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WRITING IN THE REAL WORLD

Robert L. Root, Jr.

There are two worlds of writing. One of these is the world of the practitioner, the person for whom writing is a way to get things done, a purposeful means of engaging and expressing ideas and experience; in this world the success of a composition lies in the ways it satisfies both author and audience, either as artistic expression or as effective communication about a reality with which both are concerned. It is the world of writing for publication, for expressive, literary, and transactional aims generated within the writer and received by readers interested in those aims.

The second world of writing is the world of the pretender, the person for whom writing is a task to be accomplished, a set of often arbitrary exercises to be completed; in this world the success of a composition lies in its ability to imitate the appearances of real writing in format, language, and even manual dexterity, satisfying its author by receiving the approval of a reader whose interest in the work lies not in its meaning but in its proficiency at disembodied skills, not for what it accomplishes as an act of communication but for how it conforms as an artifact. Even should the pretender hope to become a practitioner, the tasks imposed on him or her may be perceived—even conceived—as obstacles to be overcome rather than authentic activities fostering the growth of writing ability.

It should be clear from these remarks that I see the world of the practitioner as the real world of writing and the world of the pretender as an artificial world. Both literally and symbolically, the practitioner lives in the marketplace, a place of both commerce and intellectual exchange. The pretender has no place in that world because of the empty pointlessness and self-reflexiveness of the work he engages in and produces; instead, he seems better suited to an environment stocked with make-work assignments and fragmented skills, a world of, say, quantitative testing, handbook activities,

workbook exercises, and grammar drills, since that's where his training lies and since experience at non-writing doesn't translate into real writing.

It may seem as though I'm trying to locate the world of the pretender in the classroom, but nothing in my description of the world of the practitioner suggests to me that the real world of writing is *necessarily* excluded from the classroom, or that the classroom is *unavoidably* an artificial world of writing. I think we can make our classrooms part of the real world of writing, particularly the more we understand the way real writers write.

As a writer myself, as someone who has interviewed and analyzed the composing processes of essayists, critics, and business writers, I am always looking for clues about the real world of writing. Recently, reading *Songs of the North*, a collection of writings by Sigurd Olson, perhaps our most widely-read chronicler of the North Woods, I was struck by his description of how he became a writer. Olson came to writing fairly late, after growing up with a love for the outdoors, training as a biologist, working as a wilderness guide, and teaching at Ely Junior College. Having read widely in nature writing himself, eventually he felt the need to communicate something about the natural world and his understanding of it through his own writing. His description of his transition from teacher-outdoorsman to nature writer is a highly personal and candid piece of writing.

Sigurd Olson's account of his development as a writer is particularly striking for us because of the way it reveals some crucial elements of writing in the real world. For example, Olson's very motivation for becoming a writer arises out of his desire to communicate with others about specific subjects; his need to share his experience of the natural world generates his growth as a writer. Describing his years of development, Olson recalls "the gradual growth of facility through endless practice, day after day, the interminable disappointments, and the many false starts" (98). Real writers don't do it right the first time, and they don't achieve their peak levels of performance overnight. Without the possibility of trial and error, it is arguable whether Olson would have ever developed into the writer he became.

The practice Olson mentions consisted not only of genuine attempts to write articles but also daily notes and observations. Olson used writing both to learn writing itself and also to learn nature; he stresses the importance of that writing for him:

. . .taking notes in the field on what I saw and thought about, descriptions of animals, birds, and the countless things observed on each foray into the wilds; until now I had always relied on memory. This was a new activity, and while at first my scribbles were almost incoherent, in time they became more meaningful; but far more important than the actual wrestling with the mechanics of words and sentences was that the very act of recording made me see things more accurately. The longer I tried to recapture scenes and events, the more I saw. (98)

In the real world of writing, writing is a mode of learning as well as a mode of communication, and this use of writing pushed Olson beyond superficial levels of knowing. Eventually, he tells us,

There were times. . .when words and ideas came without effort, and I was conscious of something going on in my mind I had not felt before. Golden moments, because they were rare, it was as though writing generated an energy that tapped new sources of knowledge and awareness. (98)

At such moments Olson is writing epistemically; that is, as Kenneth Dowst would say, his language is not a "representation of a preexisting and knowable reality" but rather a way of coming to know a reality. As Dowst observes, "Language in a sense comes between the writer's self and objective reality, modifying the former as it gives shape to the latter. . .we do not know the world immediately; rather we *compose* our knowledge by composing language" (968-70). Through his writing Olson discovers what his understanding of the natural world consists of. Significantly, as he observes,

What I did not realize was that the constant honing of my perceptions and writing ability, the continual practice in trying to express myself, was laying the background for eventual acceptance in a field I had not even begun to explore. (103)

Ultimately, as his dissatisfaction with earlier work led him to expand earlier ideas into the essays that became *The Singing Wilderness*, the book that established his place among nature writers, he discovered "what I had always wanted to say" (107).

As Olson discovered, work in progress helps to generate further development both in writing and in understanding. The most deeply held beliefs often of necessity cannot lie easily accessible on the surface; to truly understand them and to discover the language to express them they must be mined, pursued laboriously beneath the surface. Writing not only expresses meaning—it uncovers it.

Furthermore, note that Olson discovers what *he* wants to say—not what someone else wants him to say. His great success as a writer ultimately comes from that moment, the moment at which he is satisfying himself above all, whether he satisfies a broader audience or not.

Sigurd Olson's description of his development as a writer echoes descriptions by other writers and in some ways encapsulates the elements of real world writing. To begin with, an essential element of composition for real writers is **the personal commitment to their writing**. Time and again working writers have said that they write to please themselves first of all. In an article of advice to young academics about scholarly writing, Donald Murray goes so far as to insist: "Write for yourself. Don't try to figure out what other people want, but try to figure out what you have to say and how it can best be said" (Murray, "One," 150).

The importance of this viewpoint is supported by research. Carl Bereiter has located such a commitment as an essential part of skills integrated into writing. When the author "begins to develop a personal style and a personal voice," he says, "writing becomes more authentic and satisfying. . . a productive craft and not merely an instrumental skill" (87). Moreover, such commitment is important across the board: real writing in business and technology grows out of the same impulse to personal commitment that it does in criticism, journalism, and creative writing.

Olson's remarks illustrate a second element of real world writing, **immersion in context**. Olson had a subject matter in which he was deeply engaged; his growth did not occur devoid of context. In the same way, Susan Nykamp, formerly an excellent writer as a college student, had problems even

at the sentence level as a beginning staff writer for the Photo Marketing Association until she learned the photo retailing business thoroughly. Her rise to managing editor of their major publication, *Photo Marketing*, followed the arc of her growth in understanding of her field.

As researchers in composition and cognition such as Bereiter, Flower, and Hayes, have been telling us, writers cannot consciously juggle all the constraints of writing simultaneously; they cannot attend to written language production, controlled association of ideas, rules of style and mechanics, social cognition, aesthetic or critical judgment, and reflective thinking all at the same time. Some skills need to become automatic so that attention may be focused on fewer constraints at a time. Similarly, some knowledge of subject matter, writing strategies, and sense of audience need to be stored in long-term memory so that short-term memory can deal with limited constraints. It is this immersion in context that stores knowledge of subject matter; Michael Polanyi calls it the "dwelling in" a particular activity that leads to personal knowledge. As Olson and Nykamp show, in the real world writing comes from a knowledge base that is neither arbitrary nor transient. In Thoreau's words, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live."

Donald Murray has tracked the way a written work evolves over a period from initial exposure to a topic— not even so grand a thing as an "idea" at the outset— to published work. He claims that "most of [his] articles have a five-year history": a year for his "reading and thinking and conversing and note-taking to work their way towards a topic"; a year to "play around with it" through talking or teaching it once he "recognizes the topic's potential significance"; a year to consider "reactions from colleagues and students and write a draft"; a year for further presentations, reactions, and revision; and a fifth year for publication. He says,

to those who do not work continuously it appears as if I had suddenly produced another piece of work, when it is really the product of a rather plodding habit of thinking through writing ("One", 151).

In the real world, where writing arises out of a personal commitment and immersion in context, writers are continually drawing upon their background, simultaneously completing one project and beginning another. Both

their learning and their composing are part of an ongoing cognitive process. Composition needs a long gestation period, one that begins even before the writer is conscious of being pregnant with intention. Connected to immersion in context is a third element of real world writing, **constant involvement with an area of interest through writing**. Tom Wicker has referred to this element as "assiduous string-saving," a tendency to take note of—and notes on—a range of subjects almost continually. Sigurd Olson models that for us in his copious fieldnotes; Jim Fitzgerald of *The Detroit Free Press* stores items and comments on them in a continually growing and ever changing folder. Donald Murray advises:

Keep a planning notebook with you to play in at the office, at home, in the car, on the airplane, at faculty meetings (especially at faculty meetings), while you're watching television, sitting in a parking lot or eating a lonely lunch. . . .make lists, notes, diagrams, collect quotes and citations, paste in key articles and references, sketch outlines, draft titles, leads, endings, key paragraphs. ("One," 148)

The late Edwin Way Teale, another notetaker, not only regularly took field notes but at the end of each day typed them up and dated, titled, and numbered them. Henry David Thoreau, himself an assiduous stringsaver, kept so thorough a journal that some critics have pronounced it his greatest work. Certainly it was the source of his major works. Often the journal entries served as Thoreau's zero or rough draft; we can trace specific passages out of *Walden*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and *The Maine Woods* directly to daily journal entries. His journal was the source of inspiration and expression, the place where he could generate, incubate, and explore essential ideas of those later works. Da Vinci, Darwin, Marx, Wittgenstein, Tolstoy, Freud, writers and thinkers in every field, have similarly used diaries, notebooks, journals, and logs, and given voice to their most profound insights in the pages of their workaday writing before producing the influential and enduring works by which they are best known.

Such interaction with the materials of one's writing is an important occasion for a fourth element of real world writing, **the discovery of ideas through writing**. The testimony that writing facilitates discovery has come to us from a multitude of sources, both literary and expository, in the real world of writing. James Michener claimed that "you write the first draft really

to see how it's going to come out," and Alfred Kazin said that "in a very real sense the writer writes in order to teach himself, to understand himself, to satisfy himself." Robert Frost once said, "For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew"; C. Day Lewis was more emphatic:

I do not sit down at my desk to put into verse something that is already clear in my mind. If it were clear in my mind, I should have no incentive or need to write about it. . . . we do not write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand.

Donald Murray's daybook is a place to discover and rehearse before attempting to draft and revise his writing. Whether in preliminary workaday writing or early drafts, real writers make a place for regular discovery through writing.

A fifth element of real world writing is **a realistic understanding of the composing process**. Real writers have customary work habits, practical expectations about the quality of early drafts, and confidence in their own ability to bring a "professional" text out of a formless mass of materials. Edwin Way Teale expressed this realistic understanding in a letter to Ann Zwinger:

I think the reason we dread the first draft of a book so much is not only that it is a time of endless decisions—what to put in, what to leave out, how to begin, how to end, etc., etc.—but it is the time when the book we dreamed of writing, the book that has been floating in the air, so to speak, has to be confined by words on paper. Immediately there are intimations that the book is beginning to be less than we hoped it would be. The reason revision is so much fun is that little by little, day after day, we feel we are lifting the book back nearer the original goal. (Zwinger, xviii)

The discouragement which comes with the first struggle with a draft is one familiar to all writers—of books, articles, stories, poems, plays, academic papers, convention addresses; the assurance that revision will banish the discouragement is something only writers who understand the composing process and who have successfully gotten through it can feel.

Having that confidence doesn't necessarily make the writing easier. As Teale says of his revision process:

These are my "Earthworm Days" when I am plowing back and forth through the paragraphs, loosening up lumpy or soggy sentences and enriching the book by inserting new facts and ideas as the earthworm enriches the soil by pulling pieces of leaves underground. Or, to put it another way, I am occupied these days folding over my manuscript in the sense that Thoreau meant when he wrote to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "In writing conversation should be folded over many times thick." (xviii)

Real world writers know that writing is hard work, but unlike the novice writer they know the rewards which lie beyond the labor.

For example, David Denby, film critic for *New York Magazine*, doesn't worry about careful crafting or choosing exactly the right sentences in the first draft. Instead, he says,

The second draft goes much more quickly and I find it very pleasurable. I find the first draft agony; the second draft I think is a lot of fun when you actually have something there to work with, to play with. It's at that point that your feelings of craftsmanship take over. . .

Denby's experience is replicated by a host of other writers, each of whom has his or her own variations of the process. They have had to evolve processes that work specifically for them, even if it would hamper the writing of other writers. More important, they have developed strategies for dealing with the roadblocks that often emerge in writing. Revising is an important part of those strategies, since the reliance on revising for content, style, and expression frees up their concentration for the development and discovery of ideas earlier in the process. As Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the historical writer, once observed,

Very young writers often do not revise at all. Like a hen looking at a chalk line, they are hypnotized by what they have written. "How can it be altered?" they think. "That's the way it was written." Well, it has to be altered.

Leo Tolstoy would agree. He said: "I can't understand how anyone can write without rewriting everything over and over again."

Real world writers also have routines that help them write. Richard Reeves, for example, will start writing at five or five-thirty in the morning and work productively before the outside world can interrupt him. He knows that his peak period of energy is early on the day, and he uses that period for the work he values most. Donald Murray also writes in the morning, preferring to have his classes in the afternoon. In fact, so many writers work on that kind of schedule that when Kurt Vonnegut attended an Eastern-bloc writers conference, almost the first question he was asked by a writer from Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia was: "Mr. Vonnegut, what do you do in the afternoons?"

These writers also know that the writing isn't likely to be completed at a single sitting. Richard Reeves can trace the decline of his energy through the pages of work he attempted to write nonstop; now he routinely breaks down longer tasks into manageable parts. John Saul, the American horror novelist, echoes other writers when he observes, "If I write 15 pages every day, eventually I'll have 500 of them." Other writers settle for two or three pages a day, but even that produces a book length work in less than a year.

Many writers have testified to the same experience and routinely break down the composing of longer works into short sections or chunks. In addition to recognizing that revision will pull these sections together, they also know that, in fact, the work benefits from this piecemeal approach by extending the time to incubate ideas and to work subconsciously on writing. As Hemingway did, they often leave the work at a point where they know they can begin again the next day, in order to have something to get them started with. Such a policy is an antidote to writer's block.

Studies of experienced and novice writers have demonstrated that the strategies for writing that practitioners draw upon extend to the slightest, most reflexive actions. For example, when experienced writers pause in their drafting, they tend to re-read what they've written and let the re-reading help

generate the next section of prose; inexperienced writers are apt to use those pauses to look out the window or up at the ceiling, as if trying to find the next section floating in the air. The experienced writer knows that the text he produces can help him continue to produce text; the novice thinks the text merely records ideas generated or discovered in an outside world, and he can't use the text to help himself write.

In the real world of writing all the evidence supports the view that William Hazlitt once expressed: "The more a man writes, the more a man can write." In fact, our best writers have always been self-taught about the real world of writing, teaching themselves through experience.

But if a real world of writing exists, there must also be an artificial world of writing, a looking-glass world which reflects back a false image of writing. Here is how they compare:

- In the real world, writing arises out of personal commitment; in the artificial world, writing arises out of impersonal assignment—the writer is expected to act according to the goals of assessors and evaluators, non-writers who impose tasks in order to judge the abilities of those who complete them.
- In the real world, the writer lives immersed in a context from which he draws inspiration, incentive, ideas and information, a knowledge of audience and writing plans; in the artificial world the writer begins in ignorance, with a lack of knowledge about his subject, and often works in confusion and disinterest, a grade at the end of the project his chief incentive for stumbling, chiefly on his own, through unknown, even hostile, territory.
- In the real world of writing the writer draws upon the assiduous stringsaving that makes his experience with the subject virtually an ongoing, continual act of prewriting essential not only for the individual product but the act of dwelling in context itself; in the artificial world the writer engages in jumpstart writing, a spark from an outside power source necessary to even get his

engine to idle because the writer himself has no self-starting ignition.

- In the real world of writing the writer depends upon discovery through writing, whether in the workaday writing which constitutes his means of keeping abreast of his own thinking or in the drafting of communicative texts; in the artificial world the writer continually confuses writer-based prose with reader-based prose, encouraged by his judges to aim for one-draft writing which he is often trained to perform at a single sitting.
- In the real world the writer understands his own writing process and draws upon a range of strategies to focus his attention on what is most important at each moment of that process; in the artificial world the writer assumes that the process is the same for all writers and attempts to follow a prescribed set of activities focused on the final product, assuming that such elements as written language production, controlled association of ideas, rules of usage and mechanics, needs of the reader, critical and aesthetic judgement, and reflective thinking can all be given equal and simultaneous attention, thus virtually guaranteeing ineffectiveness at all of them.

As I said at the outset, this description of the real and artificial worlds of writing, the worlds of the practitioner and the pretender, may seem at first glance to describe the writing worlds of the marketplace and the classroom. Perhaps in some cases this is a fair assessment, particularly where just such artificiality dominates classroom practices. But the marketplace and the real world of writing are not coterminous.

Real world writing happens in the marketplace because in the marketplace no writing would happen if the structures of the artificial world were applied; no one would willingly subject themselves to such strictures, and since real world writing is self-motivated, a pretender wouldn't even attempt it.

However, neither are the classrooms and the artificial world coterminous; at least, not necessarily. Students needn't be pretenders in the

classroom; they might be apprentice practitioners, particularly if teachers do things to avoid setting up an artificial world. For example:

- We could make our assignments grow out of the context of the course, with flexibility in the student selection of topic and genre.
- We could help our students acquire background in subject matter through immersion in that context, seeing the whole course as a continuous matter, not just a series of closed units.
- We could engage our students in assiduous stringsaving, the constant consideration in writing of their own ideas and accumulation of ideas and information from outside themselves, inculcating the habits of a lifetime upon which real writers build.
- We could provide them opportunity to discover and rehearse through the writing of zero drafts, learning logs, journals, and the whole range of workaday writing that facilitates deeper understanding of subject matter and self.
- We could work with our students through the process of their own writing, letting them discover and develop their ideas in early drafts, teaching them strategies for their earthworm days as they need them, dealing with their individual problems individually, teaching them about writing *while* they write rather than only before or after they produce products to evaluate.

To do these things might take time to develop, organization to coalesce, and motivation from teacher and student alike, but eventually they would create an environment conducive to committed apprenticeship. If we could encourage our students to become practitioners, not just pretenders, writing in the classroom would be a vital part of writing in the real world.

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