



10-24-2016

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Recommended Citation

Bird, John C. and Teaching and Learning Center, "Getting Rid of Procrastination, Writing Like a Rabbit, Learning to Rewrite: Some Advice About the Writing Process" (2016). *The Weekly Reader*. 104.
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October 24, 2016
Volume 8, Issue 8

The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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Getting Rid of Procrastination, Writing Like a Rabbit, Learning to Rewrite: Some Advice About the Writing Process

The blank page daunts us. It daunts all writers. It daunts our students. It daunts us.

Over the years of teaching writing and literature, I have developed some advice for students as they face the daunting task of writing. As I was staring at the blank page that is *The Weekly Reader* before I come up with a topic, it occurred to me that my advice might help as you deal with students and their writing. And it just might be of some help to you, too. Maybe. So, three bits of advice for daunted writers:

1. Get Rid of Procrastination

Advice about writing always says "Don't Procrastinate." Easy to say—and actually wrong. A writer should not rush into writing. A writer needs time to let ideas develop and percolate. But the word "procrastinate" is the problem.

I tell my students that it is okay to put off writing, but the problem is that "p" word. If someone asks

you how your paper is coming, you say "I'm procrastinating," and that makes your stomach hurt, makes you feel guilty. If you start thinking about your paper, your mind reacts and you put it off, put it out of your mind, when what you should be doing is thinking about the paper, letting it gestate and develop.

So I tell students to erase the word "procrastinate" from their vocabulary. Replace it with this word: "incubate." So if someone asks you how your paper is going, rather than say "I'm procrastinating," say "I'm incubating."

My students always laugh when I tell them this, but it is a laugh of relief and recognition. They realize immediately the power and necessity of incubation. Now, when they think about the paper they have to write, rather than putting it off and putting it out of their heads, they can allow themselves to think about it, to let it gestate, to let it incubate and grow.

Getting rid of the word "procrastinating" and replacing it with "incubating" can be very liberating. A word filled with negative connotations is replaced by one with positive connotations.

Of course, there comes a time when you have to stop incubating and start writing. Otherwise, you are just procrastinating again. But when the time comes to write, I have advice for that, too.

2. Write Like a Rabbit

In the fable, it is better to be a turtle than a rabbit. But in writing, it is better to be a rabbit.

I used to write like a turtle. I tell my students about my former process: I would sit and stare at the blank page, then I would write a title. Then I would cross it out and write another title. I would write a first sentence, then cross it out and write another. I would write sentence by sentence, word by word, crossing out words, going back and reading what I had written

“Writing is hard, but there is no need to make it harder than you have to. But the feeling of accomplishment that comes when you write well is nearly unmatched. And writing is one of the deepest forms of learning. I hope this advice can help your students as much as it has helped mine. And I hope it helps you as much as it has helped me!”



Continued from page 1

and rewriting something. Stopping to look up a word. Stopping to do some further research.

I was writing like a turtle. When I got through, hours and hours later, I had a complete draft, one that did not need much further work, if any. As I learned about the writing process—prewriting, writing, and rewriting—I realized that my turtle process was doing all three steps at once. I was telling my students to go through the process in steps, but I was mixing up all the steps. The result was good, but the process was not.

That is when I learned to write like a rabbit. When I get ready to write, with a plan and some prewriting done, with all my incubation done, I write like a rabbit. I write a draft as quickly as I can. I don't worry about anything. I write a draft as quickly as I can, without worrying about how it looks or reads.

When I get through, I have a draft, done quickly. And now I can do what I love to do: rewrite. I tell my students that, like most of them, I hate to write. But I love to rewrite. Once I have a draft, no matter how incomplete or filled with gaps or just plain bad, I know I can get to

work and make it better. And I can do that with pleasure. And that leads to my third piece of advice about writing.

3. Learn How to Rewrite

Most students do not know how to rewrite. In fact, most students don't even know what the word means, much less how to do it. We as teachers are at fault here. I remember when I was in high school and my teacher would give a paper back and tell us to revise it. I had made an “A,” and I didn't have any errors, or very few. What did I need to revise?

I share with my students an excellent article by Nancy Somers, a leading composition scholar, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” *College Composition and Communication* (1980). <http://tinyurl.com/honwc96> Somers interviewed 20 freshmen writers and 20 published adult writers, having them write and revise some writing, then talk about their process. Most of the student writers did not even have a word for revision; when they did, they focused on finding the right word, changing words, crossing out words and finding a new word.

The experienced adult writers talked about rereading to find the center or the kernel of a piece of writing. They talked about rethinking their purpose. They talked about going through level after level of rewriting, working their way down from purpose to thesis to paragraphs, and only then down to the word level. Changing words around when you don't have a clear topic or thesis or argument is like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*—but that is what most students do when they “rewrite.”

Most students write like a turtle, but revise like a rabbit. Reversing that process makes for better writing and a better overall experience. Once they learn this, they can become much better writers—and they can enjoy the process much better.

Writing is hard, but there is no need to make it harder than you have to. But the feeling of accomplishment that comes when you write well is nearly unmatched. And writing is one of the deepest forms of learning. I hope this advice can help your students as much as it has helped mine. And I hope it helps you as much as it has helped me!

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the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

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just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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Thought For the Week

"The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is that you really want to say."
--Mark Twain