

Getting started



Writing is hard enough yet there are many ways in which we add to our own difficulties. Perhaps most significant is our tendency to ask: ‘Am I good enough?’ Maureen Duffy speaks for many of us when she says that being a writer feels like ‘a terrible impertinence’, explaining that ‘the people I admire, my particular saints, are dead writers and being a writer is somehow daring to measure yourself against them’.¹ Our literary heroes can seem to loom over us, impossible to match, mocking our efforts. But it’s important to remember that all the writers you’ve ever admired had their own particular heroes – that this is just part of the condition of being a writer.

So for the moment, let your heroes recede into the background. Think of their work as part of the richness of your experience, not as a barrier to any achievement of your own. If everyone was daunted by what had gone before, there would be no record-breaking sprints, no life-saving vaccines, no new technology, no innovation of any kind. And anyway, you’re not setting out to write the way others write. You’re setting out to write the way *you* write.

So how do you find your own voice? You may already have hit on a style that works well and if so, that’s excellent. Or you may find that your voice – or the various voices you’re trying out – sounds inauthentic. Perhaps you think your voice lacks individuality – you don’t even think you have a style at all. Or perhaps your writing is perfectly fine; the problem is that it doesn’t excite you.

The only way you’re going to discover what you can do is by trying things out. If you’re going to make progress you’re going to have to be prepared to experiment. You might already not be liking the sound of this, as experiments can end in failure – indeed,

they are often expected to. A scientist may carry out hundreds of experiments before she can discover the combination that works. All those failures are needful; none of them is absolute. Every success stands on the shoulders of multiple failures. So if you're going to progress you need to be prepared to experiment, and if you're prepared to experiment, you must expect, accept and even embrace failure – learning to put the term, conceptually, in inverted commas – as a necessary function of the writing process. Even the humblest writing implement implicitly defends the inevitability of making mistakes: you can write with one end and erase with the other precisely because a pencil is deliberately designed to accommodate your right to change your mind.

Think of it this way: a novel which wins a prestigious literary prize will have been through numerous drafts. Yet the writer would not, in retrospect, consider any of those drafts as failures; she will have seen them as necessary steps on the path to success. It might be that only a quarter of her first draft has survived into the final product, yet the book would not exist unless she had allowed herself to write that first unsatisfactory draft. And this holds true right down to the level of the sentence. You may decide to cross out a phrase you have written, but if you then discover a better one, you'll find this is often precisely because you have allowed yourself to write that not-quite-satisfactory phrase in the first place. If you won't allow yourself a mistake – a misstep – you'll be looking at a blank page for a very long time, and it will still be blank when you return to it the next day and the day after that. A page with writing on it, on the other hand, holds the potential to multiply into more pages.

So the willingness to experiment – and to fail – is absolutely key if you want to develop your writing skills. James Baldwin believed that writing was simply 'a polite term' for experimenting.² Experimentation can feel scary, but that's no reason to avoid it. When Margaret Atwood was writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) she had never attempted anything like it before – all her previous

fiction had been realistic. She describes the unsettling nature of the experiment: it gave her ‘a strange feeling, like skating on river ice – exhilarating but unbalancing. How thin is this ice? How far can I go? How much trouble am I in? What’s down there if I fall?’³ In fact, most landmark fiction has done something which hasn’t been tried before. What you are attempting is comparatively modest: being prepared to try something *you* haven’t tried before. Actors rehearse, dancers and musicians practise, artists do preliminary sketches and so on – and writers, too, are allowed to take faltering first steps which may be only a pale foreshadowing of their mature work. It’s not just permissible; it’s essential.

Before we leave the f-word, it’s worth paying attention to the courageous sector of writers whose failures happen in full view of the audience. While a play will go through several drafts, it’s not until it’s performed that a playwright can see what might still be wrong with it. Yet they have to be prepared for that to happen. Samuel Beckett’s lines from his novella *Worstward Ho* (1983) are often quoted: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’⁴ He believed that ‘to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion’.⁵ More prosaically, Edward Albee said of fellow playwright, Pulitzer Prize-winning Sam Shepard: ‘Sam was always taking chances, always being original. ... Somebody who was willing to fail and fail interestingly. And if you’re willing to fail interestingly, you tend to succeed interestingly.’⁶ If these great playwrights were willing to fail in front of an audience, you can certainly afford to fail in private.

In order to write effectively we need to remember that our literary heroes, however talented, were or are mere mortals, who had to work through their mis-steps too. But who else might be sitting on your shoulder, emanating negative vibrations? Well, your nearest and dearest for a start, and perhaps your parents in particular. If you’re going to write to please your parents, it’s extremely optimistic to expect your writing to please anyone else. No writer was

ever well served by the voice of an imagined other saying ‘You can’t write that.’ Such censorship stifles creativity, closing down avenues of exploration.

This isn’t a bridge you have to cross yet, anyway. Your parents, partner, children or friends won’t be reading what you’ve written until you’re ready to show it to them. By that time you will have a different relationship with what you have written and a more confident sense of who you are as a writer. And it is *fiction*, after all. You are entitled to make full use of any of your experiences – to record them or to reconfigure them in new forms: they belong to you. Don’t write to be liked and don’t write to impress – not every reader will like you and not every reader will be impressed, and you will end up with something dishonest anyway. Ernest Hemingway had the right idea when he wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald: ‘For Christ sake write and don’t worry about what the boys will say nor whether it will be a masterpiece ... I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the wastebasket.’⁷

Hemingway was famous for his practical views on writing, although there’s no evidence that one of the most widely quoted pieces of advice was actually his at all: ‘write drunk; edit sober’. The most likely source appears to be Peter De Vries who in his novel *Reuben, Reuben* (1964) has a character say: ‘Sometimes I write drunk and revise sober ... and sometimes I write sober and revise drunk. But you have to have both elements in creation – the Apollonian and the Dionysian, or spontaneity and restraint, emotion and discipline.’⁸ Somewhat more elaborate than the advice to ‘write drunk; edit sober’, the insistence on the necessity for both ‘spontaneity and restraint, emotion and discipline’ in the creative process is extremely useful. While we wouldn’t recommend writing under the influence (no one mentions editing with a hangover) the inexperienced writer will certainly benefit from taking a relaxed and uninhibited approach to the first draft. Indeed, a

number of very experienced writers are perfectly comfortable with a distinctly underwhelming first draft. Frank O'Connor said: 'I don't give a hoot what the writing's like, I write any sort of rubbish which will cover the main outlines of the story, then I begin to see it',⁹ while James Thurber reported that his wife 'took a look at the first version of something I was doing not long ago and said, "Goddamn it, Thurber, that's high-school stuff." I have to tell her to wait until the seventh draft, it'll work out all right.'¹⁰

Ray Bradbury (who had a sign over his desk stating: DON'T THINK) had a different version of 'write drunk; edit sober', but it confirms the idea that a certain sense of abandon is appropriate at the first creative stage and that more careful consideration can come later:

The history of each story ... should read almost like a weather report: Hot today, cool tomorrow. This afternoon, burn down the house. Tomorrow, pour cold critical water upon the simmering coals. Time enough to think and cut and rewrite tomorrow. But *today* – *explode – fly apart – disintegrate!* The other six or seven drafts are going to be pure torture. So why not enjoy the first draft, in the hope that your joy will seek and find others in the world who, reading your story, will catch fire too?¹¹

(Subsequent drafts will not *necessarily* be 'pure torture' but it's fair to acknowledge there are usually some difficult moments.) So these writers, at least, lend their vote to the 'don't get it right; just get it down' school of first drafting. Only you will know just how well this will serve you, but you may well find that having started to write in a provisional and rough style, you hit your stride once you've warmed up and have a better sense of what you're writing. You can always go back and tidy up the early stuff later.

The early stages of this process often seem unsatisfactory and you may well feel dispirited at times, so it's important to remind yourself that you're not alone – far from it. Here's Virginia Woolf's account of her character Orlando's experience of writing

his novel – an account that clearly in some measure reflects her own experience:

Anyone moderately familiar with the rigours of composition will not need to be told the story in detail; how he wrote and it seemed good; read and it seemed vile; corrected and tore up; cut out; put in; was in ecstasy; in despair; had his good nights and bad mornings; snatched at ideas and lost them; saw his book plain before him and it vanished; acted his people's parts as he ate; mouthed them as he walked; now cried; now laughed; vacillated between this style and that; now preferred the heroic and pompous; next the plain and simple; now the vales of Tempe; then the fields of Kent or Cornwall; and could not decide whether he was the divinest genius or the greatest fool in the world.¹²

So accept the difficulties, expect things to be initially unsatisfactory, and start putting the words on the page. And while we acknowledge the need for preparation, let's keep in mind E. L. Doctorow's wise observation on the subject: 'Planning to write is not writing. Outlining a book is not writing. Researching is not writing. Talking to people about what you're doing, none of that is writing. Writing is writing.'¹³