

- Do I deliver enough
have to DEVELOP

If not, then I will

Reading as a Writer

The writer's first reader is the writer. Too often people forget how much reading is involved in the writing course. It is possible to teach a reading or literature course without writing, but it is impossible to teach writing without reading. The writer must be able to read a draft in such a way that the writer is able to make another draft more effective. This reading while writing is a sophisticated form of reading that is essential to the writing process.

The first problem the student writer faces is achieving enough distance to read what the reader will see on the page, not what the writer hopes is on the page. When young children write they think whatever they put down is wonderful. As they begin to grow, they become less egocentric and more aware of readers. This causes anxiety and, often, paralysis. They go from being proud of everything to being proud of nothing. Writers veer between excessive pride and excessive despair all their lives. It is understandable; writing is a private act with a public result.

The writer must be egocentric to write. It is a profession of arrogance. But then the writer must stand back and become the reader, and that requires an objectivity and distance essential to the craft of writing. Ray Bradbury allegedly puts each manuscript away in a file drawer and takes it out a year after it has been drafted. I don't know any other writer who is organized enough to even consider that technique. Most professionals write the way students write: to deadline. The writer has to develop some methods of distancing that will work in a short period of time. Some ways to achieve distancing include:

- Role-play a specific reader. Become someone you know who is not knowledgeable about the subject you are writing about and read as that person.
- Read fast, as a reader will read.
- Read out loud. Tape-record the piece and play it back, or have a friend read it so that you hear it.
- Have a friend read the piece, asking the friend to tell you what works and what needs work, what is on the page and what needs to be on the page. Be sure to use a friend who makes you want to write when you return to your writing desk.

It's important for the writer to concentrate first on what works. Too often we concentrate only on what is wrong, ignoring what is right. Yet

the most successful revision comes when we identify something that works — a strong voice, a pace that moves the reader right along, a structure that clarifies a complicated subject — and build on that strength.

It is too easy to identify all the things that are wrong and to be discouraged and unable to produce a more effective draft. Of course there will come a time to deal with what is wrong or what doesn't work, but the solutions to the problems in the piece come from the points of strength. What can we do to make the piece consistent with the good parts? What can we do to bring all parts of the piece up to the level of the best parts?

Many pieces of writing fail because the writer does not take advantage of what is already working well in a draft. For example, I may read a draft and feel despair. I'm good at despair. Nothing seems to work. But if I remember my craft I scan the disaster draft and see that, indeed, it is badly organized; that it does include too many undeveloped topics and lacks focus; that its proportions are all wrong — too much description and too little documentation; that the language is uneven, clumsy, stumbling at times and then, yes, there are moments when the language works, when I can hear a clear and strong voice. I read the strong parts aloud and work — cutting, adding, reordering, shaping, fitting, polishing — to make the voice consistent and strong. As I work on the draft line by line, I find I am following the clear sound of the voice I heard in fragments of the draft; I make one sentence clear and direct, and then another, and another. The draft begins to become better organized. I cut what doesn't belong and achieve focus; I pare back the description; I build up documentation. I work on what is most effective in the draft, and as I make that even more effective the writing that surrounds it gets attention and begins to improve.

Notice that the writer really looks for what *may* work. As I attacked my disaster draft, the voice was pretty uneven and downright poor most of the time, but I grabbed hold of those few moments of potential success and took advantage of them. They gave me a clue as to how I might improve the draft, and that was enough to get going. It's hard to look through the underbrush of messed up typography, misspellings, tangled syntax, wordiness, and writing that runs off in five directions at once, to see what might work. But that is what the writer has to do. And the writer can best do it by scanning, reading loosely, looking for what meaning lies behind the tangled text.

Writers have to keep reminding themselves that a draft is an experiment in meaning. In the early stages it's important to get beyond the etiquette of writing to see where the draft is pointing the writer. I'm intrigued by the fact that my students often make the most significant breakthroughs towards meaning where syntax breaks down — and I do too. We are obviously reaching for a meaning that is just beyond our

ability to express. What I have to do and what my students have to do is to identify that potential meaning. Once we know where we are going we may be able to figure out how to get there.

The reading writer also has to see what doesn't work: to recognize that the beginning simply delays and the piece starts on page four, that the first-person piece would be more effective in the third person, that the essay can't say three things of equal importance but has to have one dominant meaning, that the point of view is built on unfounded assumptions, that the draft is voiceless.

The writer reads, above all, to discover the text beyond the draft, to glimpse the potential text which may appear upon passing through the writing process again, and, perhaps, again and again.

Is Revision Always Necessary?

No. The first draft may work well enough for the writer to edit the piece of writing. Revision is sometimes taught as if it were a federal law. It is not. Some pieces of writing are so well planned and rehearsed that they work the first time. Some writers have enough skill that they do not need to rewrite. Newspaper writers, for example, usually just produce first-draft copy. But as they move to magazine or book writing they usually find that they have to revise to achieve the more subtle meanings or rise to the increased writing standards of the new genre. Many writers feel that writing is rewriting. But the decision has to be made by the reading of each draft.

Students should realize that rewriting is not punishment but opportunity. As Neil Simon says, "In baseball you only get three strikes and you're out. In rewriting, you get almost as many swings as you want and you know, sooner or later, you'll hit the ball." Bernard Malamud states, "I love the flowers of afterthought." Revision allows the writer to resee the text and discover in it what the writer did not expect to find.

The Writer's Need for Readers

After I finish a draft that works pretty well, I have to have a reader. I suspect most writers have a small band of special readers that give support and criticism — in that order.

I'm blessed with many writing friends, and I shamelessly exploit them. They know how to nod or grunt and not say too much, to support without undeserved praise, to make a suggestion or two without taking the piece away from me, to tell me what works best for them and what may need work. They are readers who make me itch to get back to my own writing desk and I value them above gold.