

58. The Paradox of How I Write

I am a wasteful writer. I have no trouble writing page after page after page (or poem after poem after poem), yet I always throw away half of that before I'm "finished." I would like to think I am like Michelangelo, chiseling away excess marble so that a masterpiece can emerge from the stone mass. Instead, I will admit I am a careless, wordy rambler who gets carried away with her own words and am consequently forced to discipline myself in retrospect.

Journalistic training was both bane and blessing for this wastefulness. Because deadlines are merciless and inflexible, journalists learn to plan, to write, and to revise at the typewriter. There is never time for leisurely outlines, jot lists, drafts ad infinitum. Precious prose written after a deadline doesn't get printed. Precise length is equally crucial in both newspaper and yearbook, since there is a limited space to fill with the words that do get printed. I remember moaning when my adviser would say, "Cut this to 30 lines." I, of course, had 83 lines of golden prose to reduce by two-thirds. No way!

Yes, way! Journalism also introduced me to copyreading marks that made editing and revising easy, if not painless. Ever since, I have sought the thrill of proofreading and its magical power to bestow second and third and fourth chances.

Then the master magician arrived -- the word processor. I could delete this, rearrange that, insert such-and-such, change single words or entire pages, and still recover my untouched original when my meddling was finished. Soon I cried, "Free! Free at last!" for I could write and rewrite with reckless abandon and STILL print out the pure, unblemished final copy that satisfies my compulsive nature.

Yes, I confess that I am also a compulsively organized writer, regardless of the paradox that implies. Office supply stores are my candy shoppes. I lust for tab dividers, highlighting pens, color-coordinated file folder labels, index cards in assorted sizes, and crisp packages of notebook paper.

I seem to write exposition and poetry best. Paradox, again! I flourish in a literary analysis of Charlotte Brontë's obscure novels or precise student directions for learning projects. Yet, I am equally comfortable and proud of the poetry I have written since the third grade.

There must be some connection between these inclinations and the fact that I am probably at my best in small chunks. I can tinker with a sentence until it becomes a correctly written nightmare for sentence-diagrammers. I can also reduce a fat, sentimental poem to a sleek little sentence or phrase.

Because I tend to focus on these small chunks, I have a horrible tendency to sacrifice meaning for sound. Once I get an alliterative act ambling around I pounce predatorily on properly pronounced words, putting them purposelessly where the sound suits but slaughters sense. I can also become obsessed with parallelism, bewitched by nicely balanced phrases, enamored of coordinate conjunctions, trapped by cumulative constructions, which layer endlessly, adding little meaning, but neatly specifying, introducing irrelevant ideas, disappearing ultimately into the unending sentence.

Finally, I curse all those kindly teachers who mistook correctness for worthiness, attaching smiley faces and A's to properly punctuated and capitalized nonsense. Looking back, I see their casual willingness to accept penmanship as writing as a vicious cruelty. I thought I had been writing WELL when I was only writing correctly. But, of course, that misapprehension was itself corrected in college, and that's another story.