Writing Spaces: Expanding the One-Story House

The writing process is everywhere, not just in writing. Whether we are learning a backhand stroke or doing a math problem, we move through steps from tentative experiments to revision, correction, and “publication.” If this process applies to anything, Elizabeth Leiknes claims, it applies to renovating a house. In this piece, Leiknes makes the connection between her ongoing efforts to create a new home for herself and what her students need to know about developing a piece of writing.

Elizabeth Leiknes

I live in an equilateral triangle. From the first time I saw it, the design impressed me: striking, deliberate, simple. It is a true A-frame, unlike many of its “modified” relatives, and it is this pure design that prompts me to feel that I live in a story. The actual structure, an unmistakable capital A, is more than just a letter—it is the first in a lineup of twenty-six, a beginning to making meaning. From the road outside I see the rigid roofline where the weight rests; on the inside, the angled beams are intersected by cross beams, forming a series of perfect As in pure Phoenician splendor. It is the ideal marriage of strength and beauty. So, I live and sleep within the confines of a letter that becomes a word that becomes a sentence and eventually, after a lot of work and a little divine intervention, becomes a story.

It is my job as a teacher of writing to help others see these stories that often recede into the backdrop of everyday life. This is not an easy task, but it is an important one. Asking students to notice the stories around them and “say something” in their writing is complicated. First, we need to somehow establish the value in writing, the value in communicating and expressing. Next, we need to help them figure out what it is exactly that they want to say. Then, the task becomes discovering a way to encourage them to incorporate the “rules” of good writing without squelching the initial passion for writing in the first place, the same passion that gives their writing authentic voice. All of this, of course, is done while we (writers ourselves) secretly harbor our selfish hopes and fears about our own writing—the dissertation, the journal article, the great American short story, the witty screenplay that we’re sure we could write if we weren’t so busy trying to inspire others’ writing.

Balancing our own writing goals with those of our students is just the beginning of the complicated nature of teaching writing. Unanswered questions pose a bigger problem: Who exactly benefits from writing? If writing can indeed be taught to everyone, how do we remedy the fact that some aspects of writing, like voice and style, seem just short of impossible to teach? How do we break students of the deeply ingrained notion that we should write and edit at the same time, ridding writers everywhere of the stifling panic that accompanies most of them when confronted with the task of writing? Furthermore, how do we convince the writer who has written one good story that with a little patience more will follow?

Sometimes I would talk about my house with my students. “Just like I have to have faith that our house will someday become a home, you guys have to have faith that your words are important.” They didn’t think so. Then I would take home a batch of essays and find out that they were right. They didn’t have a damn thing to say. A couple of them did, so I read those twice, but most of them made me want to bludgeon myself with my pen. It wasn’t that the metaphor was lost on them; some of them applied the “leap of faith” when playing basketball or when asking someone out on a date, but it didn’t work.
for writing. Writers only take risks when they feel it is justified and when they have a way to access their honest opinions.

Stage One: Prewriting or Clearing the Cobwebs

We bought our house against the wishes of pretty much everyone we knew. "Where's the rest of it?" and "Seriously, does it have running water?" were usual comments from our friends who looked exhausted as they witnessed the work that needed done. Whenever things went wrong with the house, my husband, John, would declare it "mine," but I loved my overpriced bastard child, even when we found out that there were no screens in ANY of the windows. Mammoth insects roamed freely through holes in the walls and back out into the mountain night air. I saw the stars. John saw wings, stingers, and a "Welcome" sign for bears. But, together, we slowly started clearing away the cobwebs, one room at a time.

Discovering honest writing occurs when the cobwebs of our minds are cleared; prewriting strategies promote this housecleaning in our heads. Students think they have nothing to write about because they are indeed living in the lobby, when they should be utilizing the whole mansion. How do we help them breathe life into their writing? Encourage them to open up windows and take out the screens that filter their true voices.

So, I knew it was time to really teach my students to write as a process. I'd taught them the definitions of each step of the writing process, but they weren't prewriting. They just wrote a draft that they never revised, only spell checked, and then they turned in a half-cooked piece. And it was my fault for letting them get away with it for so long. I decided on a new approach, for the moment. I gave up the house metaphor and explained that the writing process is a lot like creating a statue. Prewriting is going to the rock quarry to peruse different rocks and get ideas for what you want to make. Writing the first draft is giving the rock form, shaping it into some version of what you want the end result to look like. Revising is adding details and taking off select pieces, then standing back to look, and doing it all over again until it's right. Editing is fine-tuning the intricate creases and subtle curves, fixing any mistakes. Finally, publishing is putting the finished statue on display.

But what I have to remind myself is that when I want my students to freewrite for fifteen minutes, then begin writing something brilliant that surfaced, some of them are still in the rock quarry, walking around aimlessly, looking at the rocks. Or worse yet, some of them are standing in the quarry, angry that they are there, ready to go home, and unwilling to even search. Freewriting takes practice and habit. It is hard work writing about nothing, but it is an imperative part of discovering what you want to say. The left brain, the voice telling you that you are lousy at spelling, that you need to start organizing and making poignant metaphors, can be quieted only by distraction. Freewriting does this but takes a little faith and a lot of hard work. With all due respect to American youth, I will say that because of a less-than-perfect work ethic and negative past experiences, many are unwilling to do the work that it takes to develop as a writer. They want it to be good the first time around. We certainly need to establish an emotionally safe classroom environment if we want students to feel comfortable writing honestly; however, what students need is less empty praise and more practice.

Kids will write everywhere—on desks, on bathroom walls—and they'll pass notes whenever the teacher turns away. Human beings (even teenagers) need to communicate. It is only when we ask them to write that they feel they have nothing to say. But, 90 percent of teaching involves persuasion. We persuade students to trust us, to value our beliefs, to give up old beliefs, to risk making mistakes, yet we don't always know how to persuade. Modeling can be a form of persuasion. So, when I have their attention, I model how to freewrite on the overhead:

Freewriting... is writing down whatever comes out of your brain... spew it on paper... spew is a funny word... writing nonstop loosens you up... helps access the good stuff... I don't know what to say... I hate blank paper... I am supposed to be writing about a childhood memory, but I'm blanking out... I wish I had a short stack of blueberry pancakes from Heidi's... I guess I like freewriting cuz there are no wrong answers... pancakes... my mother used to make me pancakes in the shapes of cookie-cutter animals... .

When I finished this one, I asked them where I went off the topic and if they thought there was anything that I could write about from my short freewrite. One student offered, "You should write about a serial killer who works at Heidi's as a short-order cook." I suggest we can do better. Another student said, "I think you should start your piece with a conversation between you and your mom while she makes pancakes." Once I see that they have discovered real content embedded in madness, it is time to ask them to do
the same with their freewriting, moving them one step closer to expressing their true selves.

**Stage Two: Writing or First-Coat Wonders**

*Summer 2001*

It's been two months since we first cleared the cobwebs of 20 Sage. Today I decided to splash a little personality around, so I painted two doors: one a normal closet door, the other a two-foot-tall minidoor leading to a storage area. I wanted the big door to be perfectly artsy, so I fretted, planned, planned again, then ended up carefully painting the door brick red and canary yellow. This resulted in having a McDonald's drive-thru window in my hallway. With paint still tacky-wet, I went to plan B, exchanging red for purple, and it ended up looking like a tribute to the University of Michigan. Three disastrous layers later, the door became congealed rainbow-goo. Disappointed with the big-person door, I tried a new approach with the little-person door. I painted this door (we've named it the Wonka door because it looks like an Oompa-Loompa door from Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory) quickly and with no plan. Maize and mustard yellow soon appeared on the door in a diamond pattern. It wasn't symmetrical, but it was certainly whimsical. It was old-house charm and fun-house portal at the same time—it was a first-coat wonder.

When I first bought my house, I admitted to my students that it was “one giant rough draft.” They laughed. When I showed them pictures, they stopped laughing and began asking questions. “What are you, like, gonna fix first?” “What do you want it to, like, look like? Like, I mean, like all modern and stuff or, you know, kinda like my grandma’s house?” Eighteen “likes” later I realized that they were asking me the same questions they ask themselves about their own first drafts—in what order should things go and in what style should the story be told? I’ve made mistakes with my first-draft home, and some of those mistakes derive from my tendency to think too much. When kids sit down to write a draft they also automatically start thinking too much. They think about structure and voice, and even though I tell them a first draft is too early for that, they believe writing and editing are done at the same time. My mess of a door is an example of what happens when one tries to think and create at the same time. There are times when a plan is necessary, but not when writing a first draft. Mark Twain had a point when he suggested, “If we taught our children to speak in the way we teach them to write, everyone would stutter.” Writing becomes contrived, choppy, and insincere when we apply too many rules too early in the writing process. Anne Lamott reminds us, “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts” (1994, 25). And the beauty of the one-coat first draft is that it is liberating. The paper is like a canvas, but the goal of a first draft is more like finger painting than like paint-by-numbers.

**Stage Three: Revising or Tools of the Trade**

*Autumn 2001*

My husband says he's doubled his rip capacity with his new table saw. I told him I needed a visual on “ripping” so he showed me. Jagged teeth emerged from a shiny slot of metal to cut the entire length of a four-foot-long piece of birch. I asked him why he couldn’t have “ripped” the board with our circular saw, and I immediately knew that I was out of my element.

He shook his head. “No, no, no, the circular saw cuts ACROSS the grain, the table saw cuts WITH the grain. The rip fence ensures a straight cut.”

The passion with which he discusses his tools makes me secretly jealous, so I make a point to learn the names of the strangers he knows intimately. And the cast and crew stamp their names on each of his creations: hardwood floor by DeWalt, decorative shelf by Milwaukee, coffee table by Ryobi. I leave him surrounded by the tools that enable his craft, retreat to my office, and pile my tools around me, stacked and categorized in my own secret way.

When I introduce those elements of writing that many now call writing traits to my students, I show them various props: a lightbulb for “Ideas and Content,” a miniature filing cabinet for “Organization,” a heart for “Voice,” and a bag of tools for “Conventions.” I tell them that the tool bag comes during editing to fix mistakes, but lately I’ve discovered that we need tools during the revision process, too. Not the kinds of tools that check grammar and spelling, but tools that strengthen the message of the piece. The tools we need during revision can be found in books about the craft of writing. If a tool helps make a good carpenter, then craft helps make a good writer. Ursula K. Le Guin defines a skill as “Something you know how to do. Skill in
writing frees you to write what you want to write. It may also show you what you want to write” (1998, xi).

With the help of my favorite books on the craft of writing, I’ve developed a list of the most important rules or “tools” for myself and my students. Many items in the list are “what not to do,” but this seems to work best for my students. “There are no rules to assure great writing, but there are ways to avoid bad writing” (Lukeman 2000, 11). The following are tips that we review before every writing workshop.

Aim for brevity. In writing, less is usually more. “In writing, short is usually better than long. Short words and sentences are easier for the eye and the mind to process than long ones” (Zinsser 1988, 64). Stephen King received a “scribbled comment” on a high school paper that changed the way he rewrote his fiction forever: “2nd draft = 1st draft – 10%. Good luck.” My math-minded kids appreciate this formula.

Use active versus passive voice. “The timid fellow writes ‘The meeting will be held at seven o’clock’ because that somehow says to him, ‘Put it this way and people will believe you really know.’ Purge this quisling thought! Don’t be a mug! Throw back your shoulders, stick out your chin, and put that meeting in charge: Write ‘The meeting’s at seven’” (King 2000, 123).

Show; don’t tell. This is a classic, but a must. Telling: “Susan was mad.” Showing: “Susan’s face turned red, and I felt her stare burn through me.”

Avoid clichés. Turn “scared as a mouse” into “He trembled, hearing the thumping of his heart.”

Create pictures with metaphors. “My thirteen-year-old daughter is a garbage disposal. Hamburgers, hot dogs, potato chips, pretzels, ice cream, candy bars, all slide in an endless stream down that yawning maw. Even now I can hear her grinding jaws” (Kubis 1990, 104).


Use adverbs sparingly. Use vivid verbs to replace weak adverbs: “John closed the door firmly.” Better: “John slammed the door.” And in dialogue, simply use “said” as a dialogue tag.

Use sensory details. Whenever possible, create a picture in the reader’s mind using all five senses. Sight, sound, and touch: “The yellow pimpled surface of the lemon spiraled as it rolled across the wood floor.” Smell and taste: “The sweet smell of my grandmother’s cinnamon rolls reminds me of the butter-cream icing on its way.”

So how are these “tools” used in my classroom? I’ve found that new writers need their tools to be very accessible, so I give each student the tools in the form of a handout. Instead of being intimidated by the repeated exposure to these rules, they seem to be relieved to have a checklist. Stephen King comments on the goal of having your writing tools with you at all times. “I want to suggest to you that to write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle so you can carry it with you” (King 2000, 114).

Eventually, my goal is that my students will start applying some of these rules for good writing in a seamless fashion. In other words, I want them to get to a place where their audience does not see the work in their work. Finishing nails exist so that we don’t see the nail heads in the finished product; it is the same for the tools of writing. My students will eventually need to know which tool to grab for different tasks. They will have to decide when to go with the grain and when to sever all that is tightly bound.

Stage Four: Editing or The Wizard of Sludge

Winter 2002

We were [getting ready to go] to a party when brown sludge bubbled up from our shower drain. As I washed my hair, my feet disappeared in the polluted water. “What the hell is this?”

The toilet became alive with activity, mini-waves gagged up the same black-brown sludge. “Shit!” my husband said as he ran into the bathroom.

“Exactly,” I said as I towed off.

I looked out at the area of our yard where I’d hoped to put in a yellow brick road, complete with California poppies, maybe even a small, tasteful Emerald City storage shed, but there were no flowers; instead, the Wicked Witch of the West showed herself in the form of sewage seeping from the septic tank.

There is a time for allowing, as Anne Lamott says, “shitty first drafts,” but there is also a time to quit complaining about the struggle and simply clean it up. After my students revise and edit their work, I check it for what I call a “rewrite.” If their writing violates something on the rewrite sheet, I staple it to their work and they redo it for late credit. This is the only technique in eight years of teaching that has encouraged my students to become good editors. Do I want to squelch their
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confidence? No. Do I want them to think that the marks I make with my pen are the most important things I have about their writing? No. Do I want them to spell my name right, make sense, and use the right “its”? Yes. While writing is not solely about good grammar, it’s important to talk about what is “right.” Two plus two is four—not three, not five, but four. And there is a right way to put words together so that people know what you are talking about.

“Writing teachers are lucky if 10 percent of what they said in class is remembered and applied. The bad habits are just too habitual. They can be cured only by that most painful of surgical procedures: operating on what the writer has actually written. Only there, where a writer is at his most vulnerable, having put some part of himself on paper, does he make the connection between principle and practice” (Zinsser 2002, 47). This “operating” is usually hardest on the teacher because we are so inclined to give praise, but it needs to happen so that poor grammar and usage doesn’t invalidate students’ writing.

Stage Five: Publishing or Expanding the One-Story House

Spring 2002

We’ve remodeled everything there is to remodel on the downstairs of our A-frame, but it’s our only livable space. It is essentially a one-story house. I know we should begin to work on the second-story upstairs, but it’s such a huge task, and I am apprehensive. No one even goes up there but me. A giant void, that’s what it is. No color, no warmth, just uninhabited land. What we’ve already done on the first level was so successful, I wonder if it can be repeated. Maybe living in one story is enough; a second story would be asking for a lot. It would be a leap of faith to enter into such a mess.

I avoided working on the second story of my house like many writers avoid writing after they’ve experienced success on an earlier project, but eventually I took the leap of faith. Writing past the first level in your house of stories is often a pride-swallowing process. Certain pieces of writing, like many creative endeavors, sometimes just fall into place. So, it is when we feel that we only have one story to write, or worse yet, no story at all, that we need to expand, and build in order to discover.

As I expanded my one-story house, it seemed easier to pull out my hair than the rotten drywall. I pressed on, feeling like I was making no progress, until I saw the tiniest signs of transformation. The pictures of this slow and grueling process hang on my bulletin board behind my desk for a reason. Sometimes I get really lucky and a teachable moment arises when I can inspire one or two students to not give up on writing, and I point to the wall of photos to remind them.

I don’t always know what to say when my students are just plain sick of writing and consider themselves empty, because I’ve been there many times myself. What I do know is that the act of writing is done for ourselves; not for husbands, teachers, or publishers. With this said, let’s get real. The process is for the writer, but the end goal is to share your work with others. On the other hand, Anne Lamott is wary of publish-happy writers. “Some people kind of want to write, but they really want to be published” (Lamott 1994, 11). I argue that wanting to share your work and be recognized for it only pollutes your work if you obsess about it too early in the writing process. It can be lurking in the back of your mind, but it just can’t be waving its hands in your face as you create.

But, if it’s not always to publish, why write at all, my students say. I ask them to think of their favorite videotape at home. They imagine Happy Gilmore in its sophomoric splendor, resting peacefully on the shelf of the entertainment center. How long will it last? Ten years? Twenty? Some documents are thousands of years old. No videotape will ever come close to enduring that long. Writing is timeless; sacred.

I spent the morning tapping my fingers while reading new fiction that was so funny, so dark, so revealing, that it made me want to write. This feeling, this uncontrollable urge to create is innate—that can’t be taught. But what can be taught is what it feels like to intercept an out-of-reach ball, to paint the right brush stroke, to pen the perfect line. Yes, some aspects of teaching writing are more difficult, but it is imperative to teach that good writing stems from being reflective, and good writers are astute observers of truth. And as far as balancing personal goals with those of our students, realize that (selfishly) to teach is to know—it is, in fact, actually more rewarding to help others in the case of writing, because guiding others often puts us on our own right path. So, writing can indeed be taught because each day we continue to learn. And writing is learning. Not all of us will become wordsmiths, but each of us lives in a story, if we just look hard enough.

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Elizabeth Leiknes grew up in rural Iowa and knows how to make thirty-seven different dishes featuring corn. She teaches seventh and eighth grade English in California, where she lives in a humble A-frame near Lake Tahoe.