
WRITING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN

Breakthrough Techniques
for People Who Write

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To Jim, my own true love, who combines logic and sensitivity, reason and intuition, gentleness with strong masculinity: you are one of the most naturally whole-brained people I know.

And to Dorothy, whose friendship is a deep well of strength.

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Preface

Are you a businessperson who is tired of wasting valuable time laboring over written work, a student with five term papers due in one week, all left until the last minute, a freelance writer with a secret desire to win a Pulitzer Prize? This book is for you. It will show you how to make procrastination work *for* you instead of *against* you, how to capitalize on times of incubation when your inspiration is at a peak.

Did you ever watch a colleague in your office dash off a memo or compose a major report with apparent ease, and wish to yourself, "If only I had such command over words! If only I could write more confidently!" This book is for you. It will change the nature of your relationship with writing forever.

Have you envied the novelist who has just published her third novel, has sold the movie rights to the highest bidder, and is eagerly working on novel number four? This book is for you. It will increase your writing productivity dramatically and teach you how to tell the story inside of you in your own unique voice.

The basis for this book is the belief that writing and editing are two separate brain functions and that the problems we have with expressing ourselves fluently in writing arise from doing both tasks simultaneously. The purpose of this book is to give you a new approach to writing, one that will first free up your creative side and help you to produce your best writing ever and then will hone your editing skills, when they are put in their proper place, to a keen edge. This approach will provide you with writing tools and techniques that will serve you well for the rest of your life.

Writing on Both Sides of the Brain grew out of the workshops I have given over the past several years, where people who felt anxious or unhappy about their writing applied these techniques and discovered dramatic differences in the way they write. This book offers the workshop in book form; it presents the same techniques I offer there and can provide the same long-lasting results for you.

Writing on Both Sides of the Brain will teach you how to fish, and will feed you for a lifetime.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL DO FOR YOU

If you have a carping voice inside of you that criticizes your work and edits everything as you write it, *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain* will teach you to talk back, to turn your Inner Critic into your ally. You will know when to edit and when not to edit and how to go about it most effectively.

If you need to write as an integral part of your job, write for publication, or if you simply find yourself stymied by thank-you notes and ordinary correspondence, *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain* will help you get rid of the sinking sensation before a blank page. It will show you how to increase the speed of composition, introduce you to an innovative approach to outlining, and help you unlearn the writing habits that inhibit you.

My intent in writing this book is to change your life. I am not afraid to be so blunt, since I have seen the principles of writing detailed here work wonders in people's lives. Businesspeople, lawyers, freelance writers, doctors, teachers, students, administrators, lobbyists, elected officials and government employees—people from a diversity of professions—have taken my writing workshop and applied these techniques to their professional and personal writing with astonishing results. These concepts have radically changed the way they approach whatever writing they are doing. "Writing has ceased to be a problem for me," one of my former students said matter-of-factly when I met her again five years after she had taken my class. "I simply write whatever I need to write and move on to other things."

So that is my intent: to change, radically and permanently, the way you feel about writing and, consequently, to improve the power and persuasion of your finished product.

But the real power of this book lies inside of you. What is your intent in reading this book? In doing the exercises? What would you like to see happen, professionally and personally? What are your goals? Be specific. Write them down.

Take full responsibility for what occurs when you read this book, do the exercises, and incorporate the ideas into your daily writing. Make it your intent that this will be the most powerful, influential, exciting, mind-bending book that you have ever read. (I happen to think that this is a useful attitude toward any book you are reading, any course you are embarking on.) Decide that the change in you will not be just a slight one but a 180-degree turnaround. Make that your intention, own it as a goal, and then go for it, all the way.

I did not intend this book to be a library reference work or a coffee table showpiece. You have my permission to write in its pages, tack up over your computer or workspace the charts that appeal to you,

dog-ear its edges, bend down its corners, use rubber bands and clips to mark off sections to return to. Follow Francis Bacon's injunction:

Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others, to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.

This book was designed to be devoured. I trust you have a voracious appetite.

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

A book that concerns itself with the process of writing owes a debt to its readers to say how it got written. I am, after all, doing what I am talking about doing, and in that way the process is different from lecturing. I am attempting to do for myself what I set out to help you do for yourself. I need to draw on all of my own devices in order to get these words on paper. Without practicing my own injunctions, I would have soon lost heart, and this book would not be.

Did you ever hear someone say, "I'd like to write a book, but I don't have the *time*"? In today's hurried age, people usually don't write books because they have the time to do it. I wrote this book while stopping at a red light, waiting in line at the post office, sitting by the edge of the pool during the children's swim lessons. I wrote it during intermissions at the opera, in the back of darkened movie theaters, during banquet speeches and luncheon lectures, in between family dental appointments and piano lessons and soccer practice. I have a reverence for paper and daily bless its Chinese inventor. I buy paper by the reams and still never have enough of it. I wrote this book on napkins, on the corners of placemats, on the backs of envelopes, on Post-it pads of all sizes and colors, in the several notebooks, big and small, that I carry with me. I wrote with anything handy (although I do have my favorite tools, among them two Mont Blancs and a 1922 Esterbrook, oblique nib). Later, I fed the written words into a computer, and sometimes I had the luxury of composing at the keyboard. I began each chapter with branching, a system of generating ideas and organizing material explained in chapter 5. I did all my branches in multi-color and sometimes used pictures as well as words to capture my thoughts.

I can write volumes in the midst of confusion, and I can easily write on the run. But I do need solitude in order to edit. It is hard for me to take the confusion out of my writing when I am surrounded by confusion. My environment needs to reflect my mind's work. When I was in graduate school, I would go to the campus library—especially my favorite room upstairs, where I was often solitary and could look

out the Gothic windows and watch the tops of the trees sway **in** a storm—and spend as many as eight or ten hours in the same spot, pulling it all together. But I could do the preliminary work while I was out on a date. The same *modus operandi* applied here: I retreated for my editing.

THE TAO OF WRITING

While writing this book, I had a powerful sense of what the psychologist C. G. Jung called synchronicity: it was as though the universe was cooperating to make this book happen. Books that lay unopened on my shelves for years suddenly beckoned to me; I met the right people at the right time, thought of lost analogies; opportunities opened up; grace was everywhere.

Whatever happens, even crises, become grist for the writer's mill: a wonderful way to go through life. You might call it the tao of writing.

THANKS

It is traditional at this point in a book for the author to thank those who gave courage and support in moving the work forward. It is a fine and generous tradition, almost like the final curtain call at the opera, when the director and conductor step out onto the stage with the principal singers, when you have a sense of wonder at all the people who worked behind the scenes to make this piece of entertainment for you. If the true picture were realized, the electricians, the stagehands, the makeup artists, and the prop people would also appear and take a bow.

I am joyfully aware of all the people waiting in my wings who made this book happen. I would need at least the Metropolitan stage to accommodate all those who believed in me and my work and helped to make that belief a reality. First, I would fill the stage with a "cast of thousands": all of my students from ages five (Lisa, Jason, Paul, Amy, and Margaret) to eighty-five (Hazel, Eva, and Harold). They taught me while I was teaching them. Please give them a big hand.

Then I would ask particularly these people to come forward and take a bow:

Peter Scharf, the Macher—and the Matchmaker; without him the dream would still be just a dream.

Dorothy Harrison, my guardian angel, a rare human being who puts others ahead of herself, always. I felt the support and the power of her caring.

Tom Grady, patient, incisive editor, for his wise and wonderful way of knowing how to get to the heart of it. I wish I had had him for a comp teacher.

Jim, my husband, for his continual caring and love, and for showing me by his example that *wu wei* is the best way; and our children: James, for his strength of character, for setting his clock to get me up at 5:00 A.M., and for his delightful drawings; Peter, for worrying with me, for his encouragement and sense of humor, and for making "Never a day without a line" his personal credo; Emily, especially for her happy sign, bedecked with hearts and rainbows, "You have done more than is left!"; and Katherine, for her hugs and her smiles and her laughter.

Clarice Keegan, for going to Europe and taking my light pen and leaving me with her QX-10 and an empty house to write in, and for sharing her eloquent interviews.

Greg and Tracy Herrick, who make the best cafe mocha in town and have created in their shop, in the fine Johnsonian tradition, a haven from life's storm; Jeff West, at Creative Computers (need I say more?); Sr. Patrice Eilers, O.P., for her grace, in both senses of the word, for the peace she offered me at Rosary Heights, and especially for the fresh flowers she gave the struggling author.

The librarians at Edmonds Library, especially Millie Thompson and Lynnea Erickson, for their passion and patience, knack and knowledge to ferret out the truth.

George Kresovich, attorney-at-law, for seeing the light at the end of the tunnel and knowing it was not an oncoming train; for sharing his stinging, incisive interviews.

Richard Hobbs, for being a gift himself and for giving us all, vicariously, the gift of courage—courage always to write our best.

Mary Hobbs, my official *Christian Science Monitor* clipper, for not only clipping but mailing what she clips.

Elspeth Alexander, who sustained me with her wit and medieval brownies, and who, although herself a great grammarian, never took an ax to my idiolect.

Victory Searle, for her vulnerability, and for a life that lives her name.

Irene Artherholt, the first to look at me and say, "Teach me to feel confident about writing," who challenged me to ask the questions that led to the formulation of this work; with her support and good-natured laughter, she fanned the flame of my pilot light and kept the fire burning.

Mimi Bloom, who many a cold morning phoned me long-distance at 5:30 and said in the most lovely and encouraging voice, "Good morning, Henriette, it's time to write." And Dr. Susan Smith, who was also a charming part of Mimi's Wake-up Plan.

Dr. Joseph E. Grennen, medievalist and motivator par excellence ("and gladly wold he lerne and gladly teche"), even though he was the one who wrote on a college paper of mine—an analysis of *Sir Gawain*

and the Green Knight—"a bit cavalier in spots, but on the whole a good analysis." The grade was an A, but to this day I am haunted by my tendency to be "cavalier." Sorry, Joe, I just can't help it.

Bill Harrison, for all the articles clipped and the philosophical discussions generated, for being a computer genius with a heart.

Nancy Ernst, my model and Muse. Kurt Vonnegut says we—all of us—write for an audience of one and hope the rest of the world will like it. Nancy, I wrote this book for you.

Finally, I would turn to you, the audience, and ask you to stand and be applauded by us. You are the ones who believed in yourselves enough to read this book and cared enough to make it happen for you. If there is any power at all in this book, it is yours to claim.

Thank you.

From Panic to Power: Mastery over the Written Word

A mind that is stretched to a new idea never returns to its original dimension.

—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

It's time to write. The report is due (or overdue); the publisher is waiting for the next chapter; the boss needs that strategy report; the case is pending, awaiting your brilliant brief. Why is it that you would rather do something else, that you have a sudden urge to make a phone call or shuffle the papers on your desk? How did you suddenly realize that you need to do more research or that the typing paper is not quite right? Why is it that every word you write reads wrong, and why did you wait this long anyway?

Writing on Both Sides of the Brain has the answers to questions like these. If you are tired of putting off the writing that needs to be done, if you believe you have an idea locked up inside of you that you lack the confidence to share in writing, if you are holding yourself back from getting a promotion because you are not doing the writing that your chosen profession calls for, then welcome! If you are open to it, you will find here the key to fluency and the path to confidence.

I give writing workshops to educated, talented, articulate people, many of them professionals who are responsible for a great deal of writing. And they hate to write. These are the kinds of comments I hear in my classes:

I reread and scratch out everything as I go along. It takes forever, and I hate the way it sounds when it's done.

I was taught that the opening sentence is the most important. It has to catch your reader's attention, set the mood and style, anticipate the ending—all that in one sentence. Sometimes I spend forty-five minutes to an hour just getting that first sentence down, and even then I often don't like it. It's discouraging.

Why does it take so long for me to write? When I speak, I handle myself pretty well. I wish I could write as easily as I talk!

I need to have all my ideas lined up before I write. I want to be absolutely sure of everything I want to say before I start to say it. I don't want any surprises.

When I use a dictaphone, it makes me very tense. I don't want my secretary to hear anything that sounds dumb. I choose my words carefully. I guess it comes out stilted because of that.

It frustrates me to take so long to write. It always takes longer than it should, and that makes me angry with myself. After all these years, I should be able to dash it off faster and get the results I want.

My boss makes me so mad. Whenever I have a report due, he says, "Just write it. Big deal. Begin at the beginning, go on until you come to the end, then stop. Just write it. Stop wasting time, and do it." I just don't work that way. It's not that easy. There must be something wrong with me.

I agonize over every word. I would like to have writing be less painful.

I like to write, and I think I write pretty well. I wish only that it didn't take me so much time.

I love everything about my job, except the writing. I hate to write! You are a miracle worker if you can take away my dread of writing.

Wherever you are in writing, whether you like writing or hate writing, you can go higher. The work habit that underlies virtually all writing problems is the tendency to write and edit simultaneously. This book is about learning to separate the two functions: first to write, tapping into the right side of your brain for style, rhythm, and voice—for the sense that one human being is talking to another human being; then to edit, calling upon the talents of the left side of your brain, which appreciates logic, grammar and construction.

Writing anxiety is not new (you will see later in this chapter that I have personally documented it back to the first century B.C.), but it is finally being recognized as a problem that has a cure. *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain* goes beyond merely helping to surmount the immediate problem, however; it shows you how to change so that you will write as you have never written before and produce your best and most fluent work.

FROM STRESS TO SATISFACTION

This book will empower you to write well and it will show you how to shape your words so that they will have the impact you want on your audience. When you have power in producing words, that power transfers over to the effect your words have on your reader.

Before embarking on any journey, it is useful to notice and record your starting point. This opening exercise will establish your place of departure and help you set your travel goals. Where are you now? How many miles do you hope to cover?

EXERCISE 1: TAKING STOCK

In the space below, write down three words or phrases that come immediately to your mind when you think about writing.

Next, put down what you would like to change about your writing, what bugs you most about it, what you are putting up with now that you would rather not put up with.

Finally write down what you would like to get out of reading book and doing the exercises. Be specific. Write down personal professional goals.

It will be interesting to go back over this list when you have finished this book.

INTRODUCING CALIBAN AND ARIEL

Part of your brain is out to get you. At least it seems that way. when you say, "I can do it!" a little voice counters, "Are you sure?" When you say, "Go for it!" you hear an undertone, "Don't be hasty now. Maybe you need to think this over." Often the voice is not just cautious but downright caustic. When you think, "I am going to whip that report out right now, and it is going to be the best I ever wrote," it knocks you off your feet: "Who are you kidding?"

This little voice speaks for the side of your brain that makes you bite your pencil, crumple your paper into a ball in frustration, cross out words as you write them, and beat on yourself for waiting this long to get started. I call this voice your Caliban side, named after the dark monster in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* who is part of each of us.

Then there is the unfettered side of you, where inspiration and rhythm reside. Credit this side of you for color and cadence and style, for fluency and confidence—and for those little gems of ideas that creep in often unannounced at the quiet moments. This side would be Ariel, Caliban's foil, the symbol of freedom and flight.

A third entity resides on Shakespeare's island: Prospero, the magician, who knows how to get the best from both Ariel and Caliban. He is outside of each, yet a combination of both, and at his best he recognizes that.

Caliban is not evil or bad; he just needs to be controlled. Perhaps he curses because he does not know any better. Ariel, too, can get out of hand without Prospero's firm guidance. Shakespeare seems to be saying that all of us are yin and yang, male and female, earth and sky, Caliban and Ariel, and we need those opposing sides working together within us in order to be whole. That is the kind of dual control and mutual cooperation that this book points to. When you learn how to make Ariel respond to your bidding, your written words will fly; when you learn to tame Caliban to help you on your terms, your final product will persuade with power.

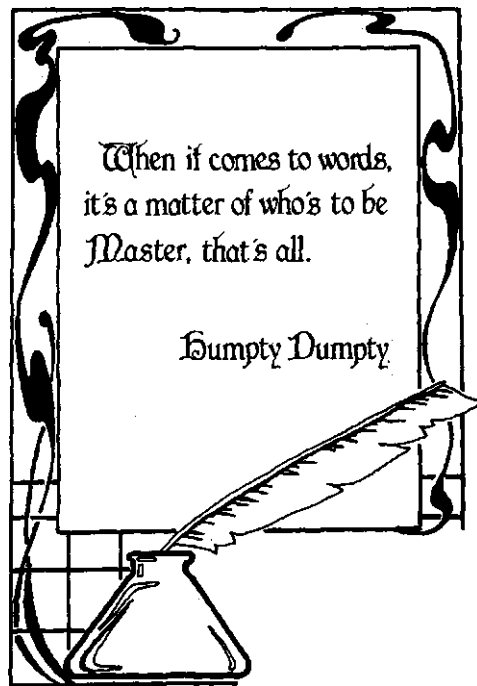
THE CHALLENGE AND THE PROMISE

In chapters 3 and 7 I will present some possible answers to the curious question of why this Caliban part of you has so much power and why it is usually negative, or at least cautious. For now, I want to issue a challenge and couple it with a promise.

The challenge is to learn how to unlock the Ariel part of you at will and to train yourself to keep Caliban quiet until called upon to comment—first to write, fluently and well, and then to invite the critical faculty back, as your guest, to sit down with you in a nonjudgmental, helpful way, look over what you have written, and make suggestions for improvement, without name calling, without beating down.

This, then, is my promise: You can be friends with the side of your brain that is out to get you and you can be in charge of the inspirational part of you, too. You can learn to separate the writing flow from the editing or critiquing part of the writing process to produce the best finished product you have ever written. You can make yourself a fluent, confident, and effective writer for the rest of your life. Caliban and Ariel each have their place, as long as you are the one in control.

Let it be said from the start: this book would not have seen the light of day had I not in writing it employed the very techniques that I am inviting you to use. Following my own prescription, I was able to release the creative floodgates and let ideas flow—from the brain to the paper. The editing was a separate process. Caliban came back at my invitation and treated me with respect as I set out to review and revise, tighten and correct. And there was an excitement and an energy about both parts, the same excitement and energy that I will train you to generate about your writing. Your relationship with writing will never be the same again.



WRITING ANXIETY GOES BACK CENTURIES

If writing, even occasionally, causes you grief and misery, you are in very respectable company. Publius Vergilius Maro, otherwise known as Virgil, started his epic poem, the *Aeneid*, in 29 B.C. and continued writing it until 19 B.C. That is an average of a line a day for eleven years, and even then it was not finished. You can imagine that he was not writing one perfect line each day and then packing up his stylus; no, chances are good that he was agonizing over every line and throwing out fifty-seven for every one that he kept. Some days he probably cranked out pages, while other days nothing came together. Sound familiar?

In case you doubt his anxiety, consider this: even after he wrote the *Aeneid*, he still was not satisfied. He left instructions at his death that the manuscript be burned.

So writing anxiety—a reluctance to put words on paper and a lack of confidence in those words once they have been written—has been with us for some time, and it strikes fear into the heart of even gifted authors.

I know an Associated Press journalist who switched from writing AP releases to composing his own book and found himself so blocked that, instead of writing, he turned to research. He studied in depth the phenomenon of writer's block, even unearthing an obscure piece about an experiment in Europe where students' hands were given electric shocks to make them keep writing. For three years he researched this malaise and discovered a wealth of information about the studies done and the learned conclusions reached. His bibliography was over thirty-five pages long.

But he wrote no book.

Why is it that writing often causes knots to form in the stomach? Why do we sit down with the pad or at the word processor with good intentions and then find ourselves immediately hating whatever words come up? Why did we wait until the last minute anyway? Putting writing in a historical framework and looking at our own personal history provide a partial answer. Just knowing the context gives some relief.

WRITING IS NEW—ONLY NINE SECONDS OLD

People put enormous pressure on themselves to perform; we want results, *right now*. There is no time allotted for growth after we reach a certain stage of development. Often people come to my classes thinking that they *ought to* be able to write faster and more definitively, that they *should* be able to express themselves effectively in writing—after all, they have had X number of years in high school composition

classes, or X number of years of college, or X number of years of graduate school or law school. By now, they think, writing certainly *should* come easily. When they think of themselves in terms of writing, writing looms very large and they themselves feel very small. Anything that I can do to flip that equation around helps people to relax and, ultimately, to perform better.

If you have some of these tapes playing in your head, it may give you some relief to know that writing is new. We are just beginning to learn how to harness its tremendous and awesome power. For many people I work with, this idea alone is liberating. When you see where writing fits into the overall picture of evolution, it takes the pressure off you to perform perfectly and instantaneously.

Carl Sagan's *The Dragons of Eden* traces the fascinating evolution of the human brain. Particularly compelling is his "Cosmic Calendar," in the first chapter, in which Sagan compresses the fifteen-billion-year life of the universe into a single year of twelve segments. It would be easier to consider this analogy if our universe had only been in existence for twelve billion years, or if Pope Gregory had given us a fifteen-month calendar, but Sagan is not held back by such limitations. He divides his cosmic year into fifteen twenty-four-day segments; each segment corresponds to a billion years of earth history. Thus, the Big Bang is January 1; the origin of the solar system, September 9; the appearance of the first humans, December 31. The last day of his cosmic year is more detailed, says Sagan, because our history books are more detailed; when he arrives in his calendar at the evening of New Year's Eve, he is able to give a second-by-second recounting of the last seconds of the cosmic year.¹

DECEMBER 31

Origin of <i>Proconsul</i> and <i>Ramapithecus</i> , probable ancestors of apes and men	~1	30 P.M.
First humans	-10	30 P.M.
Widespread use of stone tools	11	00 P.M.
Domestication of fire by Peking man	11	46 P.M.
Beginning of most recent glacial period	11	56 P.M.
Seafarers settle Australia	11	58 P.M.
Extensive cave painting in Europe	11	59 P.M.
Invention of agriculture	11:59	20 P.M.
Neolithic civilization; first cities	11:59	35 P.M.
First dynasties in Sumer, Ebla and Egypt; development of astronomy	11:59	50 P.M.
Invention of the alphabet ; Akkadian Empire	11:59	51 P.M.
Hammurabic legal codes in Babylon; Middle Kingdom in Egypt	11:59	52 P.M.
Bronze metallurgy; Mycenaean culture; Trojan War; Olmec culture; invention of the compass	11:59	53 P.M.
Iron metallurgy; First Assyrian Empire; Kingdom of Israel; founding of Carthage by Phoenicia	11:59:54	P.M.
Asokan India; Ch'in Dynasty China; Periclean Athens; birth of Buddha	11:59:55	P.M.
Euclidean geometry; Archimedian physics; Ptolemaic astronomy; Roman Empire; birth of Christ	11:59:56	P.M.
Zero and decimals invented in Indian arithmetic; Rome falls; Moslem conquests	11:59:57	P.M.
Mayan civilization; Sung Dynasty China; Byzantine empire; Mongol invasion; Crusades	11:59:58	P.M.
Renaissance in Europe; voyages of discovery from Europe and from Ming Dynasty China; emergence of the experimental method in science	11:59:59	P.M.
Widespread development of science and technology; emergence of a global culture; acquisition of the means for self-destruction of the human species; first steps in spacecraft planetary exploration and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence		Now: The first second of New Year's Day P.M.

Put in terms of the big picture, it becomes clear: alphabetical writing did not emerge until the last minute of the last hour of the last day of the cosmic year—in fact, nine seconds ago. So think of your brain and nervous system as still adjusting to this new phenomenon, to the requirements placed on them by this new skill. After all, it's only nine seconds old.

On Sagan's scale each second of the cosmic year is equivalent to 475 years, so humans had fire for 396,000 years before the alphabet. At that rate, we should feel more comfortable with our backyard barbecue and our fireplaces than we need feel about writing.

Thinking in these terms can be very freeing. It gives you room to grow. Gloria, a workshop participant, spoke for many when she said, "I found this week I felt more comfortable about writing—as a new tool. Whenever I found myself getting tight, I just said, 'Remember, this is a new tool.' And it seemed to relax me."

So be like Gloria. Relax. Give yourself credit for even trying.

WRITING IS TAUGHT—THE BAD NEWS

The reason that we try, with disastrous results, to edit and write simultaneously is because of the way we were taught. I am doing it now, with all my training and background; even though I know better, it is a difficult habit to break. When you first began to write, you had someone standing over you ("for your own good"), correcting your form and grammar and spelling. After all, if your teacher did not tell you from the first day of school how to make that sentence complete, she would not be doing her job, and you just might get all the way to college without knowing an incomplete sentence if you fell over one. Keep in mind that at the time you were learning to write (compose), you were also just learning to write (form letters of the alphabet). Spelling, grammar, form, plus learning how to shape the letters themselves—that is a pretty tall order for a six-year-old who is also trying to collect the words tumbling out of his imagination, capture the ideas in her head, and put them on paper before they run away.

So it began. As you will see in chapter 7, you no doubt internalized a great deal of this external pressure. Today, when you sit down to write, chances are that your teacher is still with you, standing over your left shoulder, correcting, critiquing, circling uppercase letters with her red pencil, and in other subtle and not so subtle ways discouraging you from writing, generally stemming the flow of words.

THE LANGUAGE LAB OF THE HOME

If we taught our children to speak in the way that we teach them to write everyone would stutter.

Mark Twain

What happened when you were a little kid and were first forming words? In studying that question, linguists, who for years tried to understand language by studying the speech patterns of children just learning to talk, discovered that they had left out an important preliminary plateau—what James Asher calls "the silent time." Asher, a

professor at San Jose State University and the author of *Total Physical Response: Learning a Language Through Actions*, examined this first stage closely and looked at the mind mapping that happens inside before the baby articulates words. He noticed how even a young child who does not yet talk responds to complex commands in her native tongue. Our daughter Katherine's story offers an example. When {Katherine was about eleven months old, she could follow compound directions. To test her sophistication of comprehension, we deliberately increased the complexity of the commands.

"Katherine, pick up that toy," we said, pointing. Then, without pointing, "Katherine, bring me your shoe."

"Katherine, sweetie, go down the hall to Peter's room, and bring me the red truck." (If you think that that is a simple command, imagine someone saying that to you in Arabic.)

Then, when she came back with the blue truck, we said, "Yes, that's a truck, all right. You are so smart. This is a blue truck. Can you find the *red* one?"

Always patient, gentle, and supportive—who would lose temper with a baby who did not understand perfectly?—we rejoiced in her proximate triumph, correcting gently any mistake or partial mistake.

Meantime, Katherine was not speaking in sentences. She was mapping syntax and vocabulary in her mind without producing anything more than sounds and isolated words, and that was okay. No parent of a year-old child is running to the pediatrician wailing, "Doctor, my baby can't talk."

FOR A BABY, WORDS ARE POWERFUL

Finally the day arrived when Katherine said her first word. It was not "book," as we had hoped. ("Book" was her older sister's first word, and we trust it augurs well for her scholastic future.) Holding up her baby cup, she uttered her first "real" word. Loud and clear, the word was "mulkie." For a nanosecond, all family activity froze. We were riveted to our chairs. All eyes turned toward her in amazement and delight. Suddenly, her mother, father, sister, brothers erupted in a frenzy of excitement.

"Katherine said, 'mulk,' I mean, 'milk'! Did you hear that? Give her some milk!!"

We gathered round her, rejoicing, called Grandma long-distance, and tried to get her to say it again.

Are you beginning to picture a similar scene in your own history and what it might have been like? Notice that we did not correct Katherine's pronunciation before we rewarded her with the beverage she was asking for and with lots of hugs and smiles and clapping. Chances are your parents and your sisters and brothers did the same for you. You did not mind making a few mistakes along the way ("Her

go out"), and you were not worried about getting it perfectly, because the people around you seemed to be so pleased that you were even trying. They were willing to meet you halfway or more to figure out the meaning with you. Words had power: you said "milkie," you got milk; you said "blankie," someone brought you a blanket. If you had waited until you got the syntax and pronunciation perfect before you even attempted to speak out loud, you would be mute today.

I hope you cherish that time, because that was it. That was probably the very last time in your learning cycle that you were allowed the luxury of assimilating before producing, the last time that you were allowed to provide proximate results and get rewarded for it with great glee and enthusiasm. The silent time of thinking it through before producing is limited to babyhood and first speech.

Then you started school. In first grade, maybe you wanted to write a little story about a mouse on a motorcycle. But you did not know how to spell *motorcycle*, so you made the mouse ride a *bike*. At least you did not have to worry about getting your paper back with a red mark on the misspelled word. But somehow it was not quite the same story that you had in your heart.

We make choices in our adult life based on the same sort of reasoning. It is safer not to try anything. I know college graduates who had wanted to major in history, for example, and were fascinated by historical events, but had rejected it as a field of study because "there were too many papers to write." Or how about the adult who wants to pursue a law career but decides against it because of all the writing involved? Decisions like these, which limit our choices, go back to the first grade when your teacher was standing over your paper with the red pen.

So if you want to know how you learned to express yourself in written communication, think back not to your native speaking education but to the first term of high school German or French or Spanish or whatever other foreign language you took.

"Repeat after me," says the fluent teacher on day one. You attempt to repeat, the teacher corrects, you repeat again, your confidence wanes, your face reddens, the class laughs.

That is how we teach writing. And why, for many of us, as fluent as we might feel in talking, writing is like a foreign language.

MORE BAD NEWS

Since writing is taught, there are rules and regulations we pick up along the way that are meant to guide us but often wind up thwarting us instead. For example, I had an English professor in college who was fond of quoting *Alice in Wonderland* when students asked him how to go about writing this or that paper.

"Begin at the beginning, go on until you come to the end, and then stop," he said.

So that became my motto, my personal creed, and I suffered and agonized under the belief that step by logical step was the only right way to approach writing. It took me many years to realize that the process of writing does not always go that way; to try to pretend that it does is to impose an artificiality on your words that need not be there. Sometimes you need to begin in the middle and go back to the beginning and then write the end and then stop. Often you do not even know how the thing best begins until you have figured out the end.

The advent of personal computers and word-processing programs has helped immensely to give writers freedom in this regard. Even the simplest word processor program can "cut and paste," allowing you to rearrange sentences and whole paragraphs. We no longer feel compelled to think in terms of a finished product. Even if you do not own a personal computer, though, the lesson is clear: allow yourself to write in the order that things occur to you and then cut and paste, literally or electronically, later. (Rapidwriting, explained in the next chapter, shows you how to do that easily; appendix 2 deals with whole-brained writing with a word processor.)

WRITING IS TAUGHT—THE GOOD NEWS

Since writing does not come naturally, since it is, as I say, a learned experience, the good news is that we are always learning. It is not a fait accompli in the fifth grade, after which we spend the rest of our lives perfecting what we already know and learning the jargon of our trade. If, instead, we see learning how to write as a never-ending story, all kinds of possibilities open up. We have never arrived; there is always so much more to learn. Reading this book and doing the exercises is learning more about yourself and about writing.

Be like the man who was lost in Manhattan. He could not find Carnegie Hall. Finally, he spotted an elderly Hungarian carrying a huge cello case. Surely he would know where Carnegie Hall was. He approached him timidly.

"Excuse me, sir, could you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?"

The cello player put down his large case and, punching the air with his hands for emphasis, announced, "Practiz! Practiz! Practiz!"

NOT BAD FOR AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD

Anne lives in Missoula, Montana. Her whole life has been one new learning experience after another. She greets each new adventure, whether it is becoming a plumber or studying the violin, with a positive attitude, an "I-can-do-it" spirit. Once I asked her what her secret is. She told me that whenever she finds herself doing something new, she thinks of herself as a little kid who is learning that task for the first

time, rather than putting adult pressure on herself to perform. Instead of lambasting herself, for example, with "What's the matter with me? Here I am at my age, and I don't even know how to change the oil in my car," she pictures herself standing by her dad as a little kid learning it for the first time. And when she comes even close to doing it right, she exclaims, "Not bad for an eight-year-old!"

When you consider that writing is only nine cosmic seconds old, then it is not unfair to see yourself, in some aspects of your writing at least, as a little kid. Give yourself credit for all the good writing that you already do. In the light of these particulars, it is not so surprising that we have anxiety about our writing. The wonder is that we do it at all. So pat yourself on the back for all that you have written, and recognize that writing is a growing thing, a learning experience. It is going to keep getting better and better. The more you write, the better you get at it. Practiz! Practiz! Practiz! and you will get to Carnegie Hall. Meantime, it's not bad for an eight-year-old.

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