The Writing Process Rejected

ORLEAN R. ANDERSON

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"The writing process is stupid." His voice was edged with the cynicism of one who has spent the last ten years detecting the games he is positive teachers play. I had been startled to attention by his words and was already studying his face when the young student teacher, who had invited me to observe, turned to me helplessly. Her lesson was imploding before her eyes. She needed bailing out.

I don't remember what I said to his defiant glare. Something not very articulate, I'm sure. Something on the order of, "Really? Why do you think so?" Whatever it was, he wasn't buying it, and our exchange ended quickly. He never got around to saying exactly why he had pronounced such a harsh verdict on the writing process, but he didn't really need to explain because I had been feeling the same way for the past year, maybe longer.

Each time I open a textbook and turn to the chapter entitled "The Writing Process" and am greeted by Step 1, Step 2, Step 3, I grit my teeth. When I go into a classroom where the "Steps in the Writing Process" are stretched out in that cramped space between the ceiling and the blackboard, my frustration grows. I have even become impatient with the "madman, architect, judge" jargon. Somehow, it is all too orderly, too linear, too controlled. Textbook publishers take pride in selling their books on the premise that the lessons within those covers are "teacher-proof"—and now the writing process has been "teacher-proofed"!

In many classrooms, right now, students are opening their books to "Chapter 8: The Writing Process; Step 1: Prewriting." They know, I feel sure, that those steps do not really define their own complex, even mysterious, process of composing and creating. They know because they know how hard it is to write something that artistically pleases someone else, that logically informs another person. They know, from experience, that success in writing is often a matter of luck or inspiration, two factors that we have not, as yet, ordered up into "steps." Publishers and teachers together have codified the writing process, assuredly with the best intentions. Maybe we have acted out of a need to be "clear" or "fair" or out of a belief, so often stated in collegial conversation, that
structure is good for the kids who aren’t gifted, kids who just don’t know where to start. That same tired line is often used to justify the five-paragraph formula of structuring a student’s writing. In fact, it is my gifted students who often take refuge in steps and five-paragraph organization. My regular and alternative students, on the other hand, soar when we take off the blinders and open up the messy possibilities. As teachers, we seem to find comfort in clearly delineated steps, formulas that we can outline and evaluate. Maybe it is this need for control that has led so many of us to mold a messy creative phenomenon into a checklist.

Whatever the reasons, in many classrooms, students are proclaiming, “I hate the writing process!” never realizing the irony of that implication: that they are professing to hate the ways their minds seize ideas, images, and emotions; the way their minds translate those inspirations into language that interests or pleases or enlightens other human beings. By attaching a “the” in front of the two key words “writing process,” we imply to students that writing process consists of correct steps. We also imply that the steps are exactly the same for all writers. People who actually write know better. Below, several writer-colleagues describe their complex, sometimes chaotic, act of composing. All of them are teacher-consultants with the Northern Virginia Writing Project.

**Early Stages**

**Sidney Brown:** [A piece begins] with wanting to explore something or to ferret out a feeling [from] drawers full of journals taped up with concepts I’ve read, images that seem layered, words that echo some kind of experience I’ve had, and thoughts that tug at something very intrinsic to me.

**Bob Ingalls:** I often get ideas from other authors. I love to imitate style. Reading suggests ideas to me. I get ideas from other writers. I want to respond to, build on, or explore an author’s ideas. Talk helps, but sometimes I write first.

**Bill McCabe:** [My] best writing starts out in misty, undefined shapes in the back of my mind. ... They are important to me but not easily articulated. I may have pinned down the idea [which] may be as vague as the power of guilt over a child or the pain of lying to someone you love. Many times I will give first voice to these ideas in a prewriting that I am doing for myself or with my students.

**Bernie Glaze:** I write in my journal all of the time—often in the middle of meetings to vent or to dump a feeling or idea that is interfering with my ability to focus. I choose personal topics on the basis of what I need to write about, that old Macrorie idea of the topic choosing you, but that is not as easy as it sounds. I find that learning to listen to oneself in a genuine way is a learned art.

**Next Considerations**

**Sidney:** [Ideas then take on] some order in the mental and spiritual dimension. The piece immediately, and often not obviously, begins to evolve in the subconscious or dream state.

**Bob:** One sentence, well written, is often what I need to get direction. That sentence rings in my head and brings a rhythm to my ideas. It is about sound, often. I feel the writing in my body, somewhere, and I move to that rhythm.

**Bill:** [I invent a] powerful first line. I try deliberately not to understand the whole story. ... I’m not sure where it’s going to go. It is like putting your fingers over your eyes and allowing yourself only small peeks at something in front of you. I want to know my subject slowly, to approach it like a stranger. I care only about the language of the first sentence—making sure it will draw the reader in, provoke a thought or emotion that feels right to me. It can take weeks or months, with many revisions of just that sentence. Once I’ve written a first line that I’m happy with, I stop writing [to allow my] subconscious mind to mull over the way the story might work itself out.

**Bernie:** In my job, I am never given the opportunity to choose topics—they are always foisted upon me. And I often have to write for hostile audiences or unknown audiences. What saves me is knowing my subject well; however, if I know ... just a little about it, then [this is where] I have to know how to find out.

**Moving Along**

**Sidney:** Once a mapping of the piece emerges into the “awake” state, I begin to put it to paper, at the computer. [I] cut, delete, move, and experiment with form. The structure or form of the writing is not apparent at first [but it is in this] nothingness state that serendipitous things happen: words and relationships of words come out. Ideas twine into relationships overlapping and feeding into other ideas at unpredictable points. Eventually the clarity of the piece—the story and understory of the piece—makes itself known.

**Bob:** I revise as I write, sometimes after I write the first draft. If I don’t have that rhythm, I have to wordsmith each sentence until I get the feel. I don’t play madman—I can’t until I get the feel in my body for what I am writing. Then other times I have to discover what I have to say or how I feel. This [part] gets messy, and it usually
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follows one sentence well written. I follow the feel of the writing.”

BILL: [I remain] unaware [of my piece but I am aware that] family, friends and enemies, my outlook on what is right and wrong, all play into how the story takes shape. From time to time, I consciously remind myself that it is still a work in progress . . . that I am free to invent, as well as remember, the story, but most of what happens at this very important [stage] is invisible, unknowable, elusive.

Continuing

SIDNEY: [At this point my] critical eye . . . the editor’s eye that cares about audience and voice and layers of meaning [comes in]. I begin to strengthen my writing through parallelism, tighter phrasing, metaphoric language, a strengthening of the thread that leads to the reader, and [I] double-check that I have dealt with everything I’ve brought on stage.

BERNIE: Usually I use my own eye.

BILL: When the time feels right, usually right before a deadline, I begin to type on the computer. I find it hard to write a first draft by hand, although I like to do revisions in pen. I watch the story come out. I need a large block of time, and it almost always has to happen late at night.

BILB: [Now I write] multiple drafts, sometimes handwritten because I want to feel the paper and the pen. There’s movement involved. I often move my hands to the sound of the writing, like a ballet in the air. I also walk and move about to the rhythm, rehearsing the writing in my head and out loud. I may say part [of the writing] to someone.

SIDNEY: My classroom is arranged in circular seating with the computer and printer outside the circle. Once [I have] verse or paragraphs, [I move] just outside that circumference and begin to walk the circular path around the student tables, reading aloud. Something about the rhythm of walking and reading aloud with my ear as proofreader catches the stride of the piece. Once I hear what needs to change, and it is usually before I make the complete circle, I punch the revision into the computer, print the new draft, and begin to “walk the work” again. [The] vocabulary moves from the abstract to the specific; sentences are streamlined; meaning becomes less mysterious.

Stopping to Listen

SIDNEY: Once a piece of writing passes through all these phases, I share it with my writing group, a group of six writers who have been together for almost four years. It is this audience, this group critique, that lets me know if what I write reaches beyond the chambers of myself.

BOB: Input comes early when I am discovering what I have to say. I listen to my voice when I respond. Later I read the writing aloud to hear my voice. That is most valuable to me. I often hear someone else when I read . . . another voice that is sometimes a part of me, sometimes new to me. I embrace it, feel it out—learning of my own identity. I resist listening to others too much until I get the sound right, until I can move my hands to the sounds. Then I listen to overall impressions, not paying much attention to details. Again it is about the feel, seeing how someone else feels about the writing. I watch body language, note their feelings expressed and implied.

BILL: I need at this point to read my story aloud to someone else. It is better when I like and trust that person . . . but that is not really necessary. The most important thing is that it is live and it is out loud. I will pick up on things that sound false to me, parts undeveloped, deficiencies of the story . . . I will take criticism from my audience, but [what] helps me most are my own mental notes that I have taken while reading and watching my audience react.

Nearing the End

SIDNEY: At this point, at least fifteen revisions have already taken place.

BILL: I put the writing away for a long time and come back to it only when I have lost a sense of familiarity with the piece.

BERNIE: All of . . . my job-related writing . . . is extremely deadline-driven.

BOB: Finished? I never know until I come back to the writing—three days seems necessary . . . three because one day is needed to let the writing slip away from my consciousness. [There is] another day for freedom of thinking of it and the final day for pondering new perspectives. The piece is finished when it feels right—[the] sound, the rhythm, the feel—in my hands, in my body.

Marian Mohr says that real writers are engaged in the act of making choices, that, in fact, effective writing is simply a series of effective choices. Each of the adult writers above understands how he or she makes choices. These adult writers have learned to unravel and articulate what happens when they compose. Each one understands that he or she follows a unique process. This knowledge of their own processes empowers them as thinkers and as writers. Students deserve to have that same power. Until students have the ability to make choices and understand their own processes, writing will be a fill-in-the-blank exercise for them.
It is my job, then, to give my students the guidance and the structure and time necessary for them to recognize and articulate their individual processes. Directed freewriting is a good place to start, freewritings composed as they begin a piece or freewritings done during or after they have completed a piece, freewritings designed to direct students into their own processes:

- What did you see in your mind before you started writing?
- When did you realize you had your topic? When did you realize your topic had you?
- What did you do first? Did you outline? Freewrite? Imagine a first line? Compose a paragraph in your head? Just start writing the whole thing?
- What happened after your first line or first paragraph? Did you write quickly, not stopping? What was the tempo of the following paragraphs?
- Did you revise as you wrote? Did you write the whole draft then begin changing?
- When did you make your biggest changes? What were those changes?
- When and how did you seek response?
- How did response help you or affect the piece?
- Did you get stuck at any point? What did you do then?
- When did you realize what the piece was really about?
- When did you figure out how you wanted to end the piece?
- When did you realize the piece was finished? What told you it was finished?
- Can you outline the steps you went through to compose this piece?
- Think of your piece as an architectural structure—cottage, townhouse, building, arena, or skyscraper. How did it get built?

There are other prompts that could work. There are no right or wrong questions... any will do as long as the questions bring the student back into the piece and into understanding his or her individual process that is occurring. My students might do visuals or models of their process, interpret them for the class, and post them on the wall. As we see those tangible explanations, we can increase and deepen the level of our conversation about process.

In addition to guided analysis of their own processes, I intend to do more consistent modeling and articulating of my own process as my students and I write pieces together. I want them to see their teacher struggle as a writer, struggle as they do. I want them to see that I do not have formulas for beginnings, or orderly routines when I get stuck, but that, instead, I am, as they are, figuring out each and every piece on its own terms. They need to know that sometimes writers get it all figured out, and sometimes we don’t, that sometimes we tear our hair, scrap a piece, and move on to the next.

My listening to them talk about their writing is crucial. They will figure out how they get and develop ideas when I stay quiet and let them talk. As they articulate what is happening with a piece, they may be able to see possibilities and solve problems in ways that I would never think of. This careful and respectful listening, I hope, will lead to real conversations about and evaluation of their writing.

So, it is the fall of a new school year. My students are writing editorials that have grown out of our Election 2000 unit. Matt’s first draft on gun control looks like a finished product. Sarah’s is full of details on pro-choice, a topic she has been researching in government, but her draft has no structure yet. Cicely, meanwhile, is on her third, very polished draft demanding the elimination of the death penalty. She prefers not to read it to anyone... yet. Kevin has no topic and is reading a car magazine. Jason has settled on the legalization of marijuana but insists that he needs headphones because he cannot concentrate without his rap music. Tomorrow, Matt will admit to me that the gun control editorial is the same one he has written for the last three years in social studies and English. Together, after a “determined” conversation, we will discover that his real passion is Internet censorship. With my prodding and cajoling, he will start over. My students know, on some level, that they are each following their own instinctive, inescapable processes, just as Sidney, Bill, Bernie, and Bob know. Tomorrow we will talk about and validate those processes, and maybe at some point, my students will learn to trust and control those processes as adult writers do.

ORLEAN R. ANDERSON is a teacher-consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.