the rules of spelling, grammar, and punctuation can be coldly learned anywhere in the English-speaking world—and they should be learned by anyone who aspires to write.

Try This
Your manuscript as you present it to your workshop, an agent, or an editor, is dressed for interview. If it's sloppy it'll be hard to see how brilliant it really is. Groom it. Consult Appendix B for the traditional and professional formats for each genre.

then:

Line Edit: Check through for faulty grammar, inconsistent tenses, unintended repetitions of words, any awkwardness that makes you feel uneasy. Fix them.

and:

Proofread: Run a spellcheck (but don't rely on it entirely). Read through for typos, punctuation errors, any of those goblins that slip into a manuscript. If you are in doubt about the spelling or meaning of a word, look it up.

> Whatever can't be taught, there is a great deal that can, and must, be learned.
>
> *Mary Oliver*

The Workshop

Once you have a draft of a piece and have worked on it to the best of your ability, someone else's eyes can help refresh the vision of your own. That's where the workshop can help. Professionals rely on their editors and agents in this process, and as Kurt Vonnegut has pointed out, "A creative writing course provides experienced editors for inspired amateurs. What could be simpler or more dignified?"

In preparation for the workshop, each class member should read the piece twice, once for its content, a second time with pen in hand to make marginal comments, observations, suggestions. A summarizing end note is usual and helpful. This should be done with the understanding that the work at hand is *by definition* a work in progress. If it were finished then there would be no reason to bring it into workshop.

Keep in mind that the goal of the workshop is to make the piece under consideration *the best that it can be.* The group should continue to deal, first, in neutral and inquiring ways with each piece before going on to discuss what does and doesn't "work." It's often a good idea to begin with a detailed summary of what the poetry, story, essay, or drama actually says—useful because if class members understand the characters or events differently, find the imagery confusing, or miss an irony, this is important information for the author, a signal that

she has not revealed what, or all, she meant. The exploratory questions suggested in the introduction may still be useful. In addition, the class might address such questions as:

- *What kind of piece is this?*
- *What other works does it remind you of?*
- *How is it structured?*
- *What is it about?*
- *What does it say about what it is about?*
- *What degree of identification does it invite?*
- *How does its imagery relate to its theme?*
- *How is persona or point of view employed?*
- *What effect on the reader does it seem to want to produce?*

Only then should the critique begin to deal with whether the work under consideration is successful in its effects: *is the language fresh, the action clear, the point of view consistent, the rhythm interesting, the characters fully drawn, the imagery vivid*? Now and again it is well to pause and return to more substantive matters: *what's the spirit of this piece, what is it trying to say, what does it make me feel?*

If this process is respectfully and attentively addressed, it can be of genuine value not only to the writer but to the writer-critics, who can learn, through the articulation of their own and others' responses, "what works" and what doesn't, and how to face similar authorial problems. In workshop discussion, disagreements are as often as instructive as consensus; lack of clarity often teaches what clarity is.

For the writer, the process is emotionally strenuous, because the piece under discussion is a sort of baby on the block. Its parent may have a strong impulse to explain and plead. Most of us feel not only committed to what we have put on the page, but also defensive on its behalf—wanting, really, only to be told that it is a work of genius or, failing that, to find out that we have gotten away with it. We may even want to blame the reader. If the criticism is: *this isn't clear*, it's hard not to feel: *you didn't read it right*—even if you understand that although the workshop members have an obligation to read with special care, it is not up to them to "get it" but up to the author to be clear. If the complaint is: *this isn't credible*, it's very hard not to respond: *but it really happened!*—even though you know perfectly well that credibility is a different sort of fish than fact. There is also a self-preservative impulse to keep from changing the core of what you've done: *why should I put in all that effort?*

The most important part of being a writer in a workshop is to learn this: be still, be greedy for suggestions, take everything in, and don't defend. The trick to making good use of criticism is to be utterly selfish about it. Ultimately you are the laborer, the arbiter, and the boss in any dispute about your story, so you can afford to consider any problem and any solution. Therefore, the first step toward successful revision is learning to hear, absorb, and accept criticism.

It *is* difficult. But only the effort of complete receptivity will make the workshop work for you. The chances are that your draft really does not say the most meaningful thing inherent in it, and that most meaningful thing may announce itself sideways, in a detail, a parenthesis, an afterthought, a slip. Somebody else may spot it before you do. Sometimes the best advice comes from the most surprising source. The thing you resist the hardest may be exactly what you need.

After the workshop, the writer's obligation alters slightly. It's important to take the written critiques and take them seriously, let them sink in with as good a will as you brought to workshop. But part of the need is also not to let them sink in too far. Reject without regret whatever seems on reflection wrong-headed, dull, destructive, or irrelevant to your vision. Resist the impulse to write "for the workshop" what you think your peers or teacher will praise. It's just as important to be able to discriminate between helpful and unhelpful criticism as it is to be able to write. It is in fact the same thing as being able to write. So listen to everything and receive all criticism as if it is golden. Then listen to yourself and toss the dross.

More to Read

Aitchity, Kenneth. *A Writer's Time*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

Kaplan, David Michael. *Revision: A Creative Approach to Writing and Rewriting Fiction*. Cincinnati: Story Press, 1997.

Strunk, William Jr. and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1979.

Woodruff, Jay, ed. *A Piece of Work: Five Writers Discuss Their Revisions*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.