

Who, What, When, and Where of Writing Rituals

A quieted mind. A lucky sweater. The right setting. Details such as these come to light when the authors of this article consider the nature of writing rituals. Aside from noting the detail of these ritual acts, the team focuses on the power that rituals seem to lend to the act of writing—and what we might glean from that relationship in regard to the creative process.

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Ask anybody who writes what really goes on before the pen touches the page or the words begin to appear on the computer screen, and you are likely to hear stories about staring out a window, holding a stuffed animal, sitting in a particular chair, or rising before the rest of the world awakes. To an outsider such actions may appear pointless, but writers know that following certain patterns can be critical if they are to get started and keep going.

Take walking. Dorothy and William Wordsworth (sometimes with Coleridge in tow), roamed for miles in search of poems and prose, as did Henry James, Virginia Woolf, A. E. Housman, and Wallace Stevens. And then there's the matter of writing tools. Hearsay has it that William Least Heat Moon needed to write with cedar pencils made by Native Americans. Gail Goodwin tells how she works:

At a nice teak desk, long and wide, on which I keep a collection of special

things: crisp new legal pads and No. 2 pencils with good erasers that don't leave red smears . . . an earth-colored ceramic box in which I keep a beechnut I picked up from Isak Dinesen's grave in Denmark and a piece of rock I picked up near D. H. Lawrence's shrine in Taos, New Mexico. (quoted in Murray 1983, 53)

May Sarton liked to listen to music when she worked, but only eighteenth-century music. "I find that the romantics don't work for me," she said. "I love them to listen to, but not to work with" (quoted in Saum 1986, 97). Other writers come alive at particular times of the day or night. Katherine Anne Porter said she preferred "to get up very early in the morning and work. I don't want to speak to anybody or see anybody. Perfect silence" (quoted in Murray 1983, 29).

Intrigued by the arcane practices of professionals, four colleagues of the National Writing Project of Acadiana (Louisiana) decided to investigate how

less-experienced writers begin and sustain the act of writing and what their stories suggest about effective classroom practice. We distributed questionnaires and held personal interviews with over one hundred writers ranging in age from elementary school students through septuagenarians. These writers write for a variety of purposes (professional, personal, assigned) and for different audiences (personal, academic, technical). Some of the writers are college professors, two were professional novelists, two more practicing journalists; several are family members of the investigators, and others are college students and school children. Their answers indicate that regardless of sex, nationality, genre, or age, rituals are an integral part of a writer's creative process.

Types of Writing Rituals

The rituals our writers described primarily involve their environment, time, and behavior—three circumstances that can be manipulated to help make the writing happen. Compulsive and eccentric,

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irrelevant and trivial, rituals built around these three elements seem to foster conditions that reduce writing anxiety, promote a sense of power and control, and enhance linguistic fluency. As a result, they can be helpful not only for novice writers who have not yet found their own strategies for getting started and maintaining momentum, but also for teachers of composition who seek to help their students find more effective writing processes.

Environment. The successful rituals of the writers we surveyed and interviewed usually took place in defined spaces. Eight-year-old Alyce, for example, described her writing space as “a nest” that she builds before she starts to write a story. Randall, age nineteen, told us, “How my room looks is important. It has to be piled with clothes, papers, and books if I’m going to get anything done.” But Melanie, also nineteen, reported, “I can’t write if everything is messy. All the closet doors have to be shut and every drawer closed. If everything isn’t picked up, I have to do it before I can start writing.” One person’s nest, it seems, can prove another person’s distraction.

However, regardless of the specific character of a writer’s “nest,” writers seem to agree that they want to work in the same place regularly. By returning to a particular room or to a specific table, the writer grows familiar with her surroundings. She knows what to expect, leaving her free to focus on the work itself. Sara, fourteen, equips her room with extra accessories to cope with the pressures of creating prose: “I write in my room, sitting on pillows. I sit and stare at the wall and talk to myself about my paper and how much I don’t want to write it. I throw the pillows around and punch them. . . . I

just need a pillow under me or by my side or across the room.”

And then there’s the sense stimulation variable. Katherine Anne Porter may benefit from silence, but Jeannine, a college freshman, said, “I can’t write without noise. If I don’t have rock on the radio, I just listen to the noises around me.”

Like William Heat Least Moon and Gail Goodwin, some writers spoke of filling their environments with tools and other special objects that eventually were looked upon as having semimagical powers. A lucky clipboard where a professor had written published articles became more like a talisman than a writing tool. “My old clipboard has been my writing buddy for years,” he said. “Some good stuff has started there, so I just carry it around with me when I’m working on a piece. It’s worked before, so maybe it’ll work again.” As a symbol, and all rituals have symbols, it reminded the writer of previous writing successes. As a charm, surely it would provide good fortune once more.

Time. Rituals that are time oriented either limit the length of an act or dictate when it is performed. Limits are important because an open-ended time frame can be intimidating, even paralyzing. The writer who sets (and sticks to) prescribed beginnings and endings can say with assurance, “This will end soon.” Chris, age seventeen, explains, “I need the clock in the bathroom. I listen to it click.” This gives him some idea of how long he has been at the act of writing and how much longer he will need to stay at it. Clarence, a teacher, writer, and editor for many years, writes from 4 A.M. until he hears the thunk of the newspaper on the doorstep. “Then it’s time to cut back on the coffee, put

down the pen, and concentrate on croissants and the mornings news,” he says. But for every early morning writer there’s likely another that doesn’t begin writing until the wee hours. Mary Ann, an adult professional, begins writing when the day ends. “It’s the time,” she says, “that the concerns of the day are put aside. There’s nothing but me and the words.”

Sometimes a time for writing is less a choice than a necessity. Roxanne, a professional woman, a mother, and a writer, was not finding much time for her writing. Then she began to make a ritual of the ten-minute bus ride to and from work. “My writing time,” she says, “began at 8:30 A.M. each day when the bus pulled up and resumed at 5:30 P.M. in the afternoon when I made the trip home. I wrote a whole short story in these fifteen-minute intervals.” Writing at a scheduled time each day (or night) makes the act of writing a normal, routine act of one’s daily life.

Behavior. The behaviors of the writers we surveyed can be described as rehearsed (as opposed to spontaneous), repetitious, and seemingly unrelated to the work at hand. They were, that is, ritualistic. Although outsiders might view these behaviors as highly idiosyncratic—even bizarre—to the persons performing them they were simply ways to work. Consider sixteen-year-old Andrea, who says, “I have to be sitting to write. My brain works harder I think. I have to be drinking a tall glass of Coke with about eight cubes of ice. When I write and stop, I’ll grab my glass and take a drink. Let myself do something else. Think for a moment. Take a drink. Boom—idea.” Ritualistic behavior can also involve mundane, routine, even monotonous actions, such as sharpening pencils, vacuuming the carpet,

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making coffee. In any case, they are repeated and practiced acts that require little conscious awareness. They can be carried out without direct attention.

By involving the senses in low levels of awareness, leaving the mind free to deal with more important matters, they promote mental states conducive to problem solving or creativity. As Flower and Hayes point out, mental procedures such as memory search, planning, and goal setting may occur when

a person is seemingly inactive or engaged in an unrelated activity (1981, 40).

Effects of Writing Rituals

Although it is interesting to note the types of writing rituals people use, more intriguing and significant questions can be asked about their effects. What needs do they serve? What satisfactions do they provide? We saw three positive results. The stories our writers told us pointed to the use of rituals to reduce writing anxiety, increase power and control over the process, and enhance fluency.

Reducing Anxiety. The effort to write is inherently anxiety making. In some writers, it can cause a creative block or lead to debilitating procrastination. The problem is not surprising since writers must move from heaps of unorganized, perhaps even contradictory, perceptions, memories, and propositions to a clearly focused statement of what they think about a topic. To allay all that anxiety, writers, like other human beings trying to cope with more than they can handle, develop rituals to promote self-confidence. The process seems to work for

three main reasons: rituals are familiar, automatic, and often productive of a hypnotic—that is, a dreamlike—state.

By surrounding themselves with familiar objects that have produced comfortable feelings in the past, a writer can establish

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a protected zone. For example, when Catherine, a middle school teacher, curls up in her familiar La-Z-Boy chair—“I’m really short, [and] my feet don’t touch the floor”—she is set to write. Presumably, that chair has given her the same comfort on occasions when she wasn’t writing. But it’s also possible to create this sense of security without relying on a prop. Sixteen-year-old Katie invokes another rehearsed behavior. She told us, “When I write, I usually sit down cross-legged, and I have to be cold.” Katie does not explain why she needs to be cold. She probably doesn’t even know why, but if a lower temperature helps her get words on paper, well, that’s reason enough.

For most writers, the act of composing takes them into unfamiliar mental terrain, so it is not unusual for a writer to want to step back to a familiar base camp during the process. Often, this involves them in an activity totally unrelated to writing. Warren, fourteen, says, “If I get really stuck, I get up and play with the dog, get a drink of water, or watch TV.” Jacob, a graduate student, says, “In between spurts of writing, I do realistic things, like wash

clothes, clean sinks, or organize dresser drawers.”

Some rituals help to allay anxiety because they take advantage of an open, receptive mental circumstance known as a hypnotic state, a condition of drowsiness usually experienced before or after sleeping, a time when the conscious mind is not fully in control and thus cannot reject ideas too quickly. It usually involves sitting quietly and staring off into space, engaging in what

is commonly called daydreaming. Richard, thirteen, explains its value: “I get in a quiet place and let my brain flow.” Jacob, twenty-two, says that he does his best writing in his head as he drifts off to sleep. Drew, seventeen, explains, “Probably my best writing begins in school or at home in a quiet room. It helps me if I’m alone, but if I get in a zone, I can’t even tell if anyone is around.”

Increasing Power and Control. At one time or another, all writers suffer from a sense of not being in charge of the process. This may result from someone else’s making all the rules (assignments, spelling conventions, deadlines) or from the writer herself feeling she is being pulled in too many directions or unable to move in any direction at all. Even professional writers complain of wrestling with characters or of days when the right words just don’t come to mind.

Writing rituals can provide a degree of control. They are usually practical because they are derived from what seems to work best, but when the need for success is particularly high, or when the situation is especially ungovernable, rituals may

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incorporate elements of superstition and magic. Even if one does not believe in magic, using it tends to promote a sense of being in control.

Baseball players, for example, are notorious for their irrational attempts to influence a game's outcome. During a sixteen-game winning streak in 1954, the New York Giants wore the same clothes in each game without washing them for fear that good fortune might be washed away with the dirt. Taboos may cause players to reject a number worn during an unsuccessful season, and everyone knows that you do not mention a no-hitter while one is in progress.

Writers' attempts to manage a situation by connecting superstitions to environment, time, or behavior are no less arcane than those of baseball players, and the purpose is the same: to have a positive effect on the outcome of their efforts. Many such practices have to do with eating (or not eating) before, during, or after writing. Jane, a college professor, says: "I always pour myself a cup of coffee or a glass of tea before I begin. Later, I realize that I haven't touched it, but I had to know it was there when I started." Marianne, twelve, always eats before beginning a piece because, she says, "It gets my brain to work." Many superstitious rituals have to do with the position of the writer's body. Sarah, eleven, says, "I have to [sit cross-legged]. I feel more in control than when I'm all sprawled out. I can't lie on my stomach."

Fetishes, charms, and other objects possessing magical powers are common among writers. These items are particularly useful when portable: certain colors of ink, specific types of paper or notebooks, a lucky pen. Other items involve a certain amount of advance planning to get

them to the right place at the right time. Wherever Rodericka, fourteen, is writing, she likes to have a picture of her boyfriend in sight. Chris, fifteen, feels the need to have a deck of Bulldog playing cards with him. Jennifer, eleven, needs to have "Pookie" near by. She says, "Pookie, my stuffed puppy, gives me lots of help. If I look into his eyes, ideas pop into my mind like magic." Artifacts from earlier successful writing ventures are often carried over into subsequent attempts. Jacob, the graduate student, likes to have a copy of a journal that has published him by his side, "as it boosts my confidence and reminds me that I am capable of writing."

Finally, some writers simply trust to luck. Catherine, fourteen, opens her thesaurus, letting it fall open to a page. Some word will catch her attention and get her started. The process has to be carried out when she is alone, however. If anyone is watching, the magic will not work. Rachel, thirteen, keeps her window open "so I can hear sounds to get ideas from."

Obviously, the rituals and the magic do not make pitches travel faster or more accurately. Neither will they by themselves cause a piece of writing to be more effective. However, no matter how silly they may seem, rituals can function in a positive way by giving their practitioners a sense of control, thereby becoming a legitimate aid to the writing process. That is not to say that all of the variables faced by writers, teachers of writing, and their students can ever be managed. Even professional writers are subject to non-negotiable deadlines, and teachers must contend with a host of classroom realities that they would like to change but cannot. Nevertheless, rituals can serve to reassure anxious writers that they are more in

charge of what happens than they might think.

Enhancing Fluency. Writers who have established rituals use them to enhance their fluency. For some, these rituals make beginning easier and writing blocks less threatening. Using a variety of terms, numerous researchers have theorized that a physical text begins not in words but as a spark in the writer's mind, making what eventually becomes a text initially nonverbal, only a vague perception of things. The stories told by our writers illustrate those amorphous beginnings. Katie, twenty-two, says:

When I was living at home, in high school and most of college, I would go into the study and sit in the orange chair and light a candle and sit and stare, in perfect silence. I could always count on this to bring on the state of mind I needed to help me think, to sort of go into a trance and blank everything out around me. I would just write down my thoughts as they came to me.

Ruby, a seventy-three-year-old grandmother, says, "If you want me to tell you some stories about when I was a little girl, you're going to have to get me some beans to snap. I get my best stories that way." Brian, fourteen, gets his sense of what he wants to write when out of doors at his family's camp. "Sitting and staring into the fire gives me ideas. It's easy to think out there," he says. Harriet, now a thirty-year-old writer herself, muses, "I remember my mama, sitting in the car on long trips, with her knitting in her lap, clicking those needles and spinning out story after story." Drawing, a particularly nonverbal activity, is a frequent starting place for writers. As Sarah, twelve, explains, "In third grade, I started

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drawing this girl. I named her Alice, and so I started writing stories about her.”

Such stories indicate that rituals are clearly part of early, preverbal activity. By freeing the mind to roam uncritically through possibilities before it finds its meaning, they assist writers in locating the seed from which a text will grow. They prepare the writer for what will follow.

Once the writing has begun, there is always the possibility that it will come to a halt, but if rituals can make beginning easier, they should also be helpful in overcoming blocks and procrastination. The stories our writers told indicate that even many of the less experienced are aware that ritualistic activities can help them keep going or restart. Emiko, ten, says: “Chewing Wrigley’s spearmint gum usually keeps me going, but I tap my feet or move my legs really fast when I get stuck.” Drew, seventeen, explains: “I move my legs, bounce up and down—the ideas just come. If I’m really churning and getting into something, I stay focused and keep writing.”

Recommendations

This study of writing rituals and who practices them to what effect has made us aware that some of the routines practiced by fledgling and professional writers alike are those least tolerated in many classrooms. They violate the environment, schedules, and behaviors imposed from kindergarten through university. If the rituals described here represent the conditions in which writers consider themselves to be most productive and successful, however, should not composition classrooms reflect their influence? Consider the following inferences that can be drawn from the stories we heard and their implications for classroom change.

- The familiarity of time, place, and behavior makes a safe zone, a “nest” that lessens writing anxiety and increases a sense of comfort. *Establishing safe zones may mean reconfiguring the straight rows of individual student desks (and changing other arrangements) found in the traditional classroom.*
- Repetition (same action, same time, same place) makes writing a normal, nonthreatening activity. *Classes that begin or end every meeting with writing are less threatening than those in which it occurs only to test or punish.*
- Time limits make a writing task less intimidating. *Good in-class writing can take place in short spurts.*
- Rehearsed activities that can be performed automatically free the mind to focus on problem solving. *Using the same series of classroom activities in preparation for writing each day can drain off unused energy that causes mental digressions.*
- Physical activity affects mental states. *Instead of increasing frustration by sitting still, a student can make use of physical movement, even exercise, to stimulate mental activity.*
- External, unrelated sensory stimuli, especially sounds or movements involving repetition and monotony, can improve concentration. *Although the music and television that students might choose are probably better left to out-of-class situations, some in-class appeals to the senses can be made to help students focus.*
- Repeating previously productive behavior can build confidence. *If something worked once, it can work again. Students can be encouraged to identify and use their successes to support subsequent writing occasions.*
- Creativity is enhanced by working in a state of drowsiness (a hypnagogic state) when negative critical faculties are less active. *Since the totally awake mind is not always the most creative one, the student who dozes or daydreams may be on task after all. Students can at least be allowed some gazing time.*
- Magic and superstition, although irrational, can create a sense of confidence, competence, and control. *Uncertain writers may benefit from having a lucky charm, perhaps some reminder of a previous victory.*
- Nonverbal drafting activities help a writer begin a piece and maintain momentum. *Drawing and doodling may not be time-wasters, but, instead, ways to get started and keep going.*
- Thorough exploration of the predrafting stages, during which most rituals take place, may lessen the need for revision. *This implication reinforces the value of drawing and doodling.*
- Practicing ritualistic behavior creates a sense of identity. *Students who work collaboratively instead of in isolation (at separate desks, without sharing, for a competitive grade), join a community marked by its own ways of behaving and talking. They begin to think of themselves as writers.*

Writing well is not totally a matter of will and self-discipline. Human beings have a need for reassurance and control that simple determination does not provide. Writing rituals help meet these needs. The right pen, the lucky clipboard, the same early morning hours, the ritualistic classroom procedure, the usual posture, the routine motions—foolish and inconsequential as they may seem to be—have the power to provide patterns that enhance the act of writing. We, as

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teachers and writers, would do well to encourage and accommodate them.

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The implication is that postsecondary composition courses would benefit from the incorporation of some form of write-up assignment, adapted, of course, by each instructor to meet her own requirements and the needs of her students. I believe the most successful component of the write-up assignment is the requirement to research, then compare and contrast, grammatical/mechanical topics in *three* separate sources. This forces students to analyze what they are reading and does not let them merely paraphrase (or worse, copy) one source directly into their write-up without any real consideration of its meaning. The next most successful component of the write-up assignment is the requirement of both incorrect and corrected examples, which forces students to see what is "wrong" with a sentence and fix it — precisely what we want them to learn to do in their own writing.

I believe the metawriting concept may be adapted to primary and secondary settings, but I leave that to other experts. As my teaching background is entirely at the postsecondary level, I am unaware of the extent to which younger writers can be expected to intellectualize grammar and mechanics.

Obviously, further research is necessary. The metawriting concept calls for a broad study of college students, one that includes more subjects and utilizes a rigorous data collection strategy. Perhaps more importantly, the concept calls for a study of primary and secondary level students to find out just how much intellectualizing about grammar and mechanics they are capable of. We may be surprised. Writing to learn has proven to be one of the most effective pedagogical tools to come out of the twentieth century. I believe metawriting may be one of the most effective tools in the twenty-first.

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Breakthroughs

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These students weren't moved by a bird's nest in a shoe, but a squashed beer can they could write about. I adjusted.

These days, I teach elementary education majors how to teach reading and writing, and I use this article at some point in the

semester, not as an example of the definitive method, but more as a cautionary tale: Beware the one-method wonder, especially when it doesn't elicit significant response. I want these soon-to-be teachers to think for themselves. I want them to learn how to recognize when a thing is not working in the classroom, give it up, and find a better way.