



GETTING A “SENSE” OF WRITING

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You will write differently with different technologies. Try it. With a pencil, you may be careless. You may write quickly, because you can just as quickly erase and correct errors with an eraser and a few more quick strokes. Pencils are good for “drafting” or “brainstorming,” because they make impermanent lines on paper; drafts and brainstorms are intended to be impermanent.

A pen, however, has some limitations, relative to a pencil. Pen marks cannot be erased. (Erasable ink is ugly and not taken seriously by serious writers.) A smoothly gliding pen, a consistent line of ink, a finely penned sentence, these are fine things. But you must get them right the first time. If you have strong, aesthetically pleasing handwriting, a page of handwritten ink can look as immutable as a printed page. But, for some, a messy, angry page of inked scribbles, cross-outs, and marginal comments is more satisfying than either a polished document or an offerased (but well-composed) page of pencil.

The typewriter is an increasingly rare tool for writing. I recommend it highly. You must attack its keys in a way that computer keyboards (especially the ultra-thin Mac keywafer) do not even approximate. A helpful analogy: a typewriter is to a keyboard as a piano is to an electronic keyboard. In one instance, you are faced with a heavy, clunking piece of machinery; in the other, you are faced with a piece of technology that wants to be quiet, unobtrusive, and mysterious (even to you) in its methods. A typewriter inks a page with hammers, a computer does not.

Nonetheless, computers are certainly handy. If you don’t mind immersing yourself in the world of operating systems and RGB for a while, a simple word processor can do wonders with words. By no other manner can you make or unmake a word so quickly as you can with a computer. By no other means can you so quickly copy and paste, edit and publish, insert obscure characters and format. A computer is an efficient writing technology, and with the advent of the internet, a computer makes it easy to type, chat, watch videos, and listen to music all at the same time. Such an experience is wholly different than, say, William Blake’s ideal vision of the writer, sitting in a room large enough for only a desk, and accompanied only by an angelic muse; also different from Marcel Proust’s favorite writing habitat, a padded room.

I have not listed all the technologies for writing. For instance, you might enjoy dictating your words. Most likely, a dictated text will be riddled with stutters and clumsy sentence constructions,

but you may be more frank (and, by extension, more truthful) in speech than you are in writing. Once you have your spoken words on paper, you can easily edit the clumsier parts. You might also compose on a hand-held device, such as a 9-key cellular phone. But you shouldn't. Text messages use T9 “predictive text technology,” which is the technological equivalent of someone finishing not just every sentence for you, but every word. So you see: cell phones are not only rude to bystanders, but to users as well.

Finally, here is some good advice: Disable auto-spell-check (the squiggly red lines) if you're using a word processor. Instead, learn to pay attention to the words you write. When you're uncertain of a spelling, be patient enough to look the word up in a good dictionary. If you let MS Word quickly correct your work, you're less likely to learn anything from your mistake. When you page through a real, fat dictionary, you have time to think about your error and to think of possible spellings. You may even encounter new or related words that you weren't looking for. This is good: when you do this, you're beginning to pay attention to the differences between what you know and what others know. That's how you learn, and that's how you learn to be a good writer regardless of the technology you use.