

Donald Murray, "A Writer's Habits"

Donald M. Murray not only taught at the University of New Hampshire for many years and helped establish the graduate program in Composition Studies there—he also worked as a journalist for over half a century. His continuing columns for *The Boston Globe* are available on the web (in the 1990s he was twice named best columnist in Boston), and he has worked for several other newspapers, as well as serving as an editor at *Time*. A Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing (the *Boston Herald* 1954) is only one of his many awards for writing and for teaching.

Murray also publishes fiction and poetry, but his books on the craft of writing and on teaching writing are the ones we know and love the best: *Learning by Teaching*, *Expecting the Unexpected*, and *The Craft of Revision* (all four editions) are only a few of the titles we keep handy on our shelves for reference and inspiration. We particularly value his insistence that a writer must write daily ("never a day without a line") and that a writer must write badly to write well ("perfect is the enemy of good"). Donald Murray's influential book—*A Writer Teaches Writing*, first published in 1968—helped bring about the new **paradigm** in the teaching of writing (see Hairston's essay in Conversation 3), a paradigm (model) based on the notion that teachers of writing had to write themselves on a regular basis if they were to be of any use to their students, that teachers needed to experience firsthand the struggles and processes that working writers go through. In fact, the title of Murray's famous essay—"Teach Writing as Process, Not Product" (1972)—became a key phrase in the ongoing international conversation about teaching writing.

A WRITER'S HABITS

Habit is the writer's best friend: the habit of the notebook, the habit of placing the posterior in the chair at the writing desk, the habit of using the mail.

I am surrounded by neighbors and friends who want to write and know more than I do, have more to say than I do, are blessed with more talent than I have, but they do not yet have writers' habits.

In trying to help some of them become productive writers recently, I found myself taking inventory of the habits that make me a published writer. I was not born with these habits. They were all acquired years ago for a practical rather than an aesthetic reason: baby needs shoes.

I suppose I hungered for fame, but I wrote to eat. Over the years I have discovered joy in my craft. I delight in my hours alone at my desk when I am surprised by the words that appear on my computer screen. But to arrive at joy I had to develop writing habits.

The following ten habits are essential to my practice of the writer's craft.

The habit of awareness

I am never bored, because I am constantly observing my world, catching, out of the corner of my eye, the revealing detail, hearing what is not said, entering into the skin of others.

I look out my window at snowy woods illuminated by the moon, and the trees seem to move apart: I have a poem. I hear what someone says visiting a sick room: I have a column. I taste my childhood in a serving of mashed potatoes and have a food page feature. I hear Mozart's 16th piano concerto on the FM, hear it again as I heard it when I lay in intensive care, and have another column.

Some of the observations taken in by eye, ear, fingertip, taste bud, or nose are recorded in my daybook or journal, but many more are held in memory. In practicing the habit of awareness, I record more than I know, and that inventory of filed away information surprises me when I write and it appears on the page.

It is almost half a century ago that I was a paratrooper taught how to make myself invisible while crawling forward in a field of grass, bush, and ledge, and, on my last furlough before going overseas, I demonstrated this strange skill for a girl standing at the top of a New Hampshire field. I had forgotten that until a character in my novel edged up that field, and I realized I was not making it up; I was reporting what had rested in a file drawer in my brain all these years.

The habit of reacting

I am aware of my reaction to my world, paying attention to what I do not expect, to what is that should not be, to what isn't that should be. I am student to my own life, allowing my feelings to ignite my thoughts.

That sounds normal, but I have found beginning writers do not value their reactions to their world. They think other people have thought the same way or felt the same way. Perhaps they have, but writers need an essential innocence or arrogance that says, "This experience—observation, thought, or feeling—has not existed until I write it." As writers we must value our response to our world.

I notice my writing habits, and from that grows this article. I see young soldiers poised for combat and write the reactions of an old man who survived combat. I see signs for a house tour, feel an unexpected anger at the smugness of those who invite tours into their homes and end up writing a humorous piece about an imaginary tour through a normally messed up house, ours. I put down my holiday thoughts about the daughter we lost at twenty and find, from readers, that my private reactions speak for them.

I have taught myself to value my own responses to the world—and to share them with readers. I build on my habit of reacting.

The habit of connecting

My wife thinks that my habit of making unexpected connections is my most valuable talent as a writer. Writers see the universal in the particular, they delight in anecdote and parable that reveals a larger story. They treasure metaphor; as Robert Frost says, "Poetry is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another."

I study a painting, read what the artist said about its making, and connect that with a technique essential to effective writing; observe the relationship between the way a child plays and a nation makes war.

Usually, these connections come in a special form I call a "line," that is usually more than a word but not yet a sentence. The line contains an essential tension that will release a text when it is developed in writing. When I have that fragment of language I know I have something to write.

Years ago I wrote in my daybook that "I had an ordinary war," realized what becomes ordinary in combat and began the novel I am writing. More than twenty years ago I wrote "a writer teaches writing" and that phrase became both a book and the title of my first textbook on teaching writing. I wrote "I remember silence," and wrote a poem that recreated the loneliness of my childhood and the way we inflicted pain by turning away. The remembered warning "step on a crack and break your back" turned me into a woman on a circus high wire, and I told her story in a poem.

The habit of rehearsal

The most important part of my writing day may be the twenty-two hours or so when I am not at my writing desk. As I leave my writing desk, I start to mull over next morning's writing in my head, and during the hours when I am asleep and awake my conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious minds combine to prepare next day's pages. I am always rehearsing what I may write.

I walk down the street and I am Melissa confronting Iain in the kitchen of a New Hampshire farmhouse. I see them and hear them. At a stop light I play with the strange, often ironic terminology of financial managers—"redemption," "yield," "trust"—and realize I am writing a column. Sitting in the living room watching the Boston Bruins play Montreal, I am actually weaving an argument for a chapter in a textbook. I am always in the world and out of it, writing what will be written the next morning.

The habit of disloyalty

Graham Greene once asked a profound question—"Isn't disloyalty as much the writer's virtue as loyalty is the soldier's?"—that I often used to describe the relationship of writer to subject, but recently I have realized that I must practice the habit of disloyalty toward myself.

☉ I must be disloyal to what I have written on the same subject before, seeing the familiar anew, willing to contradict what I have said and how I have said it. Writing is an experimental art, and I must conduct new experiments on old questions, digging deeper and deeper into the subject which is often myself. I must be disloyal to the most comforting beliefs and myths of my life.

mu I find myself, after writing strong columns against war, creating a pastoral poem celebrating a peaceful moment during combat. A character in my novel believes the opposite of what I believe when I am not in that character's skin. I record the anger I feel against my daughter who died early—a rare but momentarily true feeling most survivors experience. I revise my textbooks, changing some of the principles for which I argued strenuously in the last edition.

The habit of drafting

~~nulla dies sine linea. Never a day without a line.~~

~~Each morning I~~

~~I draft~~

~~I write drafts~~

Those who do not write wait until what they want to say is clear in their minds, and when they see it perfectly they write it down. Remember I said that is what those who do *not* write do; writers follow the counsel of André Gide:

Too often I wait for the sentence to finish taking shape in my mind before setting it down. It is better to seize it by the end that first offers itself, head and foot, though not knowing the rest, then pull: the rest will follow along.

As a trained journalist, I tend to write the first sentence first because it contains the voice, the subject, my point of view toward the subject, the form, the seed from which the writing will grow, but I do it by drafting, grabbing it by "the end that first offers itself," as I did at the beginning of this section, drafting leads until I get one I can follow.

The habit of ease

I live in a community of writers, and I became bored by their grumping, groaning, whining about how hard it was to write. And then I realized I was the leading whiner. If I really felt that way, I told myself, I should take up something more pleasant, perhaps embalming or selling real estate.

The fact is that I have to write, need to write, love—admit it—to write. In recent years I have worked hard to make writing easy. I study the conditions that make it easy to write—

a laptop computer I keep by my living room chair and take on trips, my music on the CD player that helps me concentrate, the information stored on my hard disk to which I can refer in seconds, the community of writer/readers I call on the phone when I need support or stimulus, counsel or a listener for a draft.

I start early, well ahead of deadlines, and when the writing doesn't flow, I step away from it, returning again and again until it comes easily. Unlike the schoolteacher's dictum, "Hard writing makes easy reading," for me, easy writing makes easy reading.

The habit of velocity

I write fast. On a good day I am the boy on the bicycle wobbling downhill so fast his feet are off the pedals, and he is out of control. That's how I want to write, with such velocity that my typing is bad, my grammar ain't, and my spelling is worse; I want to write what I do not know in ways I have not written. I need to speed ahead of the censor and write so fast that my velocity causes the accidents of insight and language that make good writing.

I might write:

There is talk of land war and I am sitting in a warm room in my house still surprised that the dancing shells passed by me [me by?]. Outside winter woods like the snow woods in which I fought and I found my fingers rub together nervously. What are they doing? I know. It is that bone, smooth, [by yours?], I find when I dig a foxhole under shell fire, digging like mud, crunching down. It is human, a kull, leg, some part of a man. I remember a textbook. This was a battlefield in the First World War and this the bone is part of a soldier who fell was killed, should, here in this field in that war.

I know all that is wrong with that chunk of prose—the typing, the spelling, the awkward language—but it is leading me toward meaning, making me go deeper and deeper into experience. The switch to the present tense, for example, commands me to go back in time until it is immediate and take the reader with me.

I wrote that fast and the speed took me where I did not expect to go. Now I have some writing to do.

The habit of revision

I am in the habit of revision, but I do not try to correct error as much as I try to discover the strength of the draft and try to make it stronger. One of the habits that is most successful for me these days is to layer or overwrite, putting the draft on the computer screen and then writing over it. Here I will demonstrate that technique by saving, with a line drawn through it, what I would simply delete.

~~There is talk of land war and I am sitt in a wrm room in my house
 stil surprised that t The dancing shells passed by me [me by?].~~ this
 time. I dig faster, deeper. The shells will return. My shovel hits a rock,
 no, something else. I pull it free. It is ~~Outside winter woods like the
 snow woods in which I fout and I fd my fingers rubb together nerv-~~
~~ously. What are they doing? I know. It is that bone.~~ I put my
 entrenching tool down and rub my hand over it, it is curved, **smooth,**
~~[by yrs?], I find when I dig a foxhole under shell fire, digging like~~
~~me, crujning dwn. It is human, a kull, leg, some part of a man.~~ the
 back end of a human skull and suddenly I am back in school listen-
 ing to the professor drone through European History. **I remember**
 a place on a map and realize I am there. It was a ~~textbk.~~ **This was a**
battlefield in the First World War and in this lonely hour in combat
 I have found my companion ~~the bone is part of a soldier who fell~~
~~was killed, shlld?, here in this fld in that war.~~ with whom I share the
 shell's return.

When I copy it out, you can share the text I found:

The dancing shells pass by this time. I dig faster, deeper. The shells
 will return. My shovel hits a rock, no, something else. I pull it free. It
 is bone. I put my entrenching tool down and rub my hand over it. It
 is curved, smooth, the back end of a human skull and suddenly I am
 back in school listening to the professor drone through European
 History. I remember a place on a map and realize I am there. It was
 a battlefield in the First World War and in this lonely hour in combat
 I have found my companion soldier with whom I share the shell's
 return.

That may develop into a column, find a place in the novel, become a poem, but now
 that I have rediscovered that fragment of bone I am sure it will develop into a piece of
 writing—and be revised again to fit its purpose.

The habit of completion

I wrote but did not submit. Then I met Minnie Mae Emmerich. She is of German descent
 and does not believe in waste. She sent off something I had thrown away, and it was pub-
 lished. I learned the lesson of completion: A piece of writing is not finished until it is sub-
 mitted for publication as many times as is necessary for it to appear in print.

I learned the lesson, but I need to relearn it. Forty years later, the poet Mekeel McBride read some poems I had discarded, commanded me to submit them, and some were published. Now I am rededicated to the habit of completion—and submission. I use the mails, submitting what I write to the best market first and, when it comes back, to another and another and another.

Consider my habits, but develop your own by studying what you did when the writing went well, and make what you discover your own writing habits.

Gail Godwin, "The Watcher at the Gates"

You might think that writing ten novels and two collections of short stories would make someone feel completely confident as a writer, but from this short essay it's clear that Gail Godwin understands how frightening the blank page can be and that publishing one book is no guarantee that you'll ever write another. By 1977 (when this piece came out) she already had three novels and a collection of short stories under her belt, plus a nomination for a National Book Award—yet she still had an almost paralyzing fear of failure.

Godwin worked for a while as a reporter for *The Miami Herald* before earning a PhD in English at the University of Iowa (Kurt Vonnegut was one of her teachers). She didn't become widely known until over a decade later when her fifth novel, *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982), came out; number one on *The New York Times* best-seller list, it earned her a third nomination for a National Book Award.

THE WATCHER AT THE GATES

I first realized I was not the only writer who had a restraining critic who lived inside me and sapped the juice from green inspirations when I was leafing through Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" a few years ago. Ironically, it was my "inner critic" who had sent me to Freud. I was writing a novel, and my heroine was in the middle of a dream, and then I lost faith in my own invention and rushed to "an authority" to check whether she could have such a dream. In the chapter on dream interpretation, I came upon the following passage that has helped me free myself, in some measure, from my critic and has led to many pleasant and interesting exchanges with other writers.

Freud quotes Schiller, who is writing a letter to a friend. The friend complains of his lack of creative power. Schiller replies with an allegory. He says it is not good if the intellect examines too closely the ideas pouring in at the gates.

In isolation, an idea may be quite insignificant, and venturesome in the extreme, but it may acquire importance from an idea which