



ANOTHER PAIR OF EYES: WRITING AS A RECIPROCAL PRACTICE

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My first quarter at Evergreen began with a rude awakening: not an earth-shattering crisis, but an epiphany. My professor asked us to journal about what a writing process looks like, a simple in-class assignment I was incapable of completing. No one had ever mentioned to me that writing is—needs—a process, and that each writer’s process is different. Any time I had written a paper in high school, or creatively on my own, it had been in one short, unprocessed burst. For too long I’d romanticized the idea of spontaneous writing, like Kerouac drafting *On the Road* in one night or a jazz musician improvising while performing. Something about this seemed more authentic.

What I really discovered in myself was fear: the fear of committing to a piece of writing. If I labored over a piece intently for days or weeks and it proved to be lousy, then I risked suffering the disappointment of producing a piece of bad writing. But if I busted out a rapid-fire piece of lyrical poetry or an essay for class, and it too was shoddy, there would be no emotional turmoil since I hadn’t truly put much of myself into it.

I made it a goal to build a writing process. Realizing I was going to be working from the ground up, I sought out a friend, who happened to be a tutor at the Writing Center, for guidance. She explained that the Writing Center was a place where tutors could work with me to build that process. After my first few sessions at the Center, I realized that talking with other writers about my work was what my process needed most. By engaging in a dialogue with a writing tutor at each stage of the process, I was able to overcome my overwhelming doubts.

The writing process can be broken down into five stages: brainstorming, drafting, revision, editing, and proofreading, all of which are opportunities to better understand your work through the give and take of conversation. By compartmentalizing the process, I could visualize what a piece of writing could look like at each stage, and recognize how I had previously been smushing all five stages together.

Brainstorming

Often when I begin brainstorming I only have a rough idea of what to write about. By sitting down with a tutor or another writer and starting a dialogue about my ideas, I'm able to suss them out and explore potential avenues worth investigating. Even if you don't have a clue what to write about, getting a conversation going is the best place to start.

At the Writing Center, a tutor can take notes while your mind gushes everything out, allowing both of you to look back and connect your ideas. Mapping these connections into an organized form like an outline is often the last bit of brainstorming for me. The outline is made up of points of interest for my piece, which I then use as a jumping off point for freewriting. This is when I let my mind wander over the page, exploring my ideas as far and wide as possible. There's a certain kind of thinking only accessible through the physical act of writing, and freewriting is a brainstorming technique that often lends most to the piece I'm working on.

Drafting

Drafting is the stage where my work tends to be its most solitary. During this stage I use my outline from brainstorming as a blueprint for my first draft, unloading everything I can say into a word processor. Once everything I can think of at this time has been said, I'm ready to get my dialogue with another writer going again so I can better understand where my concepts are clashing, where I'm too vague, and what information is still missing. At this stage I also look for insight into how successful the structure of my piece is: if my ideas fit together, if they're in line with the outline, or if I need to create another outline for the next draft. Though it can be arduous, there is a freedom at this midpoint where I'm capable of adding and subtracting at will. I can talk with other writers throughout, getting their feedback as I make additions or cut sections.

Revision

The goal of revision is to be able to settle on all of the ideas within your draft. While revising, I seek out the help of another writer in making my concepts interact with one another fluidly. Having another pair of eyes on your work during this stage allows you to see where your ideas are opposing each other. It's easy to believe you've been clear in a piece of writing when all of the ideas are yours and already make sense to you. When I invite a tutor or another writer to give feedback on my draft, they're able to point out where I need to better articulate my ideas and what areas are unclear. By revising with another writer, you can work through these tough spots.

Editing

Once I've established the content of my piece I can begin editing: the process of going through each paragraph and sentence and tuning them up. My ideas may all be there, but am I using the best possible words to convey them? At this point we can finally address issues with grammar and punctuation, because worrying about grammar earlier in the process can get in the way of forming content. I usually have each draft I've written open in separate documents, copying and pasting from each into my current document. I've also come to realize that retyping my draft word-for-word into

a fresh document and editing along the way often yields the best results for me. It can be a bit of a Zen practice, in the same way that freewriting can be. I'm able to labor over each word and better articulate what I'm writing about.

Editing with another writer will build a stronger, more dynamic piece of writing. You can comb through your paragraphs together, word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence, catching what you may not be able to on your own. We often get too close to our work and lose the ability to recognize where we're being too ambiguous or unclear. In those moments it's best to seek out the feedback of other writers.

Proofreading

At this point in the writing process you've nearly wrapped up the entire piece. This last stage, proofreading, is often the most gratifying. Once you're through, you can let the satisfaction of completing your piece of writing wash over you. Proofreading is the process of rereading your work in order to be positive it's as error-proof as humanly possible. Put your and another writer's joint knowledge to use, and read through the piece a few times just to be safe. If it's free of any errors and you're happy with the final product, you're ready to close the book on this one.

Postscript

Before coming into the Writing Center and encountering writing as a reciprocal practice, I was compressing all five stages of the process into that one short burst. I would lose my nerve along the way, getting psyched out by the great multitude of directions a piece of writing can go. I ultimately lacked confidence in my ability to follow through with a piece of writing. Working alongside other writers encourages me to continue forward, makes me aware that my writing has worth, and lifts me out of that psychic gridlock.

My dialogue with other writers has proven to be the crux of my process. What I needed was knowledge of the different stages of writing and a community to share my work with. A writing center isn't the only place cooperative writing relationships happen, though. Groups of friends, or even writers who don't know each other well, can come together to build a community.

If you want to develop a writing process, it's going to take time to figure out what works best for you—a writing process can always be in constant development. I encourage every writer to try out reciprocal writing, to always explore and experiment, to pick the brains of other writers on their processes, and to not stop searching. Since realizing that writing doesn't have to be a completely solitary experience, I've become more confident in my abilities and empowered to write more often. If you're struggling with your writing and want more out of it, working with other writers can help get you where you want to be.