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[Writers' Craft Box](#)

What this section is intended to do:

Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as



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opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Writer, editor, and writing coach and consultant, Noelle Sterne publishes widely in writers' and mainstream magazines. Articles have appeared in Children's Book Insider, Long Ridge Writers eNews, Pure Inspiration, 11.11, The Write Place At the Write Time, Writer's Digest special issues, the 2008 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market, Writers' Journal, Writing World, and The Writer. Most recently, two writing craft pieces are published in the September issue of The Writer, and spiritual-practical articles appear in the September/October issue of 11.11 and September issue of LivingNow (Australia). Sample query letters of articles that sold are included in Moira Allen's The Writer's Guide to Queries, Pitches and Proposals (2nd ed.), New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2010 (publication date September 21, 2010).

Based on Ms. Sterne's academic consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). Her manual of practical spirituality for reaching lifelong yearnings, Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams, is in publisher consideration.

Forge Ahead or Clean Up?

By Noelle Sterne

How do you write? Zap out your first draft at the speed of bees and ignore all sins just to get it down? Or lumber like mud and labor over each word, phrase, and comma before inching to the next?

A writing colleague, author of nonfiction business books, always did a first draft “at white heat,” spilling out everything, censoring nothing. Then, after a rest, he’d go back to pare, revise, and correct. Another colleague, a fiction writer, always composed a single paragraph at a time “with great lip-gnawing” and wouldn’t even entertain the next segment until she had the first precisely “right.”

Which is better? Which makes for more effective writing? Which were you taught was the only, inviolable method? Which really entices you more?

The answers to these questions reside within each of us and possibly within our chosen genres. Nevertheless, several touchstones tell you if you’re honoring your best methods. Consider these questions:

- Do you feel your usual process is forced?
- Is it getting in the way of your writing?
- Is it incongruent with your real writing thrust?
- Do you distrust the present use of your writing time and energy?
- Have you lost your momentum?
- Do you suspect you’re stalling in some subtle way?

If you’re nodding vigorously or even smirking with embarrassment at any of these questions, it’s time to look further. Here are some advantages and downsides of the two major approaches so you can determine which really works best for you, and when.

Forging Ahead: Nights of White Heat

Whether it’s at the white heat of my business friend or a burnt orange, barreling ahead has many advantages.

1. You get it while it’s hot. Your excitement and inspiration are at their

highest, so your words, excessive and otherwise, surge out easily.

2. You build on your excitement, accelerating momentum.

3. You continue moving, crucial for sustaining your zest for the work.

4. As your creative juices flow fully around the main idea, you can easily liberate related ideas. And scrawl them down.

5. Through the writing itself, you get a better sense of where the work is going.

6. You simply keep going, as you know you should.

7. You really do make progress.

8. You get the idea out of your system, your head, and your digestion. An unexpressed idea can weigh on your mind and stomach like undigested steak. Or seethe in your head and heart like a festering ulcer.

9. You save insomnia time. This may not be a major concern for you, but it is for me. During the day, I can easily drown out the new seed and its cry for expression by nonstop to-dos, talk radio, TV, and client phone calls.

But at night, when the day's events have simmered down, my mind, tired and defenseless, is pulled back to the submerged idea. As weary as I may be, it keeps me up. And worse—associated ideas, phrases, sentences, titles, and possibly excellent metaphors pop out from all directions, like vines growing too fast.

If I can manage to, I get up, slit-eyed, and start scribbling. But I know I've lost much essence and wish mightily I'd stopped before that tenth client call to record—at error-full white heat—what's knocking so mercilessly now. I can avoid but I can't hide.

In contrast to such attempts at evasion, writing coaches and professional writers advise us to go for the heat. Lecturing to beginning writers at Harvard, B. F. Skinner decrees: "Full speed ahead, and damn the stylebook."^[1]

In a close echo, English professor, essayist, and columnist for the Boston Globe Donald Murray explains:

Finish, then evaluate. Perfect is the enemy of good. . . . We all establish premature standards that keep us from finishing, often from even starting. Practice what [a mentor] tells me. "Get it down, then worry about making it better." [2]

Other writers agree. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jane Smiley shares excellent insight why:

For real revision to begin, it is essential for the writer to push all the way to the end of the first draft, no matter how awkward the draft seems, for hidden in the rough draft, as rough as it can possibly be, are all the answers to the writer's questions about the material.[3]

Granted, forging ahead is at once the scariest and most exhilarating aspect of writing. Too many “writers” we all know chirp blithely, “Oh, I’ve got it written—in my head. Just have to type it out.” They’re in for a surprise.

No matter how often you’ve conquered the empty page, screen, or mind, forging ahead takes guts. It’s the quintessential act of writing, the constant wrestle with the terror of blankness. And worse, when we do get the words down, our “premature standards,” in Murray’s words, constantly expose us to that ever-lurking inner judge.

This exposure may explain why we yield to the temptation to halt, backtrack and apply emergency grammatical transfusions to the sentences we’ve just written. We’ve momentarily vanquished the dread of blankness—although we can barely stand the words, at least they’re down. Yet, if we really do want to finish the work, at some point we must keep forging ahead.

Two Reasons Not to Forge Ahead for Too Long

But after we’ve got a good chunk written, forging ahead, if not completely detrimental, can confuse us. A novelist told of a crushing experience. Chugging along at off-white heat, halfway through he realized he’d taken a wrong turn. With a bleat of anguish, he saw he was writing another novel; he’d gotten carried away with a third-tier character. So . . .

1. Too much forging ahead can put you, like this novelist, in danger of derailing. You go off the track completely and into foreign wasteland, which has little relationship to what you thought you wanted to write and have been writing.
2. Too much forging ahead fools you into thinking you don’t need to think. (Huh?) This reason, less obvious than the first, mirrors a right-left brain tussle. You squirm between creativity and deliberation, intuition and reflection and get debilitated on both sides.

I’m not at all denying the place of wind-streaked writing and certainly know how

liberating it can be. But if you don't do some thinking early, the necessity for it won't fade. You can dodge but you can't hide.

Cleaning Up: Days of Thought and Revision

And thinking is at the heart of the cleanup. Of course, we must assume you've written something, whether an overblown first draft or a paltry paragraph. Like nights of white heat, devoting yourself to days of gray-cell action can yield a bolstering range of benefits.

1. You give yourself a respite from new, raw writing.
2. If you haven't looked at the piece or project for a long time, revisiting it reorients you. It refreshes and resituates you to the mindset and scene of the work.
3. When you use your powers of judgment, you gain or regain your focus. You may even learn what the work is really about. This recognition, of course, is crucial for next the moment you choose to forge ahead.
4. You exercise your critical, editorial eye.
5. You keep learning your craft. In this we can never get enough practice.
6. In the cleaning-up process, masses of inconsistencies and lapses in sequence, structure, or logic leap out at you. These revelations, mortifying as they may feel, are also essential for your later proceeding. And they'll eliminate the need to rewrite or recheck later. You won't need to comb every line from Chapter 2 to Chapter 22 to make sure the heroine's eye color or philosophy of life match or change plausibly.
7. As you clean up, you gain an undeniable sense of accomplishment.
8. Even if you're not fully satisfied with the current draft, it's a step closer to your initial pristine vision of the perfected work. Whatever the number of drafts to follow, the present scouring brings you closer to the final one.
9. You gain hope: The thing is closer to completion.
10. And with this progress, cleaning up may—no, should—keep you excited about the work.

Like the camp of writers who swear by forging ahead first, others are as adamant about cleaning up as you go. Children's writer and Newbery Award winner Sid Fleischman admits he favors revision right from the beginning: "I don't write a rough first draft. I write a rough first page and I do that page over and over until I get it as good as I can. Only then do I go on to the next page, and the next." Perfecting those early pages, Fleischman says, shows him the

“background, character, voice, style, story movement—all at once.” Then he knows where his story is going.[4]

Dylan Thomas, one of my favorite poets, beautifully describes the excitement and art of revising:

What I like to do is treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone . . . to hew, carve, mold, coil, polish, and plane them into patterns, sequences, sculptures, figures of sound expressing some lyrical impulse, some spiritual doubt or conviction, some dimly realized truth I must try to reach and realize
[5]

Two Reasons Not to Clean Up for Too Long

This kind of word crafting, shaping, loving is indeed heady. But too much cleaning up can also carry drawbacks. As forging ahead opens the gate for the wild stallion, cleaning up can pen him into a choking stall.

1. You get more and more narrowly focused and bog down in minutiae. Your squinting eyes smart, and you ponder, as if on the fate of the universe whether a comma should come next, or not.

2. Without fear of contradiction, you use the faultless rationale that you’re “writing.” Granted, writing may be largely rewriting, but too much cleaning up is like doing a college paper. You spend 98 percent of your time reading and taking notes, convincing yourself you’re really thinking and writing. But all you’re doing is copying down others’ thoughts. When you endlessly clean up your current work, you put off the teeth-gritting plunge into the icy pool of new writing.

What Works for You?

Now you can decide more consciously when to forge ahead and when to clear up. Sometimes forging ahead bestows loose-shirt relief from close editing. Sometimes cleaning up delivers steady relief from galloping thoughts.

The solution, finally, lies in balance and fluidity. Any combination and variation is possible, as an experienced writer describes: “When I write, especially short nonfiction pieces, I often bang out the whole thing first in a draft I wouldn’t ever show my dog. Then I go back and chisel away.”

Depending on the project and genre, he varies methods. “Sometimes with a longer piece, like a chapter in my novel, right from the beginning I go slower. This gives me the psychological space to keep asking, ‘What do I really want to say here?’ And when I give myself enough time, the answers always come. Then I go back a few pages to adjust and recast.”

The poet Laura Chester describes her blend of forging ahead and cleaning up as she creates a poem:

When I first begin writing a poem, the words come quickly and I don't try to censor myself. Then I immediately type up what I have . . . I type draft after draft almost obsessively until that first soft clay shapes itself into the poem it has become.

Chester also refers to something few have spoken about, which I mentioned earlier as an advantage of cleaning up:

When I rewrite I have to retrieve that original urge; otherwise it becomes mere correction and something vital is lost. True revision can be as exciting and “creative” as the first attempt.[6]

I used to detest rewriting, probably because I'd lost that “original urge” and mistakenly thought the two ways of working had to be opposites. When I discovered Chester's words, they helped me reconcile the surface disparity between the creative thrill of forging ahead and what I had perceived as the secretarial mundanity of cleaning up.

As you see, the two approaches don't have to be mutually exclusive. Each serves at different phases in the writing, and your individual styles and preferences will guide you when to use one approach or the other.

As you practice listening to yourself, you'll become more alert to the avoidance mechanism of embarking on one when you know you should be doing the other. And you'll learn to use each method at the right times for the most refinement and greatest productivity. Both forging ahead and cleaning up, used rightly, will propel you toward that perfected-as-possible work of your original vision.

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ENDNOTES

1B. F. Skinner, "How to Discover What You Have to Say: A Talk to Students," *The Writer's Home Companion*, ed. Joan Bolker (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 89. The talk was originally published in *The Behavior Analyst*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring), 1981, pp. 1-7.

2Donald M. Murray, "So You Want to Be a Writer?" *The Writer's Home Companion*, ed. Joan Bolker (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 28. The piece appeared originally in his column "Over 60," in the *Boston Globe*, December 21, 1993.

[3]Jane Smiley, "What Stories Teach Their Writers: The Purpose and Practice of Revision," quoted in "Focus on the Short Story," *WritersOnlineWorkshop.com* presented by *Writer's Digest*, December 7, 2005. Original essay in *Creating Fiction*, ed. Julie Checkoway (Cincinnati: Story Press Books, 2001), pp. 244-255.

[4]Sid Fleischman, quoted in Anna Olswanger, "From Hocus Pocus to the Newbery: The Writing Life of Sid Fleischman," *Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market* (Cincinnati: *Writer's Digest Book*, 2003), p. 85.

[5]Dylan Thomas, quoted in Gabriele Rico, *Writing the Natural Way* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), p. 208.

[6]Laura Chester, quoted in Gabriele Rico, *Writing the Natural Way* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), p. 208.



"Beauty and the Book"~ www.beautyandthebook.com, Kathy L. Patrick

Coiffure Meets Literature at Beauty and the Book

By Nicole M. Bouchard

A distinct curiosity of the Mid-west, Beauty and the Book, run by proprietor Kathy L. Patrick, is known as "the only hair salon/book store in the world!" Having opened back in 2000, 'B&B' has been graced by the famed company of Oxford American Magazine, Rue McClanahan, Pulitzer Prize winners-Edward Humes and the late Doug Marlette, Elizabeth Berg, Pat Conroy and Ron Hall amongst others. With a flash of tiara-inspired glamor, Southern belle attitude and a goal to promote literacy while indulging in all things girly, the establishment takes a fun, laid-back approach to the love of reading.

With life-size cut-out characters from the Wicked Witch of The West to Elvis, the atmosphere is pure whimsy with a bit of sparkly glitz thrown in. Hats, costumes and props are available for creative play, all in the nearness of treasured books. First editions, signed copies, book events and author events

are par for the course. Promoting new authors is also a part of Beauty and the Book's mission to increase awareness of literature from its home nestled in Jefferson, Texas. The book club selections, accessible via the website (click on the picture above) and featured authors are as diverse as the salon's/store's offerings, including a selection of local talent, debuting authors, contemporary greats and historic classics.

As the Writers' Craft Box is dedicated to the spirit of play and imagination involved in creative writing as well as the mixing of creative mediums, this bit of Southern hospitality garnered a further look! Whether visiting on site in Texas or being inspired from afar, Beauty and the Book is a great reminder of 'the beauty within' and the need to keep whimsical play as an integral part of our creative lives. We look forward to staying tuned...



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Sharing My Heart—When Private Writing Goes Public and Becomes a Newsweek Essay

By SuzAnne C. Cole

I write because I find writing the surest path to self-knowledge, but never was I more certain of this than after our oldest son Brad called to tell us he and his wife Elisabeth were separating and would soon divorce. Stunned by the news and grieved by the pain in his voice, my husband and I worried about both of them—how difficult it would be for her to return to her parents' home in France, how lonely for him to remain on assignment in Tokyo. The rest of that phone call blurs in memory, but I do remember, after he reassured us he would be all right, that I asked him to tell Elisabeth we still loved her.

Over the next few days, I tried to ease my sadness by talking with friends about the separation and journaling about it at length—writing the grief I hadn't expressed during the phone call because I didn't want to add to Brad's emotional burdens. He and Elisabeth had been together for eight years; as the first daughter-in-law in our family of three sons, she had become the daughter we never had. Now she was gone; would we ever again have a claim to her attention? If I had had someone to blame, perhaps my grief would have shifted into anger, but neither of them was interested in anyone else; being together, which had once brought them such joy, now caused them too much anguish for the marriage to continue. They quickly agreed on a no-fault divorce.

After a few weeks, Brad began to sound better as he adapted to being alone. He encouraged us to keep in touch with Elisabeth, but not knowing how she might feel about us, we waited for her to make the first contact. My sadness deepened into depression. One morning when dressing for church, I felt so anxious and sad that I stayed home. After my husband left, I sat quietly in my room. Once my mental chatter stilled, I realized I needed to journal more deeply my feelings about losing Elisabeth, to write what I hadn't dared say aloud, those thoughts I might even have feared realizing I had.

I journaled off and on for the rest of the day and discovered through the writing how many things I mourned—not just losing a daughter-in-law I had loved from the first time we met, but also her family who had welcomed us so warmly. I grieved the future without her—lonely days and weeks for Brad, an empty chair at holiday gatherings for all of us. I grieved giving up my hope for a child of theirs, a grandchild for whom I had already

tucked away a festive Christmas outfit and a small stuffed dog that played “Frère Jacques.”

I also began to realize how many people divorce affects; like a pebble thrown into a pond, the ripples of divorce widen into the encompassing circles of family, friends, and acquaintances. Over the next few days, I continued to write and rewrite, and gradually, a very personal essay evolved. When I read a draft to my writing groups, they shared their stories of “divorcing” a daughter-in-law or son-in-law. As their stories helped me find my place among the sisterhood of women who experience similar losses, I gained both clarity and a degree of detachment from my own pain, necessary when a writer seeks a wider audience.

After revising and polishing the essay, I decided to send it out for publication. But first I faced that most difficult of dilemmas for writers. When we write what we know, what happens to us, and what we feel, other people, many of them dear to us, are also involved. How do we respect their privacy, while remaining true to our experience?

I e-mailed both Brad and Elisabeth, describing the essay and asking if they would like to read it before I sent it out. Elisabeth responded, “I love all of your writing and would be most honored to read the one about ‘divorcing your daughter-in-law.’” Brad wrote, “Sure I would love to read your essay when it is finished, but needless to say I wouldn't dream of editing your content. I never mind when you write about me.” I sent them both copies of the essay and began a regular e-mail correspondence with Elisabeth.

Their generous consent having canceled my reservations about publishing the essay, I had only to select a market. As a long-time subscriber to Newsweek, I was very fond of their “My Turn” column, so tried them first. In the meantime Elisabeth responded to the draft I had sent her:

“I read your essay and cried for an entire hour. It is very hard for me to think of these things as well, and I loved the kindness with which you wrote about it. I wish I could express myself like that! It brought back a lot of memories and joys. Thank you, SuzAnne, from the depth of my heart and be assured that all you felt and feel about me, were and are equally shared

by me, and that you and your family have and will always have a special place in my heart. I love you very much, Elisabeth.”

Four weeks after I sent the essay to Newsweek, it was accepted. I e-mailed Brad and Elisabeth, giving them one last chance to change their minds, but once again they approved. Six weeks later the essay was published as “The End of a Marriage” (Newsweek, June 22, 1998). Here’s an excerpt:

“The marriage of Brad, our eldest son, and Elisabeth, the French woman he met and wooed in graduate school, began one August in a tiny French village on a day filled with sunshine, love, promise, and hope. It ended nearly five years later with a phone call from Brad in Tokyo.”

Elisabeth wrote that at first she was a little stunned by the number of e-mails she received from friends all over the world, but she said again that the essay was so gentle and kind that she would always regard it as my letter to her.

I too received letters, phone calls, and e-mails from both friends and strangers. (I’d asked Newsweek to send me the letters they received regarding the column—as I remember there were 45; I answered all of them.) Many of these letters heartened and encouraged me in my hope for a permanent relationship of respect, friendship, and love with Elisabeth. The stories the letter-writers told, similar to my own, often had happy endings. A woman in a third marriage said she quite regularly lunches with her mother-in-law from her first marriage—and remembers her on Mother’s Day. Another wrote of the tender relationship she still has with a former daughter-in-law (her term was “daughter-out-of-law”) ten years after a divorce. Even the negative letters helped me see the differences between their stories and mine—and to be grateful for the ease and love with which Brad, Elisabeth, my husband, Elisabeth’s parents and I were handling the divorce.

Journaling—and then turning my writing into the essay helped clarify my feelings and keep in touch with Elisabeth during those first few awkward months after the separation, an awkwardness that if left unattended, might have hardened into ill will. Just before the essay was published, my husband and I spent a lovely afternoon in London with Brad and Elisabeth,

who were attending a reunion of their graduate school. Publishing the essay was gratifying, but maintaining a loving relationship with my former daughter-in-law remains the best benefit of having written it.

* * * * *

It has now been twelve years since “The End of a Marriage” was published. Elisabeth remarried three years after the divorce and has two beautiful daughters, Valentine and Juliet. She sends photos, e-mails, and Christmas greetings. On September 11, 2001, she phoned immediately, worried about Brad, who traveled frequently to NYC. (Thankfully, on that tragic day, he was in Chicago).

After the divorce, Brad left Tokyo and, wanting to be closer to family, changed companies and returned to Houston. For a while, he considered going to law school; a friend said before he took the LSAT, why not have some conversation with her friend, a lawyer. And so he met Holly; they married six years ago this month and have given us Ripley, four; Louise, three; and Henry, born June 16, 2010.

I still journal and my entries still occasionally become essays. If a particular entry seems too raw, too particular, or unfocused, I sometimes revise it in third person—no longer I or me, but she and her. If this doesn't work, I also ask the question writers of the personal essay must eventually ask, “So what?” For me, the “so what” of “The End of a Marriage” was, in an age when more than fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce, the universality of my particular experience. Time also helps—the evolution of this essay from journal to publication took almost a year.

[An earlier and shorter version of this essay was originally published in Personal Journaling (Winter 1999) as “When Private Writing Goes Public” and reprinted in Writing Your Life Story (Spring 2000) as “Ease the Pain with Writing”]

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