How We Write: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blank Page

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How do I write? At the moment, writing this, I’m stretched out on a green leather couch, laptop on a thin pillow, rescue mutt at my feet. I write half the time while reclined on this couch, the other half while slouched in various coffee shops around town, or hunched in plastic chairs at airport gates. I haven’t written meaningful prose while sitting at a desk since graduate school. Desks are props for student meetings, email composition, and the production of administrative verbiage. When I write creatively, whether fiction or criticism, I’m sprawled horizontally with my bare feet on a cushion or a coffee table, or else I’m drooped over my MacBook at a café counter. I thrive on noise, distraction, pets, people. Lots of coffee.

And variety. Over the last several years I’ve learned quite a lot about my academic writing (and my academic writing habits) through the lens of my newer vocation as a novelist. It’s taken a few stumbling attempts to figure out a good and healthy balance between fiction and criticism—though this balance has less to do with time than with disposition. When producing fiction I’m generally in a state of enthralment, losing myself for hours at a stretch and experiencing the act of writing as pure joy. Even if I’m composing a research-heavy chapter in a historical novel, or working through a line-by-line revision of a scene of dialogue, I’m nearly always taking pleasure in the task (some would call this “flow,” I suppose).

Academic writing represents an entirely different experience for me. Sentences don’t come easily; they never have. Even when I’m producing a good number of words a day I often find the work of literary analysis or theoretical argument a source of
screaming frustration. This frustration shows on the page, which tends to be an ugly mess until the very late draft stages in any given piece of writing. My physical disposition while writing mirrors the in-progress state of my academic prose. It’s okay to be sloppy, I constantly reassure myself. You don’t have to be organized, systematic, sequential, off-line, ponderous, or even grammatical, and correct punctuation is purely optional. If you saw what my in-progress documents look like in their early stages you would understand how central disorganization, mess, and sprawl are to my “process,” such as it is.

Don’t believe me? I think I can illustrate what I’m talking about with a simple visual aid. So I know pretty much what I’m going to say (or rather, what I’m going to have said) in those two preceding paragraphs. But they’re not written yet, let alone polished. I’ve decided on the spot to finish this paragraph first to help make a point. Now I’ll take a screen shot of those two preceding paragraphs in their current state and put a box around them. Okay, done. Now I’ll paste that screenshot into this paragraph. Done. Here’s what those last two paragraphs look like at this very moment:

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Producing a book is for me, then, a process of slow but impatient and inevitably disordered accretion, though I would also emphasize the importance of inductive reasoning and inductive writing: starting from the smallest thing, the fragment, and working
from scratch? What do I actually put on that page, and how should I start?

Wanting to be helpful but also specific, I went back and looked through the last four or five book chapters or articles I’d written, then thought for a while about how exactly I wrote them, trying to reconstruct where, in what order, and with what specific sentences they had begun. I realized they nearly all had one thing in common: they began in a specific moment of engagement with a small (usually literary) detail typed up and sitting in front of me before I started writing about it.

So I created a first assignment for the seminar that would encourage the students to experiment with just such an initial fragment, a little something to write about, write with, write around—“the kernel,” I called it. Here is the assignment, exactly as I distributed it in diss sem. I’m including it here not to be prescriptive, but rather to illustrate what I’ve come to understand is my process of working up from the small detail into a more generalizing analytical mode.

Assignment 1: The Kernel

The goal of this first assignment of our calendar year together is to get you writing actual pages that will eventually show up in your dissertation, and perhaps your prospectus. Academic writing can and should be a process of discovery. It will be in and through your writing over the next several years that you will generate the founding ideas and interpretive ingenuities that will form your intellectual and professional identity in the years ahead. But this process of discovery begins and ends with the objects before us: primarily, in our discipline’s case, the literary artifacts that command
our sustained reflection and engagement over the course of many pages and many years.

To that end, we’ll begin with a deceptively straightforward assignment. I want you to identify for me what you see at this moment as the kernel of your prospective dissertation: that line, stanza, poem, sentence, paragraph, chapter, metaphor, image, physical object, or abstraction that most intrigues you, or puzzles you, or moves you, or repulses you into considering it worthy of your sustained critical attention.

To put this another way, if you had to start writing your dissertation tomorrow, what would be your founding text or object, and with what particular fragment of it would you begin? Your kernel might be a snippet of dialogue from Titus Andronicus, an anonymous lyric preserved in a fifteenth-century manuscript, an illustration by Blake, a confounding paragraph from Mrs. Dalloway or Cane or Finnegans Wake, or an ephemeral snippet of experimental digital poetry. If you feel you’re not quite at the point where you can settle on one object or fragment, risk it anyway: the stakes of this assignment are low, and you can complete it simply by writing about a line or passage that speaks in some way to your current interests, however unformed.

Once you have identified your kernel, I want you to think about it for a while and then just start writing. Describe it, summarize it, and contextualize it for me briefly; then, most importantly, interpret it. Let its complexity, its provocation, guide your analysis as you explore what about this kernel most intrigues you. Pay attention, if you’re so inclined, to form and style—rhetoric, syntax, diction, rhythm, prosody—so that your initial interpretation speaks to the literary substance of your object rather than simply its historical or political theme. The only real stipulation here is that your pages may not derive from a seminar paper or any other previously written work. They need to be fresh writing that thinks anew about what’s in front of you. No need for footnotes or references of any kind. If you want to engage in dialogue with another critic or two that’s fine, but citations aren’t necessary.

I would like you to write 3–5 pages, double-spaced, to hand in at some point before our next meeting, which will take place Friday, February 24, at 9:30. I will respond and meet with you individually to discuss this assignment by the end of February. You should complete this more inductive assignment while you work on Assignment 2: Comparative Dissertation Report, which will be presented orally in seminar that day.

This sort of practical, in-the-moment approach to beginning essays, chapters, and books has always helped me get going even if my thoughts are hopelessly jumbled and I have no earthly idea what I’m going to be arguing in the pages ahead. It gets words on the page, and that can sometimes be the most important thing. Let’s say your goal is to write five hundred words of your book or your dissertation every day. Some days you’ll write more, some less, but five hundred words will usually make you feel good about your progress. Well, if you simply type into your document two stanzas of Chaucer’s rhyme royal, you’ve already produced twenty percent of your daily quota!

Sounds glib, but when I’m producing first drafts, especially of academic work, I’m most often not “writing,” I’m typing. What’s the difference between writing and typing? Typing happens when I’m putting something down on the page, getting shit done; writing is what happens when I’m reworking what I’ve
typed into stronger sentences, more shapely paragraphs, more coherent arguments. Understanding the differences between these two modes has helped me slog along through chapters and books even when what I’m typing represents a quite early stage in the development of a line of thought or piece of scholarship.

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Another word for writing, then, is revision. I would guess that I spend four or five times the effort and energy revising my academic prose as I do in initially drafting it. One of the consistent practices I adopt in revision has been the careful scrutiny of my subjects and verbs during the production of final drafts. Every sentence in both my fiction and my academic writing gets parsed with a few basic questions in mind. What is the grammatical subject of this sentence—and, just as importantly, why? Should this subject be performing that action? Are there other agents and actions that might more effectively get across the substantive point I’m trying to make? What’s a stronger or subtler verb I could use here? Six times out of ten the sentence will be just fine as is, the way I first typed it. But I make serious edits on nearly half of my sentences, consciously following basic and rather old-fashioned rules for good writing, such as avoiding over-reliance on to-be verbs. Whenever I use a to-be verb I do so consciously, as when I want to emphasize the two sides of a predicate nominative or predicate adjective. In those cases an is is exactly what I want. I can now sniff out those moments in my writing when I’m trying too hard to avoid to-be verbs. The syntax and diction tend to get crabbled, overly dense, with a strained verb or a mixed metaphor resulting from a mismatch between subject and predicate.

Yeah, mixed metaphors. Oof! They’re the hallmark of tendentious, portentous academic writing. Witness an actual passage from one of my books, published about ten years ago:

For the most part, the epistemological segregations that defined modernity and its regimes of knowledge production over the course of the twentieth century were resolutely opposed to the kinds of historical self-scrutiny demanded by the acceptance or even the entertainment of Bruno Latour’s corrosive proposition.

An atrocious sentence by any measure. Bloated, overly complex, reliant on an excess of subordinating constructions and baffling overstatement. Oh, and talk about mixed metaphors! Segregation, regimes, self-scrutiny, acceptance, entertainment, corrosion. I mean, what was I even trying to say here? The sentence substitutes verbiage for thought, tortuous syntax for analysis. Rereading it helps me understand why I’ve turned with such enthusiasm and industry to the practices of revision described above. They’ve changed my academic writing style quite radically, I hope for the better—and I wince when I look back at the kind of prose I sometimes produced earlier in my career. My rule now: if I can’t happily read a sentence aloud the day after I typed it, and understand in the moment the relation of parts to whole, it gets the knife.

(Yes, I realize there have been rather fierce debates around this issue in recent years. Polemics against the logic of “common sense,” contests to identify the worst academic writing, curmudgeonly attacks on theory masked as prim defenses of plain speaking, and so on. Scholars I admire greatly have made strong arguments against just the sort of critical style I now find myself favoring and practicing. For the purposes of this collection, though, I wanted to be honest about the issue rather than pretending such differences of taste, style, inflection, practice, and commitment don’t exist and don’t affect the choices we make as writers. So please note that I’m talking here about how I write, not how others should write.)
How We Write catches me at a transitional moment in my writing life. I am coming to appreciate ever more deeply the power of story in shaping every piece of writing I produce, including the central critical arguments about literature and language informing my academic prose. I’ve become more attuned to the role of plot, suspense, and character in the unfolding of articles and book chapters (not just my own), and I’ve made a deliberate effort to bring out these narrative elements regardless of the subject I’m treating. I might be writing about William Caxton and his liturgical printing, or about images of uterine vellum in lyric poetry. But even in these cases I love figuring out who my protagonist should be and telling its, her, or his story in the most effective way I can—subplots, villains, and all. My protagonist in any given piece of writing might be a poem, a stanza, an author, an interpretive crux, a manuscript. At the moment she’s a brown cow, an animal beloved of an early Irish saint who comes back from the dead to inscribe on this creature’s skin an epic story of a cattle raid. Her hide has become a piece of parchment, you see. That’s not how I write, thankfully, though at the moment this ageing dog is nuzzling my feet, and while I really like my laptop I’m looking at her down there, and wondering what her next life will hold.