

When to Begin Writing

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A major problem for novice writers is when to start writing. The common approach is to advocate detailed research, writing of outlines, first and second drafts, and then a final draft—polished and complete. This advice carried to the extreme—do not try final version until research is complete—can lead to never writing at all, since research is inexhaustible. Hence, either professional writers ignore the advice or simply agonize over their finished works. Beginners take the common advice too seriously; eventually they turn away from writing—even letter writing. Opposed to the common approach is the approach I wish to advocate here.¹

I suggest that beginners write immediately, treating every version as drafts for future improvement. This advice encounters three problems. First, how to write right away; second, how to overcome the defects of writing *now*—sloppiness, repetition, confusion, and superficiality; and third, how, as teachers, to convey this advice. The solutions for the second and third problems are simply applications of the solution to the first problem, which is to write as if engaged in a dialogue: focus upon a question, state alternative and competing answers, and have a critical discussion of the answers. One can improve upon flaws in one's writing by using the dialogue-framework to assimilate and accommodate comments on drafts, and this is the solution to our problem of overcoming the defects of writing *now*.

When teaching writing, encourage the student to submit several drafts, make comments on those drafts directed particularly at whether the student has asked a question and has discussed alternative answers, and allow students to resubmit graded papers. As far as grading goes, one can gradually raise the standards for grades during the course—spelling out the standards in detail. For instance, for the first grade, the student may be expected to only state a question and present one view. The second grade, may involve not only the exposition of a view but also criticisms. And so on. As far as pedagogy goes, one can teach this technique by having small groups where students discuss a chosen problem and competing answers, and later by having students write on the model of the conversation in their group. The teacher can function as a moderator: ask for clarification of question and answers, state when a point is irrelevant to the issue under discussion, and state the logic of the discussion.

The dialogical technique involves the replacement of the attempt for achieving perfection with the attempt to achieve some improvement in one's

understanding and writing abilities. The way to improve is to start where one is, attempt to find one's flaws, and attempt to correct those flaws. There are basically three steps in this never-ending process:

- 1) Write down questions, answers, and criticism. Do not research before writing. Just write.
- 2) Once you have written, re-examine your draft with the aim of finding flaws, such as misrepresentations, gaps in the arguments, confusions, and linguistic transgressions. This re-examination can be carried out by seeking comments on your draft, by research, and by discussion.
- 3) Rewrite and/or revise in the light of step two. This third step may involve junking your original draft and beginning again. The rewrite may involve a total change in ideas or merely a change in punctuation.

One might object that this technique, though getting beginning writers to write, does so at the cost of lowering standards. The standards of stating views clearly, displaying adequate research, and writing with some care and attention, are lowered to the standard of writing ignorantly and carelessly. But from a sociological viewpoint, the common standards of stating views clearly, displaying adequate research, and so forth, are perfectionist. In reality, they are never achieved. So, standards are lowered automatically, uncritically, and arbitrarily. If we want to get something done, what we get done never achieves the perfectionist standards most commonly advocated. In social reality, one can say there are no standards, because what passes for a paper with adequate research and stylistic polish, depends upon the eye of the beholder. In place of this perfectionist attitude, I suggest that we should expect less of our work. We should hold our perfectionist standards as *ideals*—as goals toward which we strive in the writing of our drafts.

In this way we can use our failures as levers to push us ahead. This technique of using our failures as levers, is a "bootstrap" technique.² The idea is that we convert our mistakes into successes. This is done through treating mistakes not as sins for which we must pay, but as tools for improving our writing and the state of the ongoing discussion. It is a straightforward application of the idea that we learn through trial and error. When confronted with a mistake we ask how we can learn from the mistake: Can we develop a new view? Can we remedy the existing view? Can we reformulate the question? We start from our own confusions and inadequacies, and use them as levers to push us closer towards the unattainable goal of perfection. High ambitions, but moderate expectations, might be a good slogan for those who would like to use this bootstrap technique of writing drafts and only drafts.

Notes

Thanks to Peggy Marchi and Edward Davenport for many helpful comments on an earlier discussion of this problem which I presented at the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors, April 28, 1978.

1. "Right away" is the advice Joseph Agassi gives in the introduction of his brilliant book, *Towards a Rational Philosophical Anthropology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977). My modification of his advice is simply to be prepared to throw out, or rewrite, and revise every paper.

2. See Joseph Agassi, "Testing as a Bootstrap Operation in Physics," pp. 155-207, and "Criteria for Plausible Arguments," pp. 353-63, in his *Science in Flux* (Boston: Reidel, 1975).

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Volume XIII, Number 3 (September 1979)

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Volume XIII, Number 4 (November 1979)

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