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Getting Launched

Writing is very easy. All you do is sit in front of a typewriter keyboard until little drops of blood appear on your forehead.

—Walter W. "Red" Smith

The writer must be in it; he can't be to one side of it, ever. He has to be endangered by it. His own attitudes have to be tested in it. The best work that anybody ever writes is the work that is on the verge of embarrassing him, always.

—Arthur Miller

It's generally recognized that most people have highly individual ways of getting words onto paper. Writers themselves, at least, recognize this, even when their writing manuals don't. Some writers love outlines; others gag over them. Some writers dash off their drafts at high speed; others, known as "bleeders," tend to be mentally constipated or perfectionistic, and refuse to move on from one sentence to the next until the first has been mercilessly flailed. Some writers spend the bulk of their time lavishly researching their subject; others spend the bulk of their time revising—which can also mean doing their research after the fact.

Given our quirky methods of composition, I'm leery of recommending any one way as effective, for the question always becomes, "Effective for

whom?" Each of us finally does the job in the way that best suits his or her temperament and current deadline.

Still, most of us are desperate enough to be always shopping for alternate strategies, bits of which we might later incorporate into our habitual method. That explains why I'm brashly offering yet another approach in the recommendations below. Even if you find only two or three that are right for you, I'll feel justified.

1. Listen to your feelings

Pick a subject that *means* something to you, emotionally as well as intellectually. As in romancing, so in writing: you're most effective when your heart is in it. If you can't honestly say, "Now *this* is something I really think is important," you're a fool to write on it. Take a stroll around the neighborhood; find a coffeehouse or park bench and brood awhile; call up a friend and vent. Do whatever you need to do to figure out what you'd *really* enjoy tangling with, because it's going to define your life for a major hunk of time, isn't it? Eventually you'll come up with a subject, or a new angle on the old subject, that ignites your interest.*

If you feel in good spirits, you might consider writing what's called an "appreciation"—of a person, an event, a character, a book, a locale, or whatever. Share your sense of delight; let yourself sing. If, on the other hand, you feel combative, consider writing a salty dissent à la Maureen Dowd or H.L. Mencken. Whatever your inclinations, *turn your feelings to account*—work in harmony with them, actively tap them. If you ignore your real feelings, which is perilously easy to do, or if you try to write with just your head, the result will be phony, bloodless prose, and the labor of writing may be excruciating. You'll feel like you're performing an intellectual minuet.

But all this is too abstract. We need examples—models of prose that crackles with emotional electricity. A fount of them was Pauline Kael, the celebrated, and now retired, film critic for *The New Yorker.* Ms. Kael was

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*Experience speaks here. Late one night, years ago, when I was already some four months into writing my dissertation, I looked up from the typewriter and found myself thinking, "Do you really want to be known as the world's expert on [my chosen subject]?" My instant answer, voiced aloud, floored me: "No!" "Well, then," I challenged myself, fighting panic, "what would you *really* like to work on?" After several minutes I knew, and immediately set to it, charged with excitement and energy. Those two questions changed my life.

one writer who never failed to turn her feelings to account. She was that rare creature: someone who thinks passionately. Her reviews—always dead honest—smoked with emotion. An excerpt will illustrate the point and perhaps induce you to read the book in which it's collected, *Deeper Into Movies*—among 13 she's published. Here's one of Kael's patented 500-pound bombs, dropped on *The French Connection:*

> The noise of New York already has us tense. [*The French Connection*] is like an aggravated case of New York: it raises this noise level to produce the kind of painful tension that is usually described as almost unbearable suspense. But it's the same kind of suspense you feel when someone outside your window keeps pushing down on the car horn and you think the blaring sound is going to drive you out of your skull. This horn routine is, in fact, what the cop does throughout the longest chase sequence. The movie's suspense is magnified by the sheer pounding abrasiveness of its means; you don't have to be an artist or be original or ingenious to work on the raw nerves of an audience this way—you just have to be smart and brutal. The high-pressure methods that one could possibly accept in Z because they were tools used to show the audience how a Fascist conspiracy works are used as ends in themselves. Despite the dubious methods, the purpose of the brutality in Z was moral—it was to make you hate brutality. Here you love it, you wait for it—that's all there is. I know that there are many people—and very intelligent people, too—who love this kind of fast-action movie, who say that this is what movies do best and that this is what they really want when they go to a movie. Probably many of them would agree with everything I've said but will still love the movie. Well, it's not what I want, and the fact that Friedkin has done a sensational job of direction just makes that clearer. It's not what I want not because it fails (it doesn't fail) but because of what it is. It is, I think, what we once feared mass entertainment might become: jolts for jocks. There's nothing in the movie that you can enjoy thinking over afterward—nothing especially clever except the timing of the subway-door-and-umbrella sequence. Every other effect in the movie—even the climactic car-versus-runaway-elevated-train chase—is achieved by noise, speed, and brutality.

To summarize: It's impossible to write electric prose like this without strong emotion to energize your thinking, so pick a subject you have a stake in and write about it just as candidly as you know how. Even if the essay you end up with has serious faults, they're likely to seem pardonable. Most readers will forgive much when they encounter prose that breathes feeling and conviction. Why? They so rarely encounter it.

But what if the topic is *assigned*? What if you have no chance to "pick a subject you have a stake in"? Ah, then you have to *create* a stake in it. You do that by learning your subject cold—by going after it aggressively, like an intellectual conquistador, and treating it as a challenge to your powers of imagination, curiosity, and open-mindedness. The deeper into it you go, of course, the more you have to work with, right? And the more in command you get to feel, too. Eventually, you find yourself ready to teach others what you have learned—and to make it downright interesting for them. You can do that in part just by keying on what you found interesting. Maybe that's your angle right there.

I recommend we take a moment here to think about Russell Page, perhaps the finest landscape architect that England has produced, at least in the 20th century. Virtually *all* of Mr. Page's projects were "assigned" (commissioned), and often in the most unpromising locales—a marshland, say, or a windswept highland, or a property far too wide and far too shallow. Yet he managed to turn out one elegant landscape after another—truly gorgeous things. How? Mainly his attitude. "Limitations imply possibilities," he wrote in *The Education of a Gardener.* "A problem is a challenge." Isn't that a beautiful way to view things?

I also recommend that we take a moment to think about my old boss at *The Buffalo News,* the newspaper I worked for during the summer following my freshman year in college. As a cub reporter, I got to start off in the time-honored way—writing "obits" (obituaries), sometimes as many as four a day. After two weeks of this fare, I finally summoned the courage to approach my boss—the silver-haired, rather crusty city editor—and ask him when I was going to get some decent story assignments for a change. "Listen, young man," he growled at me, "nothing you write for this paper will ever get read as carefully as what you're writing right now. The relatives of these folks will notice every single error. You get a date or address wrong, they'll spot it. You get a name misspelled, they'll spot it. And they'll resent it, too, you can betcha. But they'll also be grateful if you do justice to their grandpa or mother or whoever it is. They'll put your prose in *laminate,* son. Look, I don't want to discuss this anymore with you." And with that he picked up his editing pencil and went back to work. So did I—and with an entirely new attitude. I pledged myself to start writing obits that deserved that laminate. And I quickly found that the more I learned about these just-departed strangers—through extra phone calls, extra questions—the more I cared about them, and the more I wanted to honor them. I ended up actually liking to write obits. It was a powerful lesson for me.

2. Start small

Once you've chosen your general subject, trim it down to size. You want something manageable, something of reasonable scope. A small garden well tended is far more comely than a large garden that shows overambition. So, too, with essays. It's better to start small and grow big than to start big and maybe grow overwhelmed.

You'll delimit your subject in part simply by asking yourself how you want to treat it. But at this point everything is speculative because, if you're like most writers, you'll find out what you think—and want to know, and need still to know—only through writing about it. *The process itself is your teacher.* Listen to some pros here:

> How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?
> —E.M. Forster

> Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.
> —E.L. Doctorow

> I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering.
> —Robert Frost

> There is always a point in the writing of a piece when I sit in a room literally papered with false starts and cannot put one word after another and imagine that I have suffered a small stroke, leaving me apparently undamaged but actually aphasic.
> —Joan Didion

> I don't write easily or rapidly. My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find out what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn't work, or what simply is not alive. . . . I am profoundly uncertain about how to write. I know what I love or what I like, because it's a direct, passionate response. But when I write I'm very uncertain whether it's good enough. That is, of course, the writer's agony.
> —Susan Sontag

> Sometimes you get a line, a phrase, sometimes you're crying, or it's the curve of a chair that hurts you and you don't know why, or sometimes you just want to write a poem, and you don't know what it's about. I will fool around on the typewriter. It might take me ten pages of nothing, of terrible

writing, and then I'll get a line, and I'll think, "That's what I mean!" What you're doing is hunting for what you mean, what you're trying to say. You don't know when you start.

—Anne Sexton

I write in the morning. . . . Then, after all the [dinner] dishes are moved away, I read what I wrote that morning. And more often than not, if I've done nine pages I may be able to save two and a half, or three. That's the cruelest time, you know, to really admit that it doesn't work. And to blue pencil it.

—Maya Angelou

I write to find out what I'm talking about.

—Edward Albee

I am an obsessive rewriter, doing one draft and then another and another, usually five. In a way, I have nothing to say, but a great deal to add.

—Gore Vidal

Delay is natural to a writer. He is like a surfer—he bides his time, waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in. Delay is instinctive with him. He waits for the surge (of emotion? of strength? of courage?) that will carry him along. I have no warm-up exercises, other than to take an occasional drink. I am apt to let something simmer for a while in my mind before trying to put it into words.

—E.B. White

3. Stockpile data

After you've staked out a promising subject and think you know what you want to do with it, you'd be wise to follow E.B. White's example: delay a bit. Let things cook. Meanwhile, though, you can be very productive by stockpiling stuff—facts, quotes, parallels, ironies, puzzlements, gut impressions . . . Principally *facts,* though, because readers like to be *taught,* and they invariably prefer the concrete to the abstract. Here, if I may offer a humble example, is something from a description assignment that I once wrote for my Advanced Expository Writing seminar. It grew out of this very data-gathering I'm extolling. I figured my troops might welcome precise numbers about Hemingway's sentence length, so I performed a few

minutes' worth of word-counting—and taught myself something in the bargain:

> Although Hemingway is celebrated for his short sentences, he was equally at home with long ones. In fact, five consecutive sentences in his story "On the Blue Water" run 23, 109, 55, 58, and 60 words, and rank among the best he ever wrote.

That second sentence is mostly data.

Facts, of course, are important to you, too. You know from experience that your best writing occurs when you're confident that you have enough data—particularly enough *solid* data. Confidence and preparation are, practically speaking, almost synonymous. Moral: If you have just enough solid data, you don't have enough; with a big surplus, you're primed to write.

4. Pose some tough questions

To generate facts and ideas, *formulate a variety of questions,* both general and specific, such as a tough examiner might ask—Why? Who? How? When? Where?—and bombard your subject with them.* As you do, begin *sketching out tentative answers to them* in the form of mini-paragraphs. For this purpose, especially when I'm away from my computer, I like to use a cheap pad of 5-by-8-inch slips, bought at any stationer's, rather than 8½-by-11-inch standard sheets. Being half as large, they're far less threatening and much easier to flip through later. (Don't confuse 5-by-8 slips with the still-smaller 3-by-5 cards. The slips are sold in gummed pads; the little 3-by-5 cards, made of pricey card stock, are sold in packs and are impractical except for recording bibliographical data.)

Each time you formulate a question, take a fresh slip, write the question at the top, skip a space or two, and jot down whatever ideas occur to you. Use as many slips as you need for each question, but be sure to write out the question at the top of each new slip, and number the slips relating to each question to avoid confusion later.

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*Thomas Griffith, former editor of *Life* magazine and a superb writer, would appear to agree: "I work better professionally when my views are crowded and challenged, for I recognize that out of antagonism comes quality, which is why the best sculptures are of marble, not of soap."

Suppose you are a psychology major who has decided to write an essay explaining the behavior of Martha in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* One of your slips might look like this:

> How does Martha protect herself from feeling pain and alienation? (1)
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> (1) She smothers any recognition of her father's lifelong indifference toward her (see p. 225) by vocally worshipping him—a good example of what psychologists term "reaction formation."
> (2) "I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities," she confesses (p. 189). Two probable reasons: to reassure herself that she is lovable and to discharge her strong masochistic feelings (e.g., "I disgust me," p. 189).
> (3) She externalizes that self-contempt—and feeds her insecurity—by loudly ridiculing her husband George.
> (4) She uses liquor to drown the pain. She's now an alcoholic: George remarks that she "can't get enough" liquor (p. 224).
> (5) She fancifully invents a child—a son—to bring beauty and meaning into her barren life. The son is one person who is all her own, to use as she wishes: to love and be loved by.

Note that each of the five points could be developed further in later slips and could eventually become a separate paragraph of your essay.

Keep at it until you have formulated and framed answers to maybe ten questions. Then collect the slips like cards in a pack and mull them over. As you reread them, keep shuffling the sequence of questions, forcing your mind to confront different combinations of ideas. From these different combinations you'll find unexpected contrasts and similarities. These, too, you should jot down, along with whatever new significant details and apt quotations suddenly appear in your brain. Remember, your object is to *accumulate data.* Data function like fuel for the brain. The more fuel you supply, the hotter and easier it will burn.

This system of prewriting, you'll discover, has two major virtues. One is psychological, and pretty clever to boot: it enables you to write much of your paper before you begin writing it. By writing under the guise of doing something else (i.e., gathering data), you aren't so likely to choke. The other virtue is organizational: you have convenient places to store your ideas, plus

an easy way to retrieve and arrange them. (Years ago, I witnessed a colleague, Professor Ernest Lovell, write an *entire book* on 5-by-8 slips. It turned out it was the sole method he ever used, and he swore by it.)

5. Get an organizing principle—a thesis

The next step is to decide which of your ideas is the meatiest, the most comprehensive. What you want at this point is an idea to try out as the organizing principle of your essay—something that at least feels like a *thesis*. And what is a thesis? It's a viewpoint, a contention. A good thesis, I would argue, is above all *arguable*—that is, not everyone will agree with it. But please understand that it won't necessarily concern a "right/wrong" issue (e.g., *OK, so which is right? Is New York the greatest American city, or only the new Bedlam?*) Often it will concern whether something is urgent or not urgent, interesting or not interesting, a good way to do something or a not-so-good way to do something, a can-we-achieve-this issue or a can-we-not-achieve-this issue. Whatever your position, it should involve some conviction, preferably bold, that even skeptics will approach with curiosity, if only to see how biased/benighted/boring you'll prove to be. Your job, of course, is to convince them otherwise! That is always the grand challenge in writing, isn't it: *to bring people around*—to teach them, amuse them, inspire them, goad them, charm them, awaken them, convince them.

Remember: Your thesis is *not* your subject. It's your *take* on your subject. And it's what you'd have *us* think and feel about it, too. In the real world, it's a letter to the editor.

You won't know how truly promising your thesis is until you try it out, of course, but you have to start somewhere, so find that provisional organizing principle and then sift through your remaining ideas to find a logical direction for the essay to take. Think of your essay as a *story*, which in a sense it will be. Try to imagine for it a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

6. Imagine a good audience

Even if we're writing for an audience of one—a professor, say, or a firm's supervising partner—we can *choose* how we wish to envision that person. Let's say your audience is Professor Starbird. You already know, or think you know, certain things about him, and it will probably pay you

to keep them in mind. For example, if he has, like me, definite expectations about how he likes papers formatted—the title styled this way, the quotes cited that way, etc.—you need to respect those requirements. You'd be crazy not to, especially if he'd made a good case for them.

But after a certain point you need to *create* your audience. You need to envision Professor Starbird in a way that frees you to be the kind of person, on paper, that you want and need to be if you are to write and think your best. In my own writing, I normally try to follow the same advice I'll be giving you later, in the chapter on "Readability": I envision my reader—no matter who it is—as a companionable friend with a warm sense of humor and a love of simple directness. That's how I'm envisioning you right now. But even if I'm wrong, you might *become* that way during this "conversation." (People often act as they're treated.) And even if you won't *ever* become my ideal reader, I still need you (or my image of you) to be that way if I am to be the way *I* need to be in order to write in a way I can respect. Make sense?

7. Freewrite a "zero draft"

Now that your mind is properly primed, you're ready to try a rough draft. That very phrase, "rough draft," draws a smile from me now, for I made a career in college of writing just one draft of everything. But I never took a writing course, either, or got assigned a book like this one, so I had to clear my own path through the woods. If you have time for two or three rough drafts, write them, of course. (This book—in its original edition—went through eight drafts, so it's clear that somewhere I discovered the value of afterthoughts.) But even if you don't have time for them, I recommend you at least make time for a zero draft. A "zero draft" is my term for a throwaway—a piece of freewriting that allows you to warm up, get into the flow, work past your inhibitions, bust through your writer's block, etc. This will take just 20 minutes. Surely you can afford that. And of course you don't have to throw it away later—you just need to pretend that you will.

Here's what you do:

Take one last, leisurely look at your 5-by-8 slips, get a reasonably clear sense of what it is you think you want to say, then resolutely put the slips out of sight and begin *talking* out your thoughts on paper as if you were explaining a concept to a friend. Imagine that it's me. Imagine I've just said to you, "Now let me hear *your* understanding of it," and imagine you're replying.

Begin anywhere. (The beginning will change later anyway; it nearly always does, even for gifted writers.)* *I recommend you use the same starting formula for each zero draft.* Simply write the words "Well, it seems to me that . . ." and go from there. You'd also be smart to put a watch in front of you and set yourself a limit of 20 minutes (which you're free to extend, of course, if you get on a roll). This will force you to scribble freely instead of compose.

Never let yourself pause more than a second or two between sentences, and *don't censor your thoughts.* Just let them come out as they want to—they're all tentative anyway. *The key thing is to keep everything moving.* After a bit of babble you'll find yourself starting to make sense. Even then, of course, you can count on running into new mental logjams, but don't panic. Simply force your pen (or your typing fingers) to nakedly record all the confusion and inarticulateness you're feeling. For example: *"I seem to have stalled out here. The words don't want to come. Where on earth can I go with this point?"* One of three things will happen: the problem will gradually work itself out merely through the act of verbalizing it; you'll stumble on an important new insight; or you'll discover something about your argument that you need to know—for instance, that it doesn't hold up in its present shape. A final point: Use your own voice, your own conversational idiom, not the puffed-up language of academe. If you start reaching for fancy language, you'll defeat the whole purpose of this warm-up exercise.

8. Critique your draft

Once you've finished, take a break—the longer, the better—and then come back and read your draft critically. See whether you still like your thesis—or even believe it anymore. Consider how you might enrich it. Determine which ideas have promise and which look extraneous or fuzzy. Ask yourself whether one of those ideas might be the embryo of a still stronger thesis than your original one. Underline phrases that please you. Try to find places in your argument that need further support. Then go back and ponder your 5-by-8 slips again. Check off points you've made in the paper and underline points you need to incorporate. Mentally file them away for the next draft.

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*For gifted composers, too. Poet Stephen Spender tells us: "Beethoven wrote fragments of themes in notebooks which he kept beside him, working on and developing them over years. Often his first ideas were of a clumsiness which makes scholars marvel how he could, at the end, have developed from them such miraculous results."

9. Freewrite again for 45 minutes

Now, time permitting, you're ready to begin again. If your writer's temperament permits, follow the same procedure outlined in item #7. Put the first draft and your 5-by-8 slips out of sight—well, most of them, anyway!—and let yourself write a new version. This time allot yourself 45 minutes. Take care that you don't start slowing up, for *rapid writing encourages the mind to function freely.* Remember, many of your best ideas lurk in your unconscious. If you slow down to edit what you've written, you'll put an airtight lid on those thoughts and begin experiencing the agonizing "blocked" feeling we're all familiar with. Blockage occurs when the creative process gets short-circuited by the picky critical process. Experience will teach you that the two involve different departments of the mind and function best when kept separate from each other. I like the way a colleague, Professor Betty Sue Flowers, once put it:

> You have to let the madman out. The madman has got to be allowed to go wild. Then you can let the architect in and design the structure. After that, you can have the engineer come in and put it together. And then you let the janitor in to clean it up. The problem is, most people let the janitor in before they let the madman out.

10. Tinker to get the words right

After you've read through your second draft you'll have a gut feeling as to whether a third is needed. Don't be alarmed if it is—most professional authors regularly count on cranking out a half dozen drafts, or more. They're refining, ever refining. If a third rough draft isn't required, you're ready to begin writing in earnest: this is the *editing* stage, otherwise known as revising. (Or—to the happy reviser, like me—*tinkering.*) By this point you've pretty much answered the Big Question—or you're getting close, at any rate:

"What am I really trying to say in this piece?"

The object now is to find the words that best express your answer—and the organization that gives it the smoothest delivery.