

What's Your Writing Process

by Valerie Bean

Not long ago, I enjoyed one of the most productive Ah-ha! moments I've experienced in my personal writing life. It happened shortly after a job interview for a technical writing gig (my day job) and it was twofold. The hiring manager asked me to describe the steps I take in writing business documents and because the project also called for collateral, nontechnical pieces, he asked me to describe my approach to freelance assignments. I was stunned to hear myself describe an identical process. From this thunder-bolt realization, I came to understand that (a) I have a process, and (b) both my creative writing and my technical writing could benefit from knowing this. It was then that I recognized how little process is referred to in discussions about creative writing.



Writing, it seems to me, is as much about process as it is about character, plot, and dialogue, about thesis and argument. Of course you need a solid grasp of grammar and mechanics, but once you have a workable love of language and feel free to make a mess of things, it's your writing process that will carry you through to The End.

In hindsight, ignorance about process likely cost me my first technical writing gig because I regularly turned in roughly written drafts for review. To its reviewers, it might have appeared as if I had both an undeveloped understanding of the subject matter and an inability to construct a sentence. (A career-limiting combination.) Eventually, experience taught me to distribute documents that were as publication-ready as the submissions I sent to literary journals and periodicals. In return, somewhere along the line, my business writing process migrated into my weekend writing.

As novices, we are preoccupied with getting our work to market, with being *published*. As emerging writers, we receive rejection letter after rejection letter while trying to write, as Hemingway suggested, "one true sentence". We become endlessly fascinated by the creative process, the inner imaginings of famous writers, but ignore writing process.

Once I applied this to my creative work, I saw results immediately. Applying my business writing process to my hobby writing allowed me to immediately see

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where I'd left off, and because I was no longer weighed down by my expectations of producing a fully-formed fictional piece the first time out, my fictional writing improved. Where I had always kept the two types of writing separate, I could see benefits to allowing them to cross over. I even introduced free-fall writing techniques from my creative writing to produce business documents in less time.

Once You Have a Workable Love of Language, Pay Attention to Process

If you write short stories, poetry, or creative non-fiction in your spare time as I do, there's no time to waste dawdling in front of a computer screen, or in the margins on the page. Your writing time is bound by constraint, so when you pull out a piece to work on, it's best if you can immediately engage with your storyline and characters. My process from notebook to finished draft may be a lot like yours:

Notes draft

In the early stages of a piece, note-taking is an essential tool. With my creative work, I have the luxury of scribbling, free fall in my notebook. When I'm in the mood for transcribing, or when the pages of the notebook are filled—whichever comes first—I type an outline from these notes into my computer making minor changes only for clarification. This draft of fractured thoughts and unfinished sentences may sit for days, weeks, or months, before I tackle it again. At some point, I'll add comments to the printed page. As mentioned earlier, I've integrated this step into my day job, although the time fame is compressed to days and hours. Free-fall writing and handwritten notes help me understand new and complex concepts, so the step is now the basis for every business document I write.

Rough Draft

With the typewritten notes in hand, I start fresh. I'll type a rough draft using the notes as a jumping-off point, but starting with the blank page. Writing from scratch allows me to reorganize my thoughts, to work out what I am trying to say, or what the story itself is trying to reveal. Start to finish, this draft is produced swiftly. Save, print, read. Add notes.

D1

An allotment of time is essential at this point. I recommend a break, whether it is a period of time, or working at a manual task of some sort to clear your head, take a break. The draft I start with is jagged and gnarly, so a pause before starting gives me perspective and a clearer understanding of the story. When I'm

ready, I start rewriting based on the original content of the rough draft and the handwritten notes I've made on the printed copy. This is where I will delete chunks of repetitious text unrelated to the central idea, revising sentences as I type. I find the physical act of making keystrokes shifts my left brain into gear and presents me with a tough-minded critic who will slash an unnecessary storyline and cut whole paragraphs without remorse. Bless her ruthlessness. It's my third typed page, but the piece is a first draft. Save. Print. Take a break. Read and add notes about weaknesses in structure and wording.

D2

Next, I face the task of revision. I let the page cool for as long as I can. When I start making edits, I pay close attention to word usage, grammar and the finer points of the piece, following the basic flow of the previous draft. This is a fairly easy, but sustained pass — the result is likely to be different from the previous draft only in word choice and sentence structure, but I'm still finding my footing and this stage is where it becomes obvious if the piece is working, or not. (Fiction and poetry can remain here, in my personal slush pile until I find its redeeming value.) Save. Print.

D3

If possible, I'll add distance between the second and third drafts. One or two weeks for an article like the one you're reading, several more for a personal essay. The uncompromising editor with her critical eye and love of red ink returns. I ask for her best work. In this third draft, revisions are specific to the objective of the piece. Does the piece fulfil its promise to entertain, to educate? Is the writing clear, engaging? Does the piece offer something to the reader?

Final

A short break between third and final drafts allows unnecessary details, information gaps, or crevices in the storyline to show that I missed in the previous draft where the reader might become confused in extra-long sentences like the one you've just read. I fix those. I trim the word count. And I do all the edits online. Save. Print. Proofread. Enter changes. Repeat. This is the version I'll submit for publication.

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If you're a part-time, weekend writer like I am with as many personal writing projects underway as books on your bedside table, following a writing process allows you to pick up any work-in-progress, and know exactly where you left off no matter how long it's been on hold

What's your process?