

Finding Fearless Ideas: Writing Under the Influence of Beautiful Words

All writing is an act of faith, belief in self, belief in subject, belief in its form, belief in its voice.

Teachers must recognize how hard it is to maintain faith—and how essential.

This is a significant reason for teachers to write.

~Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, revised second edition, 2004

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Students write better beside beautiful words.

When writers read something very good they want to write. It is a curious reaction. When we read something that is far better than we could do we should be discouraged. Instead, we're usually inspired.

It's not a matter of competition, but it is a matter of getting into the game, participating in the writing process. ~Donald Murray

Daily quick writing is low stakes writing, essential to the development of fluency and confidence.

Write while the heat is in you. When the farmer burns a hole in his yoke, he carries the hot iron quickly from the fire to the wood, for every moment it is less effectual to penetrate it. It must be used instantly, or it is useless.

The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled.

~Henry David Thoreau

Daily rereading of quick writing invites students to listen to their writing and tune it more effectively.

Just write. Hard, fast. Make mistakes. Lose control. As Guy de Maupassant said, "Get black on white."

See what happens. Let it run. Stand back. Plunge in again.

Steal a phrase or a line or an idea or a feeling from what you've just written and try again.

~Donald Murray

The teacher's model of quick writing and thinking behind revisions is a powerful, but little-used teaching practice.

You should write too, under the same conditions—on the board or in your notebook—and share your writing first. It's a matter of ethics. You are going to be seeing their work; it's only fair that they see yours. More than that, your engagement in the process demonstrates that writing isn't a magic trick to be mastered, but a craft that is continually explored. It is a skill that is alive, ever changing, ever challenging, not the boring old English that so many of your students think it is, not a matter of etiquette but of meaning, of discovering your own

meaning with your own voice. ~Donald Murray

Students learn by imitation. I select interesting, creative sentences to teach conventions through imitation.

Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft. Bach and Picasso didn't spring full-blown as Bach or Picasso; they needed models. This is especially true of writing. ~William Zinsser

Teeth

By Phillip Kaye

“Ojichama” is what I call my Japanese grandfather. In 1945 this Tokyo home was burned to the ground. Grampy is what I call my American grandfather. In 1945 he was serving on the U.S.S. Shangri-la, sending off American fighter pilots to burn down Japanese houses. Our jaws have not yet healed.

1906 Poland.

Grampy’s father is hiding in an oven. He has heard men singing on the street below, hyenas my family called them, after drinks and songs the outside townspeople will come into the Jewish ghetto for a celebration beating. Molar fireworks and eyelid explosions. Even when Grampy’s father grows up the sound of sudden song breaks his body into a sweat. Fear of joy is the darkest of captivities.

1975 Tokyo.

My father, the long-haired student with the pension for bad sexual innuendo meets Rako Hori, the well-dressed banker who forgets the choruses to her favorite songs. Twelve years later they give birth to a lanky lightbulb.

1999.

My mother speaks to me in Japanese. Most days I don’t have the strength to ask her to translate the big words. We burned that house down, Mother. Don’t you remember?

1771 Prague.

In the heart of the city is a Jewish cemetery, the only plot of land where Grampy’s ancestors were allowed to be buried. When they ran out of room they had no choice but to stack bodies one on top of the other, now there are hills of tombs. Individual tombstones jutting out crooked like valiant teeth emerging from a jaw left to rot.

1985 My parents’ wedding.

The two families sit together smiling wider than they need to. Montague must be so happy we can Capulet this all go.

1997.

From the safety of his Tokyo apartment Ojichama scrawls postcards to his old four-poster bed: haven’t been able to sleep since you left, wish you were here.

1999.

I sit with Grampy’s cousin. He is 91 and dressed in full uniform. I beg with him to untie the knots clenched in his forehead. He says, “Hate is a strong word, but it is the only strength that I have left. How am I to forgive the men that severed the trunk of my family tree and used its timber in the fireplaces of their own homes?”

2010.

Grampy and I sit together watching his favorite: baseball. In the infertile glow of the television I see his face wet. Grampy sits in his wheelchair, mouth open, teeth gasping out of his gums like violent and valiant tombstones in a cemetery left to rot. The teeth sit and I can still read them. William Chotles, killed at Auschwitz. Sara Lee killed at Dachau. Bill Kayne killed off the coast of Okinawa. "I will never forget what happened to our family, Grampy," and he looks at me with the surprised innocence of a child struck for the first time. "Forgetting is the only gift I wish to give you. I have given away my eldest son trying to bury a hatred I can no longer burden. There are nights I am kept awake by the birthday songs of children I never let live. A plague on both your houses. They have made worm's meat of me."

Do not forget that all the writing you do, all the writing you read,
all the responses you hear in conference and in workshop are part of your preparation.
~Donald Murray

A handful of my favorite spoken-word poems you can find on youtube:

"Knock Knock" by Daniel Beaty

"Teeth" by Phillip Kaye

"Pretty" by Katie Makkai

"An Origin Story" by Phil Kaye & Sarah Kay

MSA 2009 Taylor Phillips

"Thinking of You" by Mike Taylor

"Shake the Dust" by Anis Mojgani

"Repetition" by Phil Kaye

"Crab Apple Pirates" by Andrea Gibson

"To This Day: for the Bullied..." by Shane Koyzcan

"Beethoven" by Shane Koyzcan

All by Sarah Kay:

"Hands"

"Point B"

"Hiroshima"

"Montauk"

"Postcards"

"Private Parts"

"A Love Letter"

"Brother"

"Sarah Kay's Playlist"

watch Sarah Kay's Ted Talk

Our students are terrified of failure when they need to know how to make use of it. They have been taught, by teachers and parents, the press, and their own instinct, that everything must be done perfectly the first time.

They are inhibited, constipated, frightened—in no condition to produce good writing.

Writing that is written to avoid failure guarantees mediocrity.

~Donald Murray

Tinkering/Revising for Fearless Writing

- **Penny Kittle, Kennett High School, Conway School District, NH**
- **Tom Romano, Dept of Teacher Education, Miami University, Oxford, OH**
- **Judy Rowe Michaels, Poet-in-the-Schools for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
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Strategies to bring “second genius” to your words*

- **Create Mind Pictures.** Leave your writing for half-an-hour, a day or three, a week. Reread as a stranger and interact with your words. Be open to new images that appear; choose language to capture and refine what you imagine. Look for *narrative summary* that would benefit from the immediacy of being recast as *dramatic narrative* (characters in action, scenes exploded, slowed down).
- **Add Sensory Detail.** Find places where the addition of sensory detail will help readers experience your words (In writing about a favorite place in her childhood, one student wrote, “Big Mouth Spring bubbled up, and you’d put your face down there and suck. It was like a liquid crystal ball, cold on your lips”)
- **Improve Sound and Rhythm.** Do the sound and rhythm of your words create music? Reread in a deliberate, appropriately paced voice, giving each word its due. Listen to the language. Enhance rhythm and sound by deleting, adding, or changing words, altering sentence lengths, repunctuating. (Listen also for a “clang” and recast to eliminate it: “When I came back home, my back began to hurt.”)
- **Add Precise Words and Interesting Language.** Are your words living and leaping? (Did the homeless man *go away* or *disappear* or *vanish*?) Are the words vivid, specific, palpable? (Did the teacher drive a *car* or a *Mini Cooper*?)
- **Vary Sentence Length.** Does one sentence length dominate and become monotonous? Do some sentences need combined? Do long sentences need broken into shorter sentences for clarity and comprehension? Can you use a short sentence for emphasis? Remember Melville’s first line of *Moby Dick*? “Call me Ishmael.”
- **Placement and Payoff.** Words, information, and ideas gain or lose impact by where and when they appear in a sentence, a paragraph, a piece of writing. Beginnings are powerful spots for placing information. Endings are even more powerful. Anne Lamott wrote, “. . . she transferred me to a two-thousand-year-old monk. Or at least this is how he sounded, faint, reedy, out of breath, like Noah after a brisk walk.”
- **Weed the Garden.** Unnecessary words or longwinded passages can sneak into your writing without you even realizing it, sapping the energy from what is good. Do you need all the words in, “Bob swaggered arrogantly”? (Not all adverbs are bad; they can be useful; but be wary when they volunteer).
- **Pump Up the Verbs.** Have you used “verbs of muscle” as Mary Oliver called them? (Did the teen *go* into the room? Or did she *walk* or *limp* or *shuffle* or *dash* or *stride*?) In her poem, “John Chapman,” Oliver did not write in an emotional moment for her character, “. . . his gray eyes turned into ice.” She wrote, “. . . his gray eyes brittle into ice”).

In a multigenre paper about a summer job she held as a waitress at a country club, college junior Leah Wessman had written this sentence:

“Hey, Leah,” Celeste follows me hurriedly into the kitchen. “Gaggini requested you.”

Leah tinkers with the language, finds a stronger verb, and eliminates an adverb. Amid her tinkering and language work, she also creates additional visual detail:

*“Hey, Leah.” Celeste scurries behind me as I plow through the swinging kitchen doors.
“Gaggini requested you.”*

*Kim Stafford coined the “second genius” in *The Muses Among Us*

- **Change the Lead/Write Numerous Leads.** Does your first sentence/paragraph/page/chapter draw readers into the writing? Would the writing work better by beginning with a paradoxical statement, bit of dialog, critical description, or compelling scene? Below are leads Tom wrote in his notebook with his students as they began their “Literature Relationship Papers.” When we write leads with reckless abandon, trusting the gush of language within us, we not only write ourselves into a beginning, but also generate information we can use in other parts of the essay/story/poem. Tom wrote about his relationship over the years with a Robert Frost poem. The leads include the irrelevancies, redundancies, misinformation, blathering, errors, and raw thinking of five-minute quickwrites:

Lead #1: Begin telling about the piece of literature (include some of your research here):

Robert Frost wrote “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” in June 1922 while he was living in VT, the really getting warm days in that part of NE, the children just getting out of school. It was published the following year in his volume of poems titled *New Hampshire*.

Frost told the story that he had been up all night working on a difficult poem, titled “New Hampshire.” It wasn’t finished, but at dawn he walked outside to see the sunrise, thought of a snowy evening, the little horse—and it was as if he had a hallucination. He went inside the house, he says, and wrote out the poem “in just a few minutes without strain.

He says.

I’m not Frost, but gosh its humbling.

Lead #2: Describe the circumstances of your life at the time of your initial reading.

First year of teaching at Marion L. Steele HS in Amherst, Ohio. I was bran new, afraid of being revealed a fraud for not knowing enough about literature, about reading, about teaching. And I “taught” (loosely using the word in the way my professors had taught me. I assigned the literature for out of class reading. Then when students came to class, I stood in front of them at a podium, lecturing about the literature, in this case a Robert Frost poem, with the infamous help of the “teacher’s manual,” which explained the meaning of the poem. I noticed nothing amiss. That was, after all, how I had been taught (I use the word loosely).

Lead #3: Use dialog with no conversation tags or explanations

Why are you looking at me like that? / Do you remember what you did? / Did I say a poem? / Yes. Don’t you remember? / I remember something. I remember thinking, “This seems weird but I’m not stopping. / That’s what the poem was: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. / I know that poem by heart. / You didn’t miss a beat. Here, eat a cracker and drink the juice. / Did the nurse’s think it was weird? / No. / What did they do? / They went about their business, Tom. They have work to do, you know?

Lead #4: Write a lead that states a paradox/makes a blunt statement

Frost’s poem about death has given me many lives: teaching lives, philosophical lives, writing lives. Frost’s quintessential poem of winter in New England with a rural setting and snow falling steadily amid the trees was written by Frost a few minutes after he had stood on his porch in _____ VT, and

watched the sun rise on June 22, 1922. I labor over all my writing. I can't even resist sometimes tinkering with a text message. I can't seem to get anything written right the first time through. And one of the poems I admire most was written, said RF, in just a few minutes, his "best" bid, he wrote the poet Louis Untermeyer, "for remembrance."

Lead #5: Describe a place that is somehow important to you and the literature

The graveyard is beside and behind the large white clapboard church in Old Bennington, VT. Somehow I knew he was buried there and went looking for the gravesite. It took me awhile before I found it: two large slabs, each maybe 2 ½ feet by 6 feet, lying flat on the grass more than 50 years now with the names of several family members carved into it. RF, his wife, and one of his daughters. And someone—the church perhaps, or the town planning commission, maybe literati of some kind, planted two birch trees by the slabs; they still slim and shooting into the air maybe 15 or 20 feet.

Lead #6: Render a significant scene, an indelible moment

One of the most vivid memories I've spent in the classroom in my 39 years occurred in my second year of teaching, 1973 or 1974, I taught a class of Honors sophomores and I loved working with them dearly, since I hadn't yet learned to work with unmotivated students. I prepared for the Honors sophs, made sure I knew my subject matter inside out. When we approached Robert Frost's "Stopping . . ." I had something up my sleeve. With the lit anthology open on a podium in front of the classroom, I glanced at it then began saying Frost's words, "Whose woods these are I think I know." I left the podium and walked about the front of the classroom . . .

[For the lead to this creative nonfiction essay, "The Lives of a Poem," Tom built upon Lead #3. In Lead 4 he stumbled upon language that suggested his title. Information and lines of reflection from the other leads worked their way into the essay, too].