

A Different Kind of Writing Course

A long-lasting debate among writing instructors has been the product vs. process debate. On one side you have the teachers who view writing from the point of view of the end product. The approach is to give the student enough information about what makes a good sentence, paragraph, essay, story or novel, and they will figure out how to produce that product.

The teachers on the process side emphasize the process of writing and point out that simply knowing what makes a good cake doesn't mean a person knows how to bake one. They approach writing by helping the student understand the stages in the writing process and assume that out of this process-oriented approach the student will create a worthwhile product.

The “process” school of teaching was initially a reaction against what they saw as a rigid structure for teaching writing that did not adapt to the individual student. Ironically, within a few decades, those following a process approach ended up as rigid as the product-oriented instruction their predecessors railed about.

Truthfully, both sides have a point. Understanding what makes a good story is important to a fiction writer. However, for the student, understanding something of the process of writing is also important. However, more important than that is for students to understand THEIR OWN processes of writing.

This course is different in that you will learn about the novel as a product. You will learn what makes a good story, compelling characters, believable worlds, dialog that draws the reader into the conversation, sentences that are power packed and scenes that hook your readers and make them turn that page.

However, you will also discover your own way to accomplish those things. The important truth that both the product and process oriented teachers miss is that everyone is different. While we may all be headed to the same destination, some of us take the interstate, some take secondary highways, and some ride the back roads. Some head straight for their destination. Others take the scenic route with lots of detours.

Of course, there are ways to optimize your trip which vary with the roads you travel. That's what this course is all about. You will learn what makes a good novel. Then you will be presented with a variety of “paths” to reach your goal. So, for instance, instead of being given one method of planning the plot for your story you will be given several including one which does not involve planning at all.

This course is not MY course. It is YOURS. I will be the guide by the side more than the sage on the stage. When I give several different options, treat it like an educational buffet. Sample each. Choose the one you like or mix and match. Don't expect to be consistent either. One person might be very detailed in creating characters, but use only a minimal outline when it comes to plot. Another discovers their characters as they develop the plot. We will have exercises that will work with your own natural approach to the writing process.

The Writing Process

While we each approach the details of writing differently, there is a general writing process that we all process follow somewhat. This overview can help you understand the structure of this course and something about how to adapt your style to the overall process of writing.

There are four basic stages: Prewriting, Planning, Composition and Rewriting

Pre-Writing

Prewriting refers to all that which precedes the act of conscious planning or composition. We have intentional and unintentional pre-writing.

Unintentional Pre-Writing

Unintentional pre-writing consists of your entire life experience which you bring to your writing. Everything you experience in your life becomes part of that treasure chest from which you draw ideas, emotions, knowledge. Whether it is a great dinner at a four-star bistro or a sloppy hamburger in a greasy spoon on a road trip, whether a life-changing event like a wedding or graduation or everyday triumphs like using all six letters in a Scrabble game, whether it is a major grief like losing a parent or a minor one like losing your favorite pocket knife, each event defines us and gives us a wealth of emotional and factual information we can use to help weave our stories.

Intentional Pre-Writing

Secondly, you have intentional pre-writing. This would include research for your novel, reading similar novels in the same genre and learning from them and thinking about your writing. Most of what I have written in this lesson I “spoke” to myself laying flat on my back with my eyes closed planning in my mind the ideas I wanted to express to you.

Some people have rituals they follow before they write. Many Christian writers I know pray over their writing asking for God to guide their thoughts. Some people meditate and visualize the scenes they are about to write. Some people do writing exercises using writing prompts. Others get their writing environment set up right.

Planning

The second stage is planning. Planning is where you get an idea in your mind about how the novel is going to proceed. Some authors have detailed plot outlines. Others have very minimal outlines. Some have none at all and “write by the seat of their pants.” But even these “pantsers,” as they are known among writers usually have an idea in their mind, if not where the story will end, at least where it will begin.

In this course, we will discuss three basic planning models with tips for optimizing each.

Composition

The third stage is composition. This is the stage where you turn your planning into a story. This is the point where you wrap your fingers around that pen or hover them over the keyboard and begin putting words on paper (or into electronic print on a screen). This stage needs to be kept free of the impulse to edit. Editing and composition are different brain functions. Being too concerned about quality during the composition process can paralyze creativity. However, as this class attempts to adjust to many different types of personalities, we will show you ways to appease your inner editor during the composition process if you are not able to lock him/her/it away for an entire rough draft.

Revision

Someone once said, “All writing is rewriting.” What they meant is that usually what you read is not anything like what was originally written. Once you get it, though, rewriting can provide you with a great sense of freedom. If, like some of us, you had English teachers who forced you to write “pressure compositions” in class which not only had to make sense but had to be perfectly spelled and punctuated in ink without any scratch-outs or changes, discovering that you can rewrite what you have written is a great sense of release.

We will discuss several processes and styles of rewriting including one in which you can switch back and forth between rewriting and composing.

NOT ALWAYS IN ORDER!!!

Many, if not most, writing books and courses treat these stages as rigidly sequential. However, it is much more fluid than that. Often you are jumping back and forth between them. You find yourself composing your story and suddenly discover your wonderful plot outline just isn't working. So you go

back and change a bit of it here and there. Or you are rewriting, and a great idea occurs to you for a new scene. So you leave editing mode and go back to composition.

Remember, the RIGHT method of writing is the one that works best for you to reach your goal.

Discovering Your Own Style

At one point, I toyed with the idea of putting together a long multiple-choice survey form to help you find your own style. Score 30 and you are an auditory plotter editor. Score 15 and you're a visual pantsner dasher. However, I realized that writing/learning styles are rarely as simple as putting a single label on someone. Most of us are mulch-dimensional. We resist simple categorization. Most of the time I might be basically a visual learner, but for one type of learning, I might do better listening to a tape. I might generally use detailed outlines, but for this story, I'd rather take a more spontaneous approach. In short, you have to figure out for yourself what your style is.

So, how are you going to figure this out? Simple. You try different things and see which ones work best for you. For instance, we will talk about several ways to create characters. One is to make a list of characteristics ranging from hair color to musical tastes. Another involves you visualizing the person. Another involves you recording a mock interview with them. If you start making a list and get terribly bored, then switch to visualization or interviewing. The same goes for the other lessons in this course. I will try to give you as many options as possible so that you can take your own path to writing your novel your way.