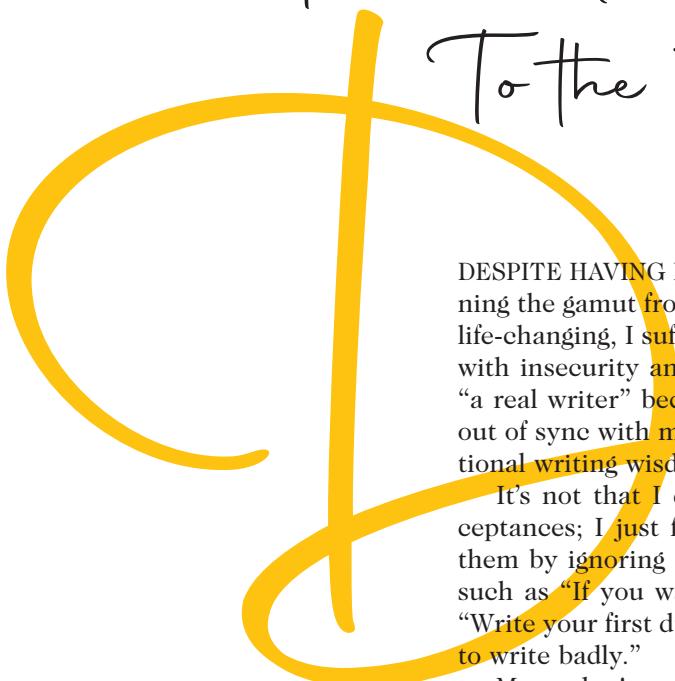


There's More Than One Path To the Final Draft



DESPITE HAVING PUBLISHED ALMOST 100 essays running the gamut from the mundane to the traumatic and life-changing, I suffer from imposter syndrome. Plagued with insecurity and self-doubt, I don't consider myself "a real writer" because I consider my creative process out of sync with most **writers** and at odds with conventional writing wisdom.

It's not that I don't acknowledge my hard-won acceptances; I just feel like a fraud for having achieved them by ignoring the writing precepts I'd been taught, such as "If you want to be a writer, write every day," "Write your first draft in longhand," or "Permit yourself to write badly."

Mea culpa! on all counts. I don't write daily. Weeks can pass without writing a word while I wait for that seed of an exciting idea to rock my consciousness. I don't write in longhand but rely exclusively on the computer. Because I am a perfectionist and control freak, I am incapable of letting the words and ideas just flow without stopping to rewrite.

Riddled with guilt for my contrarian writing approach, I agonize over whether I should accept my quirky writing habits or change them to become "a real writer?" I suspect there can be no resolution to my self-doubts unless I share them with other writers and learn about their writing practice.

Who better to consult than my writing group to gain perspective on such matters? So, instead of presenting an essay for critique, I posed questions about the writing process, a topic that, oddly, never comes up in our meetings.

Do you write every day?

I was shocked to learn that writing daily is an aspirational goal. Despite the best intentions, sitting down to write doesn't always translate into productivity. Just ask Terri, who has transposed her short story collection

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into a novel. "I sit at my computer just about every day," she says, "but I sometimes get distracted and play solitaire or google old boyfriends to see if they are still alive." Cynthia, a memoir writer, strives to write every day after breakfast. However, she admits, "That doesn't mean I do it. If I have an appointment or phone call, it goes out the window."

Karen, a travel memoirist, consistently posts her daily "100 Words" on Facebook. In addition, she carves out four hours once a week, preferably in the morning when she's at her writing best, to work on other projects, rewriting and editing in the days that follow. Asked if she feels she writes enough, Karen responds, "I write as much as I can. I'm busy."

Jack, who is writing a book about yoga master, B.K.S. Iyengar, writes when he commits to writing a new chapter. He then devotes a few hours every day the week before our group's deadline to present work. Liz, a memoirist, only writes when she has a deadline. And there is Coree, a prolific storyteller, who likes to write around people and gets a lot of writing done on, of all places, the New York City subway. "I get my \$2.75 worth," she says.

To assuage my shame over not physically writing every day, I tell myself that at least my mind is often in writing mode, developing ideas, creating beginnings, endings and narrative arcs, and resolving word choices. When I finally do face that blank screen, I have a mental blueprint on how to proceed.

Does being a mind writer count?

Do you write in longhand or on the computer?

I've read that J. K. Rowling, Stephen King, and Joyce Carol Oates first write their books in longhand. A writing instructor once directed our class to create our first drafts by putting pen to paper rather than typing directly on the computer. I tried her way, but kept ending up with illegible fragments of sentences, so I've stuck with technology. As Elizabeth, a writer of poetry and prose, says, "I'm always on the computer. Somehow it frees me up to write and I write even more."

Phyllis, who writes fiction and non-fiction, subscribes to a hybrid

approach. "I love to start in longhand. Writing the lead is the hardest part, so I write a paragraph or two, then transfer to the computer. Coree goes even further, writing her first draft, and sometimes her second one, in longhand before revising on the computer.

Do you write your first draft in a stream-of-consciousness way or do you stop to revise?

Except for Jack and me, the members of our group characterize themselves as stream-of-consciousness writers who tune into their writing muse and allow the words to flow. They don't stop to correct spelling and punctuation or obsess over perfect wording. They give themselves permission to write badly and plow full-steam ahead anyway. The next day, they edit.

Sorry, but just bouncing with the flow to create a draft, which I know is "crap," is not in my wheelhouse. I write like Jack, who says, "I start picking apart and editing almost immediately after I start."

Despite my nit-picky approach, I do eventually reach "the end," satisfied with the outcome and grateful for my painstaking effort.

My takeaway

What struck me most from my interview with my writing group is that everyone has their own unique writing

process. No one obeys all the "golden rules" of writing, but, unlike me, they persist with confidence and faith in their craft and in themselves as writers. "It's fun to find out how others approach writing, but no matter what," says Coree, "I stick to my own way, no matter how crazy!"

So, maybe I should just stop fretting about how I write, stay the course, accept my own process, and claim my identity as a "real writer" who has managed to create a respectable writing portfolio, no mean feat in this tough, competitive publishing world. ■

Fredricka R. Maister is a Philadelphia-based essayist/memoirist. Her writing has appeared in The Baltimore Sun, Miami Herald, Chicago Tribune, Philadelphia Inquirer, New York Jewish Week/The Times of Israel, The Forward, Philadelphia's Jewish Exponent, The Manifest-Station, OZY, Broad Street Review, The Writer, Brevity Blog, and ICON.



JON ADAMS