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The Interior View *One Writer's Philosophy of Composition*

The process by which the publishing writer discovers what he has to say and says it has important implications for the student writer.

Yet in the English Department composition course we usually limit ourselves to an exterior view of writing, principally examining what has been written or studying patterns which have been evolved by the analysis of what has been published.

The critic, the scholar, the scientist of language and form, all make contributions to the understanding of writing. We all learn, writers certainly included, from what perceptive readers see in a piece of writing, and we can gain new insights into old problems from such stimulating work as that reported by Dr. Robert Zoellner in his article, "A Behavioral Approach to Writing," which made up the entire January 1969 issue of *College English*. More scholars, using information from the social sciences and the sciences, should be encouraged to contribute to the study of the writing process.

There should be, however, serious consideration of the interior view of composing seen by the practicing writer. Since I am declaring my own philosophy of composition, I have to admit my own subjectivity, my own involvement in the process I am to philosophize about. I have been and I am a

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writer of fiction and non-fiction. I do not see writing from the exterior view but from within my own mind and my own emotions as I try to write every single day of my life.

My personal exploration of the writing process is supported by an almost lifelong study of the testimony of other writers. I can remember going to the Wollaston Public Library and reading what writers had to say about writing before I was in the Seventh Grade. I have certainly read, and unfortunately purchased, most of the bad books about how to write by writers published in the last quarter century. I've also found some significant ones, and what I have read in those books has been reinforced by the testimony of writers I have known.

But my view of composing is frankly personal. The interior view of the writing act reveals that writing is an individual search for meaning in life. As I have written about the process of writing my main resource has been myself.

For months, even before I wrote this paper, I had been trying to capture the essential process of writing in one sentence. I had been writing, rewriting and revising draft sentences to find out what writing looks like when it is not seen from the outside as an act completed, but when it is seen from the inside as a continuing process. Here is my one sentence:

A writer is an individual who uses language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it.

Let's see if we can wriggle into the skin of the writer and explore the meaning of this sentence from that point of view. If this sentence stands up it contains some significant—and very specific—implications for the way we teach composition.

A WRITER IS AN INDIVIDUAL
who uses language
to discover meaning in experience
and communicate it.

At the moment of writing the writer has a fundamental aloneness. Although I have written in the city room, suffered group journalism at Time, worked with a collaborator, I have always found that at the center of the process I am alone with the blank page, struggling to discover what I know so I can know what to say.

The scholar or the historian of writing may know that the writer's belief he can find a new way of saying what he has to say is naive. The academic knows that the problems on the writer's page have all been worked out by other writers. But the writer's illusion of innocence is essential. As Frost said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." If the writer does not feel that through writing he will discover something which is uniquely his, he may soon concentrate on craft rather than content and speak with tricks rather than truth.

The good writer, of course, doesn't write entirely for himself, but he must be self-centered. He accepts criticism if he sees its value. He rejects criticism if it will not help him extricate himself from his immediate writing problem. The writer uses the traditions which work for him, and he rejects the traditions which do not work for him. He seeks praise, and he mistrusts it. He is most hungry for success and most fearful of success.

It has never been easy for the writer to maintain his individuality, and it never will be. Listen to Jane Austen, Andre Gide, e. e. cummings, and Stephen Spender, a fascinating quartet to imagine around your dinner table.

Jane Austen says, "No, I must keep to my own style, and go in my own way; and though I may never succeed . . . I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other."

Gide adds, "Look for your own. Do not do what someone else could do as well as you. Do not say, do not write what someone could say, could write as well as you. Care for nothing in yourself but what you feel exists nowhere else—and out of yourself create . . . the most irreplaceable of beings."

"to be nobody—but—yourself—," e. e. cummings agrees; "in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

Stephen Spender says, "The essential fact about the poet is that he is alone with his experience. He relates the new to the unprecedented, but he does so by instinct and intuition, not by established rule. If a poet works on an image and then attempts to judge the truth of his own lines he does so by asking himself, 'Is this how I really saw or experienced it?' not by asking, 'Is this how some other writer whom I approve of would have described it?'"

A writer is an individual
WHO USES LANGUAGE
to discover meaning in experience
and communicate it.

When you sit at the writer's desk, in the writer's skin, you discover his feeling for language as a living tool. He feels language in his fingers, hears language in his ears, sees language evolving and working on his page. He knows language, no matter how much he delights in this tool, is never an end in itself. It is what the writer uses to lead him to understanding. The painter doesn't paint colors he has seen, he uses color on the canvas to see. The composer uses the notes on the piano to hear. The writer doesn't write down words to photograph what is in his head, he uses words to set an experiment in motion.

Words are put down so he can find out what they reveal when they bump into other words on the page. The writer uses verb and noun, phrase and sentence, paragraph and page, to explore his world. Any usage is appropriate if it is honest and illuminating. The writer toys with language, knowing that out of his most irresponsible word play may come his most responsible writing. His

drafts, both in his mind and on the page, are filled with words, tried out and discarded, arranged and rearranged—evidence of language that is always changing, flexible, usable.

A writer is an individual
who uses language
TO DISCOVER MEANING IN EXPERIENCE
and communicate it.

“I write to find out what I’m thinking about,” says Edward Albee. “Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what one is saying,” adds John Updike. And Robert Creeley agrees, “For myself writing has always been the way of finding out what I was thinking about.”

“The impulse of the pen,” cries Jules Renard, “left alone, thought goes as it will. As it follows the pen, it loses its freedom. It wants to go one way, the pen another. It is like a blind man led astray by his cane, and what I came to write is no longer what I wish to write.”

William Carlos Williams sums it all up: “The poet thinks with his poem.”

When the reader looks at the published piece of writing he sees something which is absolute, and he may feel that what he sees is a piece of thinking which was completed and then copied down by the writer. When the writer looks at a piece of writing he sees the final chart of a voyage of discovery, and he can imagine the expedition which began with a dream, developed through a series of choices, calculations, failures, successes, accidents and is at last completed.

The writer’s basic job is not to say what he already knows but to explore his own experience for his own meaning. His experience may be in the library or in the pub, but at the moment of writing he uses the tool of language to discover the meanings which exist in his experience. As he uses his language to try to put down on the page what he thinks he means he keeps changing the words—he thinks. As his writing develops under his hand his words reveal his meaning, an order evolves as his mind uses language to expose what is significant in his experience.

A writer is an individual
who uses language
to discover meaning in experience
AND COMMUNICATE IT.

During the process of writing the writer has, in a sense, been communicating with himself. And if the words on the writer’s page reveal the writer’s meaning to himself through language, the writer then can reveal what he has discovered to others and practice Orwell’s definition of an effective style, “Good writing is like a windowpane.”

The writer should get out of the way of what he has said and let the

reader see what is left standing where the writer has worked. He doesn’t want the reader to pass through the writer’s own experience of discovery.

To communicate effectively the writer may do some final tinkering and make some adjustments in his words, using specialized analogies, for example, to reach a particular audience. But even in the final editing the professional writer doesn’t look to the language, but through it to what he has to say, not asking, “Is this the attractive word?” as much as, “Is this the accurate word?” The writer doesn’t make adjustments in what he has to say; he doesn’t look to the audience first and write down what the reader wants to hear. The good writer communicates by building—through language—a sturdy discovery of thought.

Now we can look back at the complete sentence to see if it expresses the interior view of the process of composing, a constantly changing, evolving, searching act. If we agree this is what the writer goes through then we may be able to say as clearly and succinctly what the student writer should go through.

A student writer is an individual who is learning to use language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it.

Too often the very word *student* gets in our way, and we forget that the student is simply, first of all, a writer. If he is to write well he has to go through a process similar to the one which the professional writer has found works for him.

I can hear the English teachers ask, “What do a poet’s writing processes have to do with my students who can’t write a literate term paper?” My answer is: everything. The college freshman may learn something about literature and what another man found in life by reading the poem, and he may learn something about writing by discovering how the poem was made. He will probably learn more, however, looking into his own life and writing his own poem.

The interior view of the writing process makes it clear that the writing course should have one central purpose: to allow the student to use language to explore his world. But if the student does learn to write as the published author writes, he will also be able to do a much better job on the term paper. Practical academic skill and, perhaps, commercial skill are the by-products of a workshop which allows the student to experience the process of writing. We tend to forget the hard cash value the world places on art, not even realizing it is doing it. I have been a ghostwriter because I have been a novelist. Industry, government, the university—the holy trinity of our society—continually tries to hire communicators who can discover order through language and, therefore, reveal it.

We may not be able to teach our students to write, but as teachers we can create an environment which will encourage them to pass through the stages of writing necessary for effective written communication.

A STUDENT WRITER IS AN INDIVIDUAL
who is learning to use language
to discover meaning in experience
and communicate it.

There is no one way to write and there is no one way for the student to learn to write. We must accept the individual student and appreciate his individualness. No class can move lock step through a writing sequence which is meaningful. The students do not start at the same place and they do not end at the same place. They do not proceed at a similar pace and they do not follow the same path through the course. A student writer may rewrite on the page or in his head; he may write slowly or swiftly; he may overwrite or underwrite. What is even more confusing, the same student writer, just like the publishing writer, may do all of these things at different times on different writing projects.

It is true that we, veteran teachers, numbed by years of conferences, will see certain patterns of development repeated in our students. These patterns interest us as teachers, but they are not significant to our students. What John Milton did centuries ago or Jimmy Jones did last semester is of surprisingly little immediate help to the student who has to find his own way. The student should know there is a basic process of writing, practiced by most writers, but ultimately he has to learn the process for himself.

The teacher may comfort and encourage the student with the information that other lonely writers have passed the same way, but the teacher should never make the student feel there is one thing to say, one way to think, one way to speak, one work pattern appropriate for every task. The learning writer should always feel he is working towards the one best way he can say what he has to say, listening to hear his own voice speaking his own meaning.

A student writer is an individual
WHO IS LEARNING TO USE LANGUAGE
to discover meaning in experience
and communicate it.

There are no absolutes in language. The student must get away from the idea of right and wrong in usage and develop the feeling that there is language which works and language which doesn't work, and most of the time you only know what works by trying to make it work. The student should discover language is fun because it is a sturdy tool for the exploration of experience. It gives the student writer what he hungers for—a way to find meaning and understanding in his own experience. The student writer should find out for himself that language is purposeful, that it yields a valuable product: thought.

And to yield this product language should be used wastefully, even promiscuously, because it is usually necessary to use the wrong word to get to the right word and to pass through the awkward construction on the way to the graceful one. While John Kenneth Galbraith was working on a book he called

Why People Are Poor, he decided that title was un-descriptive, and he called his manuscript *The Opulent Society*. It was not the right word and Galbraith knew it, but it was getting there. *Opulent* was the necessary wrong word. It was a long step from *Why People Are Poor* to *The Opulent Society*. It was a short step to his celebrated title, *The Affluent Society*.

The exactly wrong word, the clumsy clause, the misplaced modifier, which are too often ruled mistakes in the English course, may be evidence of language being used to lead the mind to meaning. Therefore they are not mistakes in the conventional sense but merely experiments that didn't work, but which may have beneficial side-products. They are only mistakes when they do not communicate the writer's meaning in the final edited draft.

A student writer is an individual
who is learning to use language
TO DISCOVER MEANING IN EXPERIENCE
and communicate it.

The student writer is searching for what is significant in his experience. That is what the writer does and that is what the student does. To allow this search to occur the teacher must realize that not all his students will have the same experience or find the same meaning in the same experience. What is meaningful for the student may not be meaningful for the teacher. And what the teacher believes is significant may have little significance for the student. Too often the most experimental composition course is absolutely rigid because it attempts to impose a theme on an entire class. Our educational system still thrives because there is no one issue which, thank God, has equal relevance to a class of undergraduates meeting at the same hour each week.

As teachers we should, of course, create environments where the student's conclusions are tested. His opinions must be informed and they must stand up after he gets out from under them. But most of all there must be time in the writing course for the process of discovery to take place. The very act of exploration through language adds to the student's experience. He is engaged in a continual process of revision, refinement, definition, and clarification. His words change and therefore his ideas; his ideas change and therefore his words.

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The importance of communication cannot be minimized, for publication before the eyes of the instructor and possibly the class completes a stage in the writing process. When the writer is convinced he has found what he has to say and has said it as well as he can, then he shows it to the reader. And then, when he has seen his own words with a stranger's eyes, he usually decides he has to go back and rediscover just what he has to say. The writing course does not have the usual police pressure of quizzes and grades. The student writer faces a

greater trial. With the publishing writer, he suffers exposure on the page. He is examined by his peers and by his instructor on what he has said, not what he hoped to say.

Through the inevitable self-revelation of the writing course the student discovers a painful essential lesson: you can't write writing. Content always precedes form. If you don't have a subject you won't have a reader; if you don't know what you mean you can't say it; if language does not clarify your own mind it will not clarify your reader's mind.

The interior view of the writing process as it is seen by the publishing writer may challenge the writing teacher to design an educational environment in which his students can make this sentence come alive:

A writer is an individual who uses language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it.