The way I write—by which I mean both the practices I follow and (please God) the style of my writing—has changed over the years: though, as I tell all my students, that doesn't mean it's become any easier.

I wrote my PhD thesis (on the woolen industry in Yorkshire between 1780 and 1840) in three weeks. Really. Starting at 7 A.M., with thirty minutes off for lunch (including a walk to the corner shop for a newspaper, trailed by our deeply suspicious cat all the way there and all the way back), an hour off for dinner and the quick pleasure of a novel, knocking off at midnight. Every day for twenty-one days. When I finished I promised myself I'd never work like that again. Years later, while I was writing The Colonial Present, I became wholly absorbed in the attempt to keep up with a cascade of real-time events in multiple places. My training as an historical geographer hadn't prepared me for that—I'd always envied the ability of colleagues writing about contemporary issues to make sense of a world that was changing around them as they wrote—and there were times when I yearned for the less frenetic pace of archival work. But I wasn't writing to a deadline—though as the project swelled beyond an analysis of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan to include Israel's renewed assault on occupied Palestine and then the US-led invasion of Iraq, I decided I must finish before Bush invaded France.

Deadlines are the problem: I've always had the greatest difficulty writing to meet them because I can never be sure where my words will take me. Lecturing is something else entirely. There's something infinitely more will take me, but lecturing is something else entirely. There's something infinitely more

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words will take me. Lecturing is something else entirely. There’s something infinitely more pressing about facing a live audience the next morning, and since I don’t perform from a prepared script I don’t have to fine-tool my prose or curb my flights of fancy, and I like the sense of freedom that gives me. Anyone writing in those pre-digital days could also rely on a raft of excuses to stay afloat in the face of turbulent editors—not least clinging to the flotsam of “I posted the manuscript last week.” But a PhD thesis combined the worst of both worlds: appealing to a mail-storm was out of the question, and my Cambridge examiners were live and all too close at hand. The problem was that I had made little real progress and instead had devoted myself to acting (a live audience again). Every Wednesday evening I would walk home after rehearsals promising myself a fresh start the following morning. But who starts on a Thursday? So we agreed, me and I, to wait until Monday. Monday evening found me walking home after rehearsals renewing my vows. But it was the 29th of the month, and who starts anything then? So we both agreed to wait until the 1st of the month. And when that arrived, it was a Thursday. You could keep this up forever, or at least I could. In this case, the back story was that I had been married for just three months when my mother-in-law offered to take my wife for an extended visit to her family in Colombia, and I realized that this was an opportunity for uninterrupted, distraction-free writing.

Those two adjectives tell the real story: how I welcomed those interruptions and distractions! There always seemed to be good reasons to defer putting pen to paper (or, more accurately in those days, fingers to the keys of my electric typewriter). As you will have gathered I was, and remain, a past master at procrastination. I know that many writers have an iron will and obediently follow a strict self-discipline. Perhaps the most extreme, though sadly apocryphal, example is Victor Hugo, who supposedly instructed his manservant to confiscate all his clothes so that he couldn’t leave the house while he was working on a novel. But that’s not me (I don’t have a manservant).

Or at any rate, it’s not me until I immerse myself in the writing. And that’s always been my first problem: starting. Over the years I’ve learned to know and trust myself. So I know I can write in the morning, sometimes in the evening but never in the afternoon—so I’ve stopped trying. And if the words aren’t there on Monday morning, there is no point in spending the day staring at the screen and hesitantly pecking at the keys, because I know very well that the next morning I will come in, read the print-out and tear the whole thing up. Better to find other things to do—especially if I can convince myself that they are getting me into the right space to start the next day. The converse is also true. If the words are leaking out of my fingertips dismally early on a Sunday morning, then out they must come (and, in case you are wondering, I’m still married to my wife—who learned all this long before I did). The irony is that once the text is moving, I’ve always wondered why it took me so long to get started.

I invariably wonder about that because I actually enjoy the process once it’s under way, though each time I also wonder whether I’ll be able to pull it off again. Whenever I sit at my desk, or increasingly these days my laptop, there’s almost always a flicker of doubt: will the words come this time? I imagine (another conceit, I know) that it’s something like the moment just before the diver launches himself into space. I pause, waiting to break the still surface of the screen.

I have my own swimming-pool library, of course. I’ll have read and read and then read some more, and I’ll have organized my notes, quotations, comments, thoughts and ideas into a long working—I was going to say draft, but it’s more of a storyboard. In the past, the storyboard would have been the product of reading and thinking, by which I mean it was a verbal-textual product-in-formation. Reading is a creative process, to be sure, though it’s usually an internal one as you work with the text to
I don’t read (or write) with a single purpose; on the way all sorts of other ideas flicker into being, rarely fully formed, that might end up in the essay I’m working on at the moment but might just as well end up as the spur for something else altogether. My sources are all over the place, and ideas are as likely to emerge from fiction as they are from anywhere else. Years ago I read William Boyd’s *An Ice-Cream War*, and one passage—“Gabriel thought maps should be banned. They gave the world an order and reasonableness it didn’t possess”—stayed with me, like a burr clinging to my jeans. I used it as an epigraph in one of the chapters in *Geographical Imaginations*, but years later I surprised myself by returning not only to that passage but also to the incident it described, and unfolding it into a completely new essay on cartographic vision and what I called “corpography” in the First World War (in which another novel, Tom McCarthy’s *C*, also occupies a central place: I can’t think of a more beautiful combination of skilled research and superb writing). I called the essay “Gabriel’s Map”—of course—but, more figuratively for my present purposes, working on it confirmed that there’s something deeply deceptive about mapping, a false sense of security that has to be supplemented by lively interruptions activated through the body.

So I also like to be free of the text—springing away from the board, if you like (and I do like)—so that for me there’s always been another moment in creative work that is an intensely physical, even corporeal process, thinking that is best conducted on the move, sometimes in front of a class but often out walking, alive to the world around me until it disappears into my own fabricated world. I’ve always had the sensation of *feeling* myself think: of ideas moving around, words forming in my mouth, whole phrases springing to my lips (the real trick is to remember them!). I often talk to myself, even say passages out loud, because the rhythm and cadence of the prose matters to me, and I know it does to some readers too. I remember Roger Lee, when he was editor of the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, writing to tell me that he had just spent a summer’s afternoon wandering around his garden reading aloud parts of my manuscript on the Egyptian journeys of Florence Nightingale and Gustave Flaubert. It was a characteristically thoughtful and wonderfully appreciative remark, and I’ve never forgotten it. In some measure, I think, I always have Roger and his garden in my mind’s eye as I try to coax more words into the world.

Even writing is a corporeal process. I can’t think with my laptop on my lap—it has to be on a table or a desk—and I need a chair that I can push back or pull up; I need space to get up, scoot to a book-case, stand and gaze out of the window; and I write best in bare feet (seriously: perhaps that’s where the diving metaphor comes from). I usually write three or four pages without much editing. This is never the whole argument or story, just the first three or four pages, and—like those crime novelists whose work I most admire—I’m never sure where I’m going next. (How I despair of those who tell me they have finished their research so that all—all!—they have to do is “write it up,”
as though writing is not part of the creative research process: if what you’ve written is merely a record of what you’ve done or thought, then perhaps you should work in a laboratory. Three or four hot pages uncurl from the printer, and then I take myself off—sometimes to my office at the university, sometimes to a coffee shop—where I go over what I’ve written. It’s much better editing hard copy than trying to do so on the screen, and for some reason I have to use a black roller-ball; pencil doesn’t work, and blue ink is a disaster. By the time I’ve re-written the draft, expanded sentences that I now see are shorthand for something that needs much more explication, and added notes to myself about work that needs to be done to fill out gaps, I’ve also got a sense of where the writing is taking me next.

So it’s back to the keyboard—and back to the beginning of the manuscript. I rework my original pages, and by the time I’ve finished (scribbling on my original storyboard and annotating the map while I’m writing the essay, adding footnotes which will sometimes make it into the finished version but are just as likely to be notes to myself, and pushing further out into the unknown) those three or four pages will have grown to six or seven. I use footnotes constantly, sometimes as commentary, often as placeholders for paragraphs to be drafted in the next round of revisions, and always as a holding pen for references. I never use the Harvard reference system while I’m compositing—to me, the arch-enemy of good writing—and the final labor of transforming (deforming) my prose into the obstacle course of brackets, names and dates required by most journals is the most depressing part of the whole business.¹ Once my six or seven pages are on the screen the cycle starts again: back to the beginning, editing, annotating, moving some of those footnotes into the text (which is often the best place for them) and composing another three or four pages, slowly pushing on.

It’s a discontinuous process, but I’m always writing from the beginning towards the end, although I never know in advance where that will be. It isn’t seamless, and sometimes everything comes to a juddering halt. These days I use my blog as (among other things) a sort of five-finger exercise, practicing ideas for long-form essays and getting the words to flow across the screen, but some days that’s not enough. In fact, I can look back at virtually all of my published work and remember how the gaping white space between this paragraph and that marks a week, sometimes (far) longer, when nothing was working. That’s almost always been because I didn’t know enough or because I’d tried to dodge a difficulty. So I eventually admit to myself that I need to read and think some more, to go back and undo the preceding paragraphs, even—the horror of it!—to delete whole passages (that’s easily the hardest part, but I’ve learned to save those deletions in case they can be given a new lease of life somewhere else), and often to re-order or even re-think the narrative. This also usually involves going off to find new source materials, reading more essays and more books, so that the whole journey opens up again. En route, my desk becomes steadily more cluttered with piles of books, previous print-outs, pages from articles and far too many black roller-ball pens. There’s no trail of breadcrumbs to take me back to the beginning, but there are several coffee mugs in different stages of decomposition which mark the stages of my increasing immersion in the text. Friends and family know when I’m not working on something: my desk is tidy. But once I’m in that space (the zone?) I never, ever stop the research and switch to writing.

I’ve described all this as working with a storyboard, largely because I think of what I do now as telling stories. This means two things. First, I think it’s a mistake to front-load theory into any essay; unless what you are about is textual exegesis—I did

a lot of that in the past, but if I do it now it’s *en passant*—that act will needlessly limit the story you tell. You may think that’s a good thing—after all, you can’t say everything and you need to keep what you write within bounds—but I’ve come to think of writing as a journey that takes me (and, crucially, my readers) to unexpected places. Front-loading theory is the intellectual equivalent of a conjurer coming on stage and showing the audience how a trick is done before they do it. There’s a reason they don’t do that. I realize that this *is* a device which helps a lot of writers magic words onto the page, but it gives the impression that theory is something to be “applied,” that it provides a template, whereas I try to treat it as a *medium* in which I work—and one that will be changed by the substantive materials I use. (In much the same way, my “map” is constantly changed as I travel with it: it’s not the map but the *mapping* that matters). I also think that the best sort of theory is carried in solution: if you know your Michel Foucault or Judith Butler, say, you will recognize their hand in what I write, but if you don’t you are not disqualified from grasping what I’m saying. It follows, too, that theory in my writing is always impure and hybrid; I borrow from multiple sources, since I still haven’t found anyone who asks all the interesting questions or provides all the satisfying answers, and I’m usually aware of the tensions and contradictions between them. But ultimately the story is the thing.

Second, writing is no longer a purely verbal-textual process for me because I now work from a visual storyboard. Everything I’ve written for the past five or six years (apart from this essay, ironically) has emerged out of presentations that I’ve tried to design to make as visually arresting as possible. I’ve found a real pleasure in image research—which often takes me to sources I would never have found any other way, and opens up avenues of inquiry I’d never have glimpsed otherwise—but it’s also a way of “slow thinking”: of trying to work out how best to show what I mean, and even of figuring out what I mean. One of Allan Pred’s favourite Benjamin quotations was “I have nothing to say, only to show,”² and at long last I’m discovering the power of that resonant phrase. So as I search for images, and juggle text boxes and fonts, I’m thinking about how this will *look* and *in consequence* what it will say...instead of lines of text marching across the screen, words appearing from I never know quite where, everything slows down and, again, I *feel myself think*. I’ve found this even more immersive than pure writing, a process of creation that constantly draws me in and draws me back and pushes me on. It’s also interactive: it’s much easier to re-jig a presentation, which I do every time depending on the previous audience’s reaction and the Q&A, than it is to re-work a text (and reading a paper to an audience is in most cases one of the least effective ways of communicating anything of substance to anyone). I should probably add that I prefer Keynote to PowerPoint, I never use preset templates and there’s not a bullet point in sight. Since I don’t have a script to accompany the presentation, the only disadvantage is that once I’ve performed the thing enough times for me to be more or less satisfied with the argument, at least for the moment, I then have to convert a cascade of images and quotations into a text….Sometimes, to be honest, that means I don’t; I’ve done the fun part, and I shrink from the labor of conversion. Sometimes I do—in which case the whole process starts all over again, using the presentation as the basis for the storyboard and adding more notes, ideas and sources to track down.

There’s also another, more traditional sense of interactivity involved in my work, because there comes a time when writing has to join up with reading: communication is, after all, a collaborative not a competitive process. So I’ve always relied on good friends (colleagues and graduate students alike) who are willing to read my far too long drafts and tell me exactly what they

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disagree with, what they don't get, and what is wrong with them; they almost always suggest other things to think about and other sources to track down. Referees are often a different kettle of fish, particularly if you haven't referred to them (which is what some of them seem to think “refereeing” means). But here too there is an opportunity for dialogue—there’s no point in acceding to every criticism and suggestion if you're not persuaded by them, and I've learned most from those editors who have identified the points which they think are particularly sharp while leaving me to make up my own mind so long as I can justify it.

In this sense, writing—like reading—can be a never-ending process. In much the same way that you can't read the same book twice, because you are no longer the same person that read it first time round, you read your own work differently when you see it through someone else's eyes. And that’s one of the best things about the whole process. There are times when writing is a solitary and remarkably lonely affair. There’s a passage at the very end of E.P. Thompson’s *Whigs and Hunters*—one of my political and intellectual heroes ever since I worked on my PhD—where he describes himself sitting in his study, the clock ticking towards midnight, the desk covered with notes and drafts. I identify with that; but there is also that wonderful moment when you are released back into the world that lies outside the text—with your text in your hands and in your reader’s. There’s no greater reward.