

Tom Romano

## HOW TO WRITE

Trust language. It lies within, ready to lead you. All those years ago, before you were praised or corrected, before you were shown the niceties of communication, language quickened in you. That fierce human need to name and say launched words. Remember that. And be brave on the page. Be a warrior with words. Trust the gush of language.<sup>1</sup> Exercise self-generosity.<sup>2</sup>

Make a place to write. Somewhere with a single lamplight showing the page. Somewhere else with all lights ablaze. In a room of your own with the glow of the computer screen illuminating the keyboard, the words, your absorbed face. Write in bed. Write in a coffee shop when business abates. Write in a classroom with others. Write sitting on the floor, your back against the wall. Use tools that please you: sharpened pencil, inexpensive ballpoint, gel pen, keyboard under your fingers. Pamper yourself in this regard. Cultivate pleasure when writing.

Write every day.<sup>3</sup> Set time aside: a heroic hour or a vital five minutes. After a while your writing and being will merge. Writing and breathing will be one. Write in silence. Listen to music. Whatever helps you come to language, tap, exploit, ride. Whatever hinders you coming to language, avoid, shun, spurn. Does making a drawing help you see your way, even if you use stick figures? Yes? Then move away from language. Sketch what you see and mean.<sup>4</sup> Move the sketch into words and put them on the page to help your reader think your feeling, feel your thinking. Are you experiencing your words, not just understanding them?<sup>5</sup> That's what you want readers to do.

Once you've written, look at the words you gushed. Hold them up to the light. Examine their color. Feel their contours, trace where they lead. Lay the words in your open palm, sense their heft. Lick them. Taste their flavor. Imagine firing the words; measure the impression they make. Notice surprises: in language, ideas, associations, productive tangents. None of these, of course, did you intend until the moment you were setting words upon the page. Think how the reader will be surprised, delighted, and rewarded, just as you were in the heat of composing.<sup>6</sup>

Put the writing away for twenty minutes or three months or a year, then reread it. You were "passion hot" when you trusted the gush. Now be "critic cold," as John Ciardi put it (Ciardi 1966, 153). Does your writing work? Are there weaknesses? Soft spots? Know that when you detect failure, the very act of noticing that failure is movement toward success—the wrong word sparks the right word, the vague description spawns vivid imagery, illogic gives way to sudden understanding, and you see how one thought links to the next.

In your draft you were smart and bold and exploratory. In your revision you achieved the second genius.<sup>7</sup> Type in this second genius to make a new draft. It will be more substantive, textured, evocative. Make ample margins. Choose a font that enhances the look of your words. Use a type size that's easily read, that doesn't crowd words on a line. Double space those lines and print a copy you can spread out before you. Give it a good, global look.

Reread with a pen or pencil in hand. Read aloud. Feel the words in your mouth. Listen. Your sense of how language should sound is a great ally. You'll hear when words make music; you'll hear when they're discordant. Make adjustments if you need to and be amazed and fulfilled at how well you are writing, gushing only in spurts now, but honing language, tinkering and tuning. Cross out words. Move others around. Write anew in the ample margins and between the lines. You are crafting, creating. Does new meaning bloom in your mind that is not on the page? Put that in.

Type what you've reseen. Print another copy. Pause a moment. Do you remember that blessed, stumbling start when you forged ahead with language and trusted the gush? Remember how many of those first words did not reflect what you were learning to mean? Revere that process. That raw language got you to a place that you could not have arrived at without them.

Congratulations. Though you may not consider yourself a writer, you write.<sup>8</sup> That's what matters. You are one of the meaning makers.<sup>9</sup> You know writing from the inside. You can teach others.

#### ENDNOTES

1) In her final learning portfolio one student included a piece of paper with one sentence brush stroked on it in three-inch high letters, dripping ink:

TRUST THE GUSH

**[Editor: "Trust the gush" might look good in brushstrokes]**

Stephanie was hearkening to something I'd said to exhort students to begin writing. Faith and fearlessness, I'd told them. Faith that there is plenty of language in them, because there is. Humans are language animals. And fearlessness in heading down the page with that language. Trust the gush, I told them.

I was channeling Walt Whitman:

And the secret of it all is to write in a gush, the throb, the flood, of the moment—to put things down without deliberation—without worrying about style—without waiting for a fit time and place. . . . You want to catch the first spirit—to tally its truth. By writing at the instant the very heartbeat of life is caught. (Quoted in Wallace 1982, 284—85).

2) In *Holding on to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones: Six Literacy Principles Worth Fighting For* (2009)—a book destined to be a classic in literacy education—Thomas Newkirk writes about the self-critical nature of so many of us when it comes to our writing. We harshly judge our initial words, often before they get to the page. We second guess every sentence. This attitude can be dysfunctional to our writing process. It does not promote growth and discovery. Essential to effective writing, Newkirk believes, are “self-acceptance and a willingness to trust the generative possibilities of language” (76). Our inexperienced student writers, especially, need an attitude of self-generosity.

3) Two writing scholars call the late Donald Murray “America’s greatest writing teacher” (Miller and Newkirk). A Pulitzer Prize winner for editorial writing, columnist, novelist, poet, textbook writer, and university professor, Murray’s mantra was “*Nulla dies sine linea*,” Never a day without a line (Murray 1990, 55). It appeared in all his books about teaching writing. He included it on handouts, in talks, presentations, and workshops. He laminated the expression and gave it to students.

Murray kept what he called a “daybook.” He wrote in it every day, collecting lines, generating leads, jotting ideas, and sketching pictures. He carried the daybook everywhere and wrote on the run. If he had five minutes while waiting for his wife, he pulled out the daybook. He had long ago developed what a high school student of mine once called a “writing state of mind.” To get their writing done, many writers have habits. The habit of writing regularly, at least a little bit every day, is critical to many writers, just like the avid runner is loath to miss a day.

4) More and more teachers have students draw as part of their writing process. I’ve seen students of many ages use sketching and storyboarding to support their writing: Ruth Shagoury with children (2006), Linda Rief with middle school students (2007), Penny Kittle with high school seniors (2008).

Roger Essley is a tireless proponent of visual expression (2008). As a child, he was often stopped from learning by written text. A page of words overwhelmed his visual sensibility. Essley believes that many students in our visual culture benefit from using visual tools to learn. Essley has students use storyboarding to plan their writing. The sketches provide scaffolding that many students—especially boys—need to launch and sustain writing.

5) Peter Elbow makes a distinction between allowing readers access to your mind and allowing readers access to your experience (1981, 317). When writers craft their words, when they have an experience with what they are writing about—not just deal in ideas and concepts (1981 324—325), good readers do more than merely understand the writing. They experience it. Think of how you occupied the basement and second floor bedroom in that town outside Munich in Nazi Germany where *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2006) was set. Think of how the premise, explanation, and examples in *Blink* (Gladwell 2005) made immediate sense. You experienced what Zusak and Gladwell wrote.

6) In the 1970s Ken Macrorie wrote readable, helpful books about writing for teachers and students. My favorite was *Writing to Be Read* (1976). I used it in a creative writing class with high school juniors and seniors. After a few years, our English department combined creative writing with introductory composition and called the course Writing I. It was a bold, philosophical move. We six English teachers, five of whom had studied at the Ohio Writing Project summer institute at Miami University, believed that all writing was an act of creativity. Although writers wrote for different audiences and purposes, the process of writing was creative with language as the medium.

Most good writing, Macrorie said, is surprising, delightful, and rewarding. He dispensed other sound advice, too: Write about what you know. Choose topics important to you. Avoid pretentiousness. Be metaphorical. Sharpen and tighten your language. Cultivate your written voice.

As mentor texts, Macrorie used writers from Shakespeare to Erma Bombeck, as well as the writing of his students. As I taught, always writing what I asked my students to write, always monitoring myself as a writer, I tried to live and teach what I believed made writing work. As a result, I moved farther and farther away from tightly controlled, thesis-driven, bloodless writing that had no voice, no attitude, no bite. I began to keep a journal I wrote in every day, as Daniel Fader suggested students do (1968). I began to develop a writing state of mind. My writing got clearer, more pointed, more rewarding, for both my readers and, more importantly, for me. I was having an experience with whatever I was writing about.

7) In *The Muses Among Us* (2003), Kim Stafford calls revision “the second genius.” “Revision happens best,” he explains, “when it can have the same fervency as first writing” (36). In our lives we all rely on the second genius. As we accumulate information, talk with others, and engage in reflection, we sometimes change our minds and alter our plans. Usually, we make

better decisions. The same process occurs when we write. If I didn't have opportunity to reach the second genius, I wouldn't write.

8) Last summer I taught a multigenre writing course for the New Hampshire Literacy Institute. One morning we talked about the idea of "teacher as writer." Some teachers felt that anyone who proposed to teach students how to write, at any level, ought to be writers themselves, so they knew the intellectual and emotional territory of writing. Others expressed the inadequacy they felt as writers. "I play music," said one teacher, "but I don't call myself a musician."

Enrolled in the course was Maja Wilson, a doctoral student at the University of New Hampshire and author of *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* (2007), a powerful book in which she takes issue with the seeming sanctity of using rubrics to assess writing. About the uneasiness many felt in naming themselves writers, Maja said, "Make it a verb, not a noun. Not an identity—I *am a writer*, but an act: *I write*."

Such a stance by teachers, I thought, such a commitment to embrace writing as an essential act in their lives, would significantly change the way they taught writing. It had to. Just as reading and literature teachers read, writing teachers write. And we are all writing teachers.

9) In 1985 Gordon Wells published an important book about language acquisition titled *The Meaning Makers*. His premise was that infants and toddlers are driven to acquire language by the desire to make meaning. That desire and intellectual proclivity to crack the language code is a genius of our species.

Last winter our granddaughter, not yet three, had grown testy one evening, resisting all attempts to coax her to sleepy town.

"I amn't going to be putted to bed," she said.

The grammar of Leah Mae's sentence is impeccable. She has intuited that most verbs are regularly inflected, and so has logically regularized the past participial ending of "put." Even more exhilarating is that she has mastered the sophisticated linguistic move of making contractions. She had never heard anyone put together *am* and *not*. But she did, naturally and swiftly, serving her perfectly well in asserting what her present and future would *not* include. ("It's a stunning accomplishment at her age," a linguist friend tells me, "to know where to put that negative particle 'not,' let alone how to contract it").

The language is generative. Using it is magical. It's (Dare I use the "C" word?) *creative*. There is room in language for naming and describing; narrating and persuading; musing, conjecturing, and experimenting. There is room for logic and passion. There is room for surprise and delight. Our three-year-old granddaughter speaks. Students kindergarten through college write. We teachers must keep reveling in language ourselves, showing students how we write, telling them why we write, offering them strategies we know work because we have used them. We—along with our colleagues and students—are in this writing business together.

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