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## Chapter 10

### The Essential Delay: When Writer's Block Isn't

Donald M. Murray

Morison isn't writing. He's a professional writer, published and anthologized, but he's not writing. He goes to his typewriter and jumps up to find more paper. He organizes and reorganizes his notes, makes a third cup of tea, visits the stationery store to buy a new pen, hunts through the library for the one elusive reference. He makes starts and notes and more notes and folders and outlines, but he does not produce a draft.

He wonders if he has writer's block. He clears writing time on his schedule, shuts the door to his study, and watches a tree grow. Slowly. He makes neat work plans, types them up, pins them above his desk, and doesn't follow them. He drafts letters—in his head—telling the editor he cannot deliver the piece. He considers going into real estate, or advertising, or becoming a hit person. He composes suicide notes—in his head—that are witty, ironic, publishable. He grumps at his wife and lies awake at night wondering if there is treatment for writer's block.

But Morison knows he doesn't have writer's block. He's been writing for almost 40 years. He is passing through the normal, necessary, always terrifying delay that precedes effective writing.

"Delay is natural to a writer," E.B. White states. "He is like a surfer—he bides his time. Waits for the perfect wave on which to ride [ends page 219, begins page 220] in."

Virginia Woolf reminds herself in her diary, "As for my next book, I am going to hold myself from it till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid, asking to be cut or it will fall."

To understand writer's block, we have to discover what is not writer's block, what forms of delay are essential for good writing. Again and again we hear our best writers—perhaps whistling in the dark—counseling themselves not to worry as they wait for writing. Ernest Hemingway said, "My writing habits are simple: long periods of thinking, short periods of writing." Franz Kafka had one word over his writing desk: "Wait." Denise Levertov says,

"If...somewhere in the vicinity there is a poem . . . I don't do anything about it, I wait."

Recently Carol McCabe, a prizewinning journalist, explored this period of waiting. "The time just before I begin to write is the most important time I spend on a piece. By now the piece is there, waiting inside the notebook, tape or transcripts, clip files and photos, like a sculpture, waiting for release from a block of limestone. I just have to figure out how to get it out of there."

"As I begin, I turn on my own switch before the machine's," McCabe continues. "I put myself into a fugue state, a sort of hypnotic trance in which I am sensitive to blips of idea and memory, receptive to the voices of my characters whom I begin to hear as I write."

There is, of course, no certainty for McCabe, Kafka, or any other writer that the waiting will be productive. It may be a pregnancy without issue. Each writer fears that writing will never come, yet the experienced writer knows it may take days, weeks, and months to produce a few hours of text production.

I kept an unscientific account of my writing time for the first 43 weeks of 1982. I wrote the introductory material for a collection of my articles on writing and teaching, responded to the editing of a collection of pieces on writing journalism, edited a journal article, drafted and revised chapters for two different collections, completed a newspaper editorial, wrote several poems, finished a freshman text and revised it once, worked on a novel. Yet I did formal drafting, revising, or editing for only 206 hours.

I had 43 weeks, or 301 days in which to write, yet I averaged far less than an hour a day, less than five hours a week. And my working pace wasn't that even. One week I wrote for more than 22 hours, and in 10 different weeks I wrote nothing. I had more than adequate time [ends page 220, begins page 221] for panic and terror, doubt that I would ever write again, fears of writer's block, and plenty of time for the necessary incubation that precedes writing. My middle name is Morison.

The more I observe the writing patterns of my students, my colleagues, and professional writers, the more I study the testimony of respected writers in published interviews, journals, essays, letters, biographies and autobiographies; the more I study my own writing processes—the more convinced I become that we not only can state the importance of delay but also can begin to comprehend those conditions or kinds of knowledge the writer waits

for. There appear to be five things the writer needs to know—or feel—before writing.

### *Information*

Amateurs try to write with words; professionals write with information. They collect warehouses full of information, far more than they need, so much information that its sheer abundance makes the need for meaning and order insistent. “One of the marks of the true genius is a quality of abundance,” says Catherine Drinker Bowen. “A rich, rollicking abundance, enough to give indigestion to ordinary people.” The writer turns over this compost of information in the file, in the notebook, in the head, seeking what Maxine Kumin calls the “informing material” that produces meaning.

The writer also knows it is dangerous to start writing too soon when all the writer has on hand are ideas, concepts, theories, abstractions, and generalizations. Good writers learn to fear the vague and general, to seek the hard-edged and precise. Maxine Kumin says, “What makes good poetry for me is a terrible specificity of detail.” “The more particular, the more specific you are, the more universal you are,” declares Nancy Hale. Vladimir Nabokov testifies, “As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.”

Specifics give off meaning. They connect with each other in such a way that two plus two equals seven—or eleven. Writers treasure the informing detail, the revealing specific, the organizing fact; and their notebooks are filled with sentences, test paragraphs, diagrams, as they **[ends page 221, begins page 222]** connect and disconnect, order and reorder, building potential significance from their abundant fragments.

### *Insight*

“Whenever the special images and phrases that are always criss-crossing in a poet’s mind begin to stream in a common direction, rhythmically and distinctly, he will begin to write a poem,” says James Emanuel. That streaming, or insight, is a single vision or dominant meaning that will be tested by the writing of the draft.

The insight is not often a thesis statement; it is less formed than that. It is a figure seen in a fog, a fragile relationship between facts, a sketch, a hint, a feeling, a guess, a question.

Mary Lee Settle says, “I start my work by asking a question and then try to answer it.” But it may take a long time of fiddling around with notes, starting and discarding opening paragraphs, searching and researching, and just plain waiting for the key question to appear. Anton Chekhov says, “An artist observes, selects, guesses, and combines.” Virginia Woolf speaks in her diaries of “the power of combination.” And the writer has to find a way to combine the elements into a single vision before beginning a draft.

One of the most effective forms of insight is a problem that may be solved by the writing. Eugene Ionesco says, “That’s what a writer is: someone who sees problems a little more clearly than others.” The problem is what motivates the writer, for the best writers do not want to solve those problems they have already solved, to write what they have written before. Joubert says, “To write well, one needs a natural facility and an acquired difficulty.” Experienced writers are suspicious of ease, and wait for challenge. As James Wright says, “the writer’s real enemy is his own glibness, his own facility; the writer constantly should try to discover what difficulties there truly are inherent in a subject or in his own language and come to terms with these difficulties.”

When the writer has achieved this difficulty, or found the question, or defined the problem, the writer may be able to begin the draft. It is important, however, for the writer seeking insight not to expect precision. Exactness comes after the final draft, after revision and re-revision, reading and rereading, editing and re-editing. Before the first **[ends page 222, begins page 223]** draft the writer is seeking possibility. As Donald Barthelme says, “At best there is a slender intuition, not much greater than an itch.”

### *Order*

Barbara Tuchman tells us that “writing blocks...generally come from difficulty of organization.” John McPhee says, “I want to get the structural problems out of the way first, so I can get to what matters more. After they’re solved, the only thing left for me to do is to tell the story as well as possible.”

Experienced writers refuse to leave on a trip through a draft without a map. The map may be in the head or on paper, but the writer needs a sense of destination. "A novel is like getting on a train for Louisiana," says Ernest J. Gaines. "All you know at the moment is that you're getting on the train, and you're going to Louisiana, but you don't know who you're going to sit behind, or in front of, or beside; you don't know what the weather is going to be when you pass through certain areas of the country; you don't know what's going to happen south; you don't know all these things, but you know you're going to Louisiana."

A significant number of writers wait until they have the ending before they begin. "I don't know how far away the end is—only *what* it is," states John Irving. "I know the last sentence, but I'm very much in the dark concerning how to get to it." Katherine Anne Porter says, "If I didn't know the ending of a story, I wouldn't begin. I always write my last line, my last paragraph, my last page first." Eudora Welty agrees, "I think the end is implicit in the beginning. It must be. If that isn't there in the beginning, you don't know what you're working toward. You should have some sense of a story's shape and form and its destination, all of which is like a flower inside a seed."

An even greater number of writers wait for the lead or first few lines that will set the draft in motion, and they are willing to spend a great deal of time waiting for those lines or worrying them into place. "Leads, like titles, are flashlights that shine down into the story," says John McPhee. "With novels it's the first line that's important," says Elie Wiesel. "If I have that, the novel comes easily. The first line determines the form of the whole novel. The first line sets the tone, the melody, then I have the book."

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#### *Need [begins page 224]*

Writers often delay beginning a draft until they feel a need to write. This need usually has two parts: the internal need of the writer to speak, and the perceived need of readers to listen.

The best writing usually comes from a need that precedes the entire process of writing. The writing comes in a climate of need created by the experiences and obsessions of the writer. The writer has an itch that must be scratched. If the writer does not have that need, then it must be achieved during the waiting period.

We delay writing until we can find the need to write. This is especially true of that writing that comes by assignment or invitation. When the need is initiated outside of the writer, the experienced writer will find a way to discover a personal need that parallels the external need.

Donald Graves writes of the importance of ownership in teaching writing. He argues that the teacher should not take over ownership of the draft, but the student must maintain ownership of what is being written. The struggle for ownership between writer and teacher, of writer and editor, is normal. But the writer must win. The writer must feel as Louise Nevelson does when she says, "My work is a feast for myself."

I almost lost the struggle with the editor of this book while drafting this chapter. When writing the first draft I was too conscious of the editor's suggestions, which I read as instructions. After I completed the draft, the editor responded with a long letter of criticism. I congratulated him for it, since it was perhaps the most impressive editorial response I've ever received. But when I came to rewrite the draft, it was lifeless. I was bored, and felt as if I were painting a picture by number. It was *his* draft, not mine. I had to put his letter aside, put away my notes based on his suggestions, put aside my earlier drafts, and start anew.

The writer has to create the illusion that the writing is his, or hers, that only this writer can deliver this message. Such arrogance is essential. I had to internalize the editor's suggestions and make them mine. And, of course, the editor has to have his own illusion. He watches me dance and knows he pipes the tune.

The writer also must have a sense of a need outside of the writer, that there is a reader who has to know what the writer says. In waiting to begin a draft, the writer is also waiting to see a reader, a person who [ends page 224, begins page 225] needs what will be written. But we write for ourselves first, and others afterward; we must need to write and need to be read.

#### *Voice*

Morison waiting, staring out the window, pacing the floor, slumped in a chair, is listening, trying to hear the voice that may be able to write the draft. Morison scribbling, crossing out, drafting, crumpling paper into a ball and hurling it near the wastebasket, then writing again and

moving his lips as he reads what is written, is listening. Writers know not to write until they can hear the voice that will run through the draft.

An effective piece of writing creates the illusion of a writer speaking to a reader. The language, although written, sounds as if it were spoken. Speech is the glue that holds the piece together. The writing voice provides the intensity that captures the reader; the voice provides the music and grace and surprise that keeps the reader interested; the voice communicates the emotion and the mood that makes the reader involved.

Each writer, of course, has an individual voice. But the writer learns how to extend that voice so it is appropriate for the particular piece of writing. "The most difficult task for a writer is to get the right 'voice' for his material; by voice I mean the overall impression one has of the creator behind what he creates," says John Fowles. Wright Morris adds, "The language leads, and we continue to follow where it leads."

Morison draws an angry line through the top page of a draft and hurls the stack of paper across the floor. He has written too soon. He forces himself to sit quietly in his Morris chair, to stare into that blurred middle territory between intent and realization, to wait and listen for the essential accumulation of abundant information, for a guess of a potential meaning he may call insight, for an order that may lead him toward that meaning, for a need that makes it necessary for him to write, for the sound of the draft's voice.

This waiting may be the hardest part of writing. "It's a matter of letting go," Walker Percy points out. You have to work hard, you have to punch a clock, you have to put in your time. But somehow there's a trick of letting go to let the best writing take place." It is essential to let **[ends page 225, begins page 226]** the writing grow within the writer, accepting the doing nothing that is essential for writing. "You have to be willing to waste time," counsels Robert Penn Warren. "When you start a poem, stay with it and suffer through it and just think about nothing, not even the poem. Just *be* there." The writer has to accept the writer's own ridiculousness of working by not working. "I spend a great deal of time simply walking around," says Joyce Carol Oates, "sitting, day-dreaming, going through the motions of an ordinary life with—I suspect—an abstracted, dreaming, rather blank expression on my face."

Morison has completed the chapter. It is in the mail. He sits down to write the next book. He is a Puritan; he makes a work schedule on Sunday, and keeps to it on Monday. Not on Tuesday. On Wednesday he reads Simone de Beauvoir: "A day in which I don't write leaves a taste of ashes." He smiles bitterly. The following Monday he forces a draft of the first chapter. It doesn't even come close. He lies awake that night and wonders if he has writer's block. But then he remembers what he has just written the week before. There is an essential delay; he must be patient; he must wait for information, insight, order, need, voice. He must not write to write.

Typed and gently re-formatted from the original\* by  
Robert H. Johnson

Parham Campus Academic Support Center

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

Richmond, VA

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\*I made these changes: eliminated paragraph indentions in favor of justified left margins and double-spacing between paragraphs. Eight print pages became 4 word-processed pages. Typographical errors, if any remain, are likely mine.