INTRODUCTION

Between 1977 and 1998—twenty-one years—I taught in one of the most noteworthy graduate writing programs in the United States, working term after term with aspiring young writers as they tried to get a grip on the elusive craft of fiction. For eight of those years, while simultaneously continuing to teach full-time, I served as the program's chair. For over two decades, then, without once missing even a single semester, I spent much of my energy thinking and talking about the craft of fiction in a perpetually renewed and perpetually changing dialogue with some of the most promising young writers of their several generations. I worked one-on-one with many hundreds of gifted people, and I have since had the quiet pleasure of seeing many among them emerge as the leading younger writers of our era. During those twenty-one years, I read thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of manuscripts in every stage of completion. I edited. I admired. I argued. I advised. I praised. I questioned. I doubted. I shut my mouth and hoped. I did my best to help people test their talent and find their way, struggling through what seemed to be
nature about technique reaches far beyond a small cluster of interested technicians, and it always has. Homer addressed a wider audience than just other poets. Shakespeare surely put interchanges on dramatic technique into his plays because he knew they would touch his larger audience. The craft of writing is bound to the experience of literacy and language itself. All of us are involved, consciously and unconsciously, in the way language is bound to all communication. All of us are involved, somehow, in how our thoughts and imaginings find focus. And while not everyone is a writer, every reader is a collaborator in the way any book is written, an active partner in a participatory event. Lots of people muse about writing even though they will never write a word. They are interested in what triggers the creative spirit; in how inspiration can be tapped and used; in how one gets hold of some nameless something in the mind and puts it out in the world as language, clear and knowable. That is the quiet drama that goes on every day at every writer’s desk, and it is always a little fable, waiting to be told. Interest in it is expressed at every level of the culture, from Henry James’s prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels to the talk show hostess asking her writer guests about how they do it.

I have tried to present here a loose intuitive consensus on the basics of the craft. Consensus of course incorporates, and sometimes masks, dissent. Some people—you may be one—may well disagree with some of the things said here. Maybe many things. Rest assured, there is some notable figure somewhere who could be found to take vocal and irritated exception to every single insight in this book. Yet on most of the big issues—the “invention” of a story, the development of characters, the honing of a style, the interior logic of “invention” itself—there seems to be more common ground among writers than even I expected to find when I started out.

But there are no rules. Please remember that. There are no rules. The moment some precept or other obstructs your path rather than opens it, you must stride right past it. The moment some opinion acts to stifle your work rather than help it onto the page, you must banish its power.

This is a writer’s guide, not a reader’s. In my “Postscript,” I’ve added some thoughts about a number of the classic books on literary craft—but there is no reading list here. I have taken my illustrations mainly from familiar classics and from works such as The Great Gatsby or The Catcher in the Rye, stuff that I’m pretty confident almost every reader will already know. I cite them not because I think they are the last word, but because they are illustrative and ubiquitously known. In choosing the writers to comment on how to handle this or that technical issue, I have merrily disregarded every distinction between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow taste. I see no reason not to mix Elmore Leonard with Henry James and J. K. Rowling with Proust. For one thing, surely any free reader’s taste will embrace work at all these levels. More to the point, I have zero interest in propounding a manual of “good taste” or in adding even one more syllable to the interminable discussion of “the canon.” I want this book to be useful, if possible, to any writer who happens to pick it up, whatever the real or imagined pitch of her or his “brow.” I have been struck from the beginning by the wonderfully reckless way the issues of craft cut straight across the dreary distinctions of literary class, and frankly, that’s fine with me. There seems to be something democratic in technique.

How you use the book will of course depend on you. My suggestion is that you breeze through once, noticing especially what excites you, what stirs you with the simple thought: I could do that! or what calls out Hey! Use me! Note what works and skip quickly through what perplexes you. Some things won’t touch you—yet. Leave them for later. There’s plenty of time. If you’re a writer, you are going to be returning to these technical questions endlessly, for years to come. If you find this book useful once, you are likely to find it useful twice.
That's because all growth is a kind of superior beginning again. The Modern Library Writer's Workshop is clearly addressed to novice writers, but I hope its value does not exhaust itself at the beginner's level. I hope that colleagues at every stage of development will find something useful here. Writers' lives, most of them, move in phases, and each new phase of a creative life will necessarily entail a kind of a new start, and with it very possibly new craft, too. Beginning again is hard, and it can be frightening. We never begin again at the old starting point and rarely reach the old answers. To experience this uncertainty at any stage of life is troubling—but it is also a great and wonderful thing. We are speaking about the uncertainty of promise, the anxious tentative hope out of which everything of value must come. It may be that anyone experiencing that hope, at any stage of her or his working life, will find something useful in these few words to the wise.
The only way to begin is to begin, and begin right now. If you like, begin the minute you finish reading this paragraph. For sure, begin before you finish reading this book. I have no doubt the day is coming when you will be wiser or better informed or more highly skilled than you are now, but you will never be more ready to begin writing than you are right this minute. The time has come. You already know, more or less, what a good story looks like. You’ve already got in mind some human situation that matters to you. You need nothing more. Begin with whatever gives you the impetus to begin: an image, a fantasy, a situation, a memory, a motion, a set of people—anything at all that arouses your imagination. The job is only to get some or all of this into words able to reach and touch an unknown, unseen somebody “out there” known as the Reader. You must plunge into it. And you must do it now.

It would be nice, I suppose, to begin at the perfect point in the story, in the perfect way, using the perfect voice to present exactly the desired scene. Unfortunately, you have no choice but to be wholly clueless about all of this. The rightness of things is
Mr. Amis, “seems to me to be an exact description of writer’s block. In the common view, the writer is at this stage so desperate that he’s sitting around with a list of characters, a list of themes, and a framework for his plot, and ostensibly trying to mesh the three elements. In fact, it’s never like that. What happens is what Nabokov described as a throb. A throb or a glimmer, an act of recognition on the writer’s part. At this stage the writer thinks, Here is something I can write a novel about.” Isak Dinesen used to say much the same: “I start with a tingle, a kind of feeling of the story I will write. Then come the characters, and they take over, they make the story. But all this ends by being a plot.” Robert Penn Warren began the same way. “Any book I write starts with a flash. . . .” A “throb.” A “tingle.” A “flash.” Pretty flimsy stuff. Most people have spent a lifetime shunting shimmers like that out of their minds. Now you must recognize them as a call to action, as a promise of what is to come. And you must sit down and write. It doesn’t even really matter if you feel like writing. As Tom Wolfe says, “Sometimes, if things are going badly, I will force myself to write a page in half an hour. I find that can be done. I find that what I write when I force myself is generally just as good as what I write when I’m feeling inspired. It’s mainly a matter of forcing yourself to write. There’s a marvelous essay that Sinclair Lewis wrote on how to write. He said that most writers don’t understand that the process begins by actually sitting down.” Joyce Carol Oates agrees: “One must be pitiless about this matter of ‘mood.’ In a sense, the writing will create the mood. . . . Generally I’ve found this to be true. I have forced myself to begin writing when I’ve been utterly exhausted, when I’ve felt my soul as thin as a playing card, when nothing has seemed worth enduring for another five minutes . . . and somehow the activity of writing changes everything.”
McClellan refusing to advance (as people said) until the last mule was shod. . . . In every research there comes a point, which you should recognize like a call of conscience, when you must get down to writing. And once you are writing, go on writing as long as you can; there will be plenty of time later to shove in the footnotes or return to the library for extra information.

"But"—you may say—"I don't even know my story yet." My answer is: "Of course you don't know your story yet." You are the very first person to tell this story ever, anywhere in the whole world, and you cannot know a story until it has been told. First you tell it; then you know it. It is not the other way around. That may sound illogical, but to the narrating mind, it is logic itself. Stories make themselves known, they reveal themselves—even to their tellers—only by being told. You may ask how on earth you can tell a story before you know it. You do that by letting the emerging story tell itself through you. As you tell it, you let the story give you your cues about where it is going to go next. At first, you must feel your way, letting it be your guide. You may eventually be able to plan the whole scope of the work down to its smallest details, as J. K. Rowling is said to have done with all her Harry Potter books. But in the very first phase of its creation, any story must be teased out from the shadows of your imagination and unconscious. As Isabel Allende says, the story is "hidden in a very somber and secret place where I don't have any access yet. It is something that I've been feeling but which has no shape, no name, no tone, no voice." It is waiting for you, untold, undefined, and latent. It will take shape only when you put it into words. So start putting it into words. As Allende concludes, "By the time I've finished the first draft, I know what the book is about. But not before."

Since you have no choice but to begin in uncertainty, you must learn to tolerate uncertainty and, if possible, to turn it into excitement. As Toni Morrison puts it: "I am profoundly excited by thinking up or having the idea in the first place . . . before I begin to write . . . it's a sustained thing I have to play with. I always start out with an idea, even a boring idea, that becomes a question I don't have any answers to."

Most writers start out uncertainly with a small thing called the "germ," or the "seed" of the story. That "germ," as E. L. Doctorow points out, can be anything. "It can be a voice, an image; it can be a deep moment of personal desperation. For instance, with Ragtime I was so desperate to write something, I was facing the wall of my study in my house in New Rochelle and so I started to write about the wall. That's the kind of day we sometimes have, as writers. Then I wrote about the house that was attached to the wall. It was built in 1906, you see, so I thought about the era and what Broadview Avenue looked like then: Trolley cars ran along the avenue down at the bottom of the hill; people wore white clothes in the summer to stay cool. Teddy Roosevelt was president. One thing led to another, and that's the way that book began, through desperation to those few images."

Writers use all kinds of metaphors to describe the way their imagination is originally aroused. Tom McGuane says it makes him feel like a hunting dog snapping alert, catching the scent. "When I start something it's like being a bird dog getting a smell; it's a matter of running it down in prose and then trying to figure out what the thing is that's out there." In the prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels, Henry James tells the many little tales of how each of his classic works began as some sudden impression, something "minute and windblown . . . the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo, at the touch of which the novelist's imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point . . ." Patricia Highsmith notes that story ideas "can be little or big, simple or complex, fragmentary or rather complete, still or moving. The important thing is to recognize them when they come. I recognize them by a certain excitement which they instantaneously bring, akin to the pleasure and excitement of a good poem or line in a poem." The "throb" can come to you as a whole
story, but more often it will be a fragment. The job, once you've been aroused, is to expand your excitement: to let it grow, take on substance.

While you cannot force ideas into existence, you can coax them into view. When you first notice some exciting fragment, your impulse may be to brush it aside. It looks so ... so small, so slight. Don't be deceived. What matters is not the idea's size but its resonance. Ray Bradbury has generated stories by simply writing down, in free association, image after image, looking for "a pattern in the list, in these words that I had simply flung forth on paper, trusting my subconscious to give bread, as it were, to the birds. ... Where am I leading you? Well, if you are a writer, or would hope to be one, similar lists, dredged out of the lopside of your brain, might well help you discover you, even as I flopped around and finally found me. I began to run through those lists, pick a noun, and then sit down to write a long prose-poem-essay on it. Somewhere along about the middle of the page, or perhaps on the second page, the prose poem would turn into a story. Which is to say that a character suddenly appeared and said, 'That's me!' or, 'That's an idea I like!' And the character would then finish the tale for me."

But be careful. If you are like me, your first instinct will be to "take control" of a new idea, to assert yourself, to "turn this into something." Yet at this early stage, it may be a mistake to treat your idea too aggressively. The whole process of writing, from first to last, requires that you alternate steadily between a passive, open, daydreaming intuitiveness, followed by worked-out, thought-through, fully developed acts of judgment and control. You must have both, and you must get both to work not against each other but in concert. In the early stages, most developing ideas usually need lots of fertile, nurturing passivity. Something has moved you. You begin to write about it. You sketch. You jot down a chain of fantasies and associations. You dream the dream. You don't know what's coming; you're a vehicle for what's happening on your page, as was Flannery O'Connor when she wrote her great short story "Good Country People." "When I started writing that story, I didn't know there was going to be a Ph.D. with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women I knew something about, and before I realized it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg. I brought in the Bible salesman, but I had no idea what I was going to do with him. I didn't know he was going to steal that wooden leg until ten or twelve lines before he did it, and when I found out that this was what was going to happen, I realized it was inevitable."

We know the original fragmentary image that William Faulkner made into The Sound and the Fury. "[The book] began with a mental picture. I didn't realize at the time it was symbolic. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree, where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place and report what was happening to her brothers on the ground below. By the time I explained who they were and what they were doing and how her pants got muddy, I realized it would be impossible to get all of it into a short story and that it would have to be a book."

Writer after writer speaks of this fragmentary inspiration. William Trevor recalls a glimpse of two people on a train. "I remember being on a train, and I was perhaps walking down to the bar when I noticed a woman and a boy traveling together. He was in his school uniform, and she was clearly in charge of him. I can remember now the fatigue on her face. Afterwards—probably years afterwards—I wrote a story called 'Going Home.'" For John Hersey it was not a chance encounter but a world-historical cataclysm: "I think the first impulse comes from some deep emotion. It may be anger, it may be some sort of excitement. ... To give you an example, the impulse to write The Wall came from seeing some camps in Eastern Europe when I was working as a correspondent in Moscow for Time. ... This came at a time when
the West had not yet known very much about the Holocaust; there had been some vague rumors of the camps, but we had no real pictures of them. To see these bodies, to hear from the people who survived, created a sense of horror and anger in me that made me want to write.” For Eudora Welty, writing her unforgettable story “Powerhouse,” the spur was music: “I wrote it in one night after I’d been to a concert and dance in Jackson where Fats Waller played. I tried to write my idea of the life of the traveling artist and performer—not Fats Waller himself, but any artist—in the alien world and tried to put it in the words and plot suggested by the music I’d been listening to. It was a daring attempt for a writer like me... I’m not qualified to write about music or performers. But trying it pleased me then, and it still does please me.” For Grace Paley, stories can begin simply with one sentence sounding in her head. “It sounds dopey to say that, but it’s true. Very often one sentence is absolutely resonant. A story can begin with someone speaking. ‘I was popular in certain circles,’ for example; an aunt of mine said that, and it hung around in my head for a long time. Eventually I wrote a story, ‘Goodbye and Good Luck,’ that began with that line, though it had nothing to do with my aunt.”

So don’t try to take control of your idea too early. Begin by letting it take control of you. You will be needing all your capacities for organization and judgment and mastery soon enough. For now, let whatever has stirred inside you gain strength. An image is glowing in your mind. A voice keeps nattering in your head. An incident on the street speaks to you. Like O’Connor and Faulkner, be a little passive in your nurturance. Let it become what it is going to be.

But do jot it all down. Use your notebook as a kind of seedbed. Once you’ve learned to recognize the seeds, you’ll probably have more than you can use. With a little tending—sketching, adding, changing, seeing what moves you—some will sprout. Some will grow. Some will even make it to the harvest. How do you choose among them all? That’s simple. Eventually, one idea, properly tended, becomes irresistible and fills the mind.

**WRITING “WHAT YOU KNOW”**

The most familiar of all advice on writing is the old classroom cliché “Write what you know.” It is very much a cliché, and it is going to get rather rough treatment over the course of this book. Yet, like most clichés, it has the residual virtue of being a half-truth. Taken literally, it is nonsense. Applied unimaginatively, it would reduce us all to plodding autobiography. Yet once you have grasped the intimate and magical bond between what you “know” and what you imagine, the old saw does make some sense. Gabriel García Márquez, whom nobody is likely to accuse of undue literalism, says this: “If I had to give a young writer some advice, I would say to write about something that has happened to him; it’s always easy to tell whether a writer is writing about something that has happened to him or something he has read or been told... It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my work comes for the imagination, while the truth is that there’s not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality.” Somerset Maugham said much the same thing: “I have never claimed to create anything out of nothing; I have always needed an incident or a character as a starting point, but I have exercised imagination, invention, and a sense of the dramatic to make it something of my own.”

Yet “write what you know” misleads mainly because all of us “know” much more than we can easily say, and all of us can and do imagine more than we “know.” As E. L. Doctorow says, “Writing teachers invariably tell students, Write about what you know... [B]ut on the other hand, how do you know what you know until you’ve written it? Writing is knowing. What did Kafka know? The insurance business? So that kind of advice is foolish, because it
presumes that you have to go out to a war to be able to do war. Well, some do and some don’t.

Commenting on the need to “write from experience,” Henry James said much the same thing, albeit in his very Henry Jamesian way. “What kind of experience is intended,” James wondered, “and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind…”

Stephen King says much the same thing, except in his way. “I think you begin by interpreting ‘write what you know’ as broadly and inclusively as possible. If you’re a plumber, you know plumbing, but that is far from the extent of your knowledge; the heart also knows things, and so does the imagination.”

As a writer, you are using words to turn your unknown into what you “know.” You are inventing, and reinventing, what you “know.” Edith Wharton summed it up well: “As to experience, intellectual and moral, the creative imagination can make a little go a long way, provided it remains long enough in the mind and is sufficiently brooded upon. One good heartbreak will furnish the poet with many songs, and the novelist with a considerable number of novels. But they must have hearts that can break.”

The key is to move on steadily from what you know, be it ever so little. Suppose you begin with a situation or character taken straight from real life. How do you turn that reality into fiction? This is a big subject, and we are going to explore it carefully in chapter 6. For the moment, John Irving has some sound advice. Starting from real material, Irving begins by keeping what he calls a “diary” of that experience. “I begin by telling the truth, by remembering real people, relatives, and friends. The landscape detail is pretty good, but the people aren’t quite interesting enough—they don’t have quite enough to do with one another; of course, what unsettles me and bores me is the absence of plot… And so I find a little something that I exaggerate, a little; gradually, I have an autobiography on its way to becoming a lie. The lie, of course, is more interesting. I become more interested in the part of the story I’m making up, in the ‘relative’ I never had. And then I begin to think of a novel; that’s the end of the diary. I promise I’ll start another one as soon as I finish the novel. Then the same thing happens; the lies become much more interesting—always.”

WHERE TO FIND YOUR STORY

When you’re in doubt about where to find a story, try childhood. If you have a strong imagination, you’ll soon move beyond your own experience of it, but it’s a good place to begin. Childhood is, in every sense, the cradle of narrative. If you’re uncertain about a beginning, here is Anne Lamott’s advice: “Plug your nose and jump in, and write down all your memories as truthfully as you can. Flannery O’Connor said that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life.” Richard Price, a very different writer, offers the same advice. “As I always told my students, ‘We all grow up with ten great stories about our families, our childhoods… they probably have nothing to do with the truth of things, but they’re yours. You know them. And you love them. So use them!’ And that’s what I did. That’s what I reached for, to become a writer.”

INVENTING YOUR STORY

Many novices simply freeze, terrified, at the thought of “making up” a story. We’ll discuss that freeze-up at length in chapter 3, but let’s get one basic thought into play right now. You can make up a story only by finding it, and you can find a story only by making it
The Latin root of the word *invent* means "to find." And since you cannot know what you have to say until you have said it, writers of both fiction and nonfiction "invent" through "finding." They find their voices, find their characters, find their own persona. Another way to put this is that there are many ways of knowing things. Yes, you "know" what you can easily articulate right now. But you also "know" what you only obscurely sense, what you have not yet articulated; you "know" what you intuit prior to language; you "know" what you can only vaguely and distantly feel, what is out of your grasp, what you must dig to reach or even touch. This is where you will find your story. The germ is only the visible tip of something big buried inside you, your first glimpse of what is to be. The whole will emerge feeling as though it were already inside you, already present to your imagination.

Stephen King compares stories to fossils and thinks stories need to be as much dug up as made up. "Stories aren't souvenir T-shirts or GameBoys. Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered preexisting world." They are dug up in the shadow region between fabrication and discovery.

Here are some of the most essential tools for digging.

**Provide Motivation.** Every story *is* what its characters *do*. Therefore, you have to show us only secondarily what your characters are like, or what they *look* like, or what they *feel* like. You must show us what they do.

They will not act without a motivation. As Kurt Vonnegut shrewdly points out, motivation is *the* point of entry into every story. "When I used to teach creative writing, I would tell the students to make their characters want something right away, even if it's only a glass of water. Characters paralyzed by the meaninglessness of modern life still have to drink water from time to time." Motivation leads to conflict, and conflict is the key to drama. Vonnegut goes on: "When you exclude plot, when you exclude anyone's wanting anything, you exclude the reader, which is a mean-spirited thing to do. You can also exclude the reader by not telling him immediately where the story is taking place, and who the people are [and what they want]. And you can put him to sleep by never having characters confront each other. Students like to say that they stage no confrontations because people avoid confrontations in modern life. 'Modern life is so lonely,' they say. This is laziness. It's the writer's job to stage confrontations, so the characters will say surprising and revealing things, and educate and entertain us all. If a writer can't or won't do that, he should withdraw from the trade."

Ray Bradbury also calls motivation the key to story. "My characters write my stories for me. They tell me what they want, and I tell them to go get it, and I follow as they run, working at my typing as they rush to their destiny. Montag, in Fahrenheit 451, wanted to stop burning books. Go stop it! I said. He ran to do just that. I followed, typing. Ahah, in Moby Dick, wanted to chase and kill a whale. He rushed raging off to do so. Melville followed, writing the novel with a harpoon on the flesh of the damned whale!"

There's a story inside every motive, because wanting something invariably has a result, some kind of outcome. That result may be nothing more than pure frustration—but then the frustration will have some outcome. In any case, the wish will lead to a result, and therein lies, always, some sort of tale, a path to narrative, and a route to the end.

The *kind* of motive and the nature of its outcome are entirely up to the writer. That's what gives the art its metaphysics and magic. It can be comic or tragic, silly or sublime, cataclysmic or microscopic, and depicting it is how the artist experiences and finds her or his style and identity.

**Look for a Beginning—or an End.** Better yet, both. A story—any story—recounts a sequence of events. Those events
happen in time. You do not have to begin at the literal beginning of the sequence. The ancients advised beginning in medias res, in the middle of things. But you must begin somewhere. Once you’ve begun, you must proceed to some end. Some strong sense of where to begin, accompanied sooner or later by a strong sense of where to end, has to play a very large role shaping whatever you write. Even writers who begin their stories with nothing more than a phrase sense that it is a beginning phrase, a phrase that impels them to what follows.

Intuition counts for everything here. Obviously, you cannot be logically certain that a given moment begins or ends a story before you yourself know exactly what the story is. You’ve got to feel the rightness of the thing. You won’t be able to prove that sense of “rightness” until you are done and the tale told. But do trust it. Stick with it. Let it be your navigating star.

The search for that feeling can be hard work. As Philip Roth explains, “Beginning a book is unpleasant. I’m entirely uncertain about the character and the predicament, and a character in his predicament is what I have to begin with. Worse than not knowing your subject is not knowing how to treat it, because that’s finally everything. I type out beginnings and they’re awful, more of an unconscious parody of my previous book than the breakaway from it that I want. I need something driving down the center of a book, a magnet to draw everything to it—that’s what I look for during the first months of writing something new. I often have to write a hundred pages or more before there’s a paragraph that’s alive. Okay, I say to myself, that’s your beginning, start there; that’s the first paragraph of the book. I’ll go over the first six months of work and underline in red a paragraph, a sentence, sometimes no more than a phrase, that has some life in it, and then I’ll type all these out on one page.”

It is almost the same with endings. Sometimes an ending will occur to you before the beginning. Good. Once you have a last scene or last line glowing in your mind, you can start writing toward it. There are many short-story writers who don’t start work until they have their end. Katherine Anne Porter was one: “If I didn’t know the ending of a story, I wouldn’t begin. I always write my last lines, my last paragraph, my last page first, and then I go back and work towards it. I know where I’m going. I know what my goal is. And how I get there is God’s grace.”

YOU AND YOUR NOTEBOOKS

You prepare in your notebook, both before and while you do the main work. You should be “preparing” all the time, and “preparing” for more than one project. A writer should always be writing. At any given moment in your writing life, some main project should be on the front burner. But other possibilities should also be brewing on that back burner of the literary life, your notebook.

“A writer,” as Paul Johnson says, “should not see his craft solely in terms of particular books or projects. The input must be continuous. All is grist to the mill. A writer must train himself to observe and to record. It is essential he keep notebooks, and always have one in his pocket. The rule must be: Write it down instantly. Never trust your memory. Get it on paper. If you see something in a newspaper or magazine, clip it, not tomorrow but now....”

Opinion among writers is somewhat divided about notebooks and their usefulness. “At one time,” Truman Capote claimed, “I used to keep notebooks with outlines for stories. But I found doing this somehow deadened the idea in my imagination. If the notion is good enough, if it truly belongs to you, then you can’t forget it—it will haunt you till it’s written.” Dorothy Parker, a blocked writer, could never make up her mind whether to keep a notebook or not. Frank McCourt, a once-blocked writer who came spectacularly unblocked with Angela’s Ashes, warns eloquently
against the danger of using notebooks as a substitute for the work itself. “I retired from teaching in 1987. By then I was fifty-seven, and I was still poking at this book, still trying to write it—I had notebooks, notebooks, notebooks—and not knowing what ailed me. The paradox is that I used to tell my students ... ‘Forget about writing. Just scribble, scribble, scribble. scribble. Put down anything. Write honestly. Write from your own point of view and your own voice, and it eventually takes form. There’s no such thing as writer’s block.’ So why didn’t I go home and do it myself? Why didn’t I just tell my story naturally? With all these notebooks piling up, and the tremendous desire to write this book, and knowing that if I hadn’t written it I would have died an unhappy man?”

These are wise words of warning. Writers love to procrastinate, and notebooks are among their favorite places to do it. Scribbling in a notebook feels so much like real writing. Once you grasp that a notebook is most useful after you’ve begun the main text, the danger diminishes a little. Yet you will need your notebooks. The fantasy that you will remember whatever is important enough without notes is just that: a fantasy. Anne Lamott explains, “I used to think that if something was important enough, I’d remember it until I got home, where I could simply write it down in my notebook ....”

“I have never been blocked,” says Lorrie Moore, “never lost faith (or never lost it for longer than necessary, shall we say), never not had ideas and scraps sitting around in notebooks or on Post-its adhered to the desk edge ... ” Whenever a story idea flickers through your mind, jot it down. Not later. Now. Once it’s jotted down, don’t forget it. Schedule time for your notebooks. Some ideas will keep their vitality, and some will die on the vine. But the only place they can germinate and grow is on the page. Your notes may at first seem almost random—too random for use. But if you’re alert, these traces of your excitement will sooner or later begin to form a mosaic that reveals your enduring preconscious interests. Nabokov once remarked that most of his novels emerged from seeing the pattern in a cluster of seemingly unrelated images. The editor and agent Betsy Lerner says: “If you are struggling with what you should be writing, look at your scraps. Encoded there are the times and subjects that you should be grappling with as a writer.”

Once you see that an idea is persistent enough to be really important for you, start a separate notebook for it. If you work only on the computer, start a separate folder. Put into it every idea, every insight, every scrap of research, and every meandering random phrase that forms itself in your mind. If you use a paper notebook, make it not loose-leaf but bound: You are not going to throw out anything. Even if something looks like a foolish mistake now, cross it out with a couple of thin lines. You may
change your mind. If you find you have started shaping real sentences in your head, be sure to get them down, too. You may find you're writing the story even before you begin. It's wonderful what can suddenly emerge from a random jotting. "Never throw away a story with a good story line, even in synopsis," Patricia Highsmith advised. "Novelists—most of them—have a lot of ideas that are brief and minor, that cannot or should not be made into books. They may make good or spectacularly good short stories." She adds, "Write down all those slender ideas. It is surprising how often one sentence, jotted in a notebook, leads immediately to a second sentence. A plot can develop as you write notes. Close the notebook and think about it for a few days—and then presto! You're ready to write a short story."

**SHORT STORY OR NOVEL?**

If you are a novice, you will probably begin by writing short stories, assuming that once you have mastered the short story form, you'll graduate to writing a novel. This is a perfectly natural thought. It is also a little misleading. The short story has a close and obvious kinship to the novel, but a transition from one form to the other is neither obligatory nor inevitable. Not every novelist has a gift for the short form, and there are many short story writers who are not natural novelists. Raymond Carver moved from short stories not to the novel but to lyric poetry. Anton Chekhov himself, often seen as the greatest among the founders of the modern short story, made the transition not to novels but to plays.

In fact, the short story and the novel are very different forms. Both are, to be sure, narrative prose, but they often narrate very different kinds of things. Every novel must provide some account of a sequence of events. Movement and change are its essence. A short story, like a lyric poem, may be comparatively static. It may use its narrative as much to establish and fortify an image as to follow the tale to its dramatic outcome.

Let me illustrate with Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Let's try to reconceive that great lyric as a short story. The poem could be a short story. It has everything a short story needs. It has a setting: those freezing, voluptuously enticing woods. It has its moment: "the darkest evening of the year." Though the poem is a meditation on solitude, it has a number of characters. There's the man stopping by the woods. There's his horse. There's the owner of the woods—the one whose house is in the village. And there is some person or persons to whom the traveler has made some promises that must be kept. The traveler also has a destination. It is miles away but near enough to reach tonight. Above all, there's a conflict. The traveler wants to stay where he is, rapt in all that is "lovely, dark and deep." Yet he feels pulled away by his obligations. The poem has all the elements of a story collapsed within a single murmuring image.

Transformed into a story, all this could easily begin and end with that image, exactly as the poem does. The traveler stops to look and then resolves, reluctantly, to go ahead. The essential structure could remain: first, stopping; then silent rapture; then conflict—those promises—followed by an outcome: the decision to proceed. But it would all be more amply shown. We'd learn more about how the traveler is so touched by the freezing, all-but-silent nocturnal vision; we'd be given more about his promises and the person or persons to whom they were made. We'd get information, living information, about how hard it is to break away from the cold, uninhabited depths of the woods and start covering the miles ahead. In short, we would know more about everything, and especially more about the conflict. But structurally, the poem and the story might look very much alike.

A novel based on this poem would tell us a great deal more, and it would give us a sequence of events that would not be contained within the embrace of a single image. In a novel, the
poem's one long moment, the stop by the woods, would be a single scene. It might be a great scene. It could be the first scene in the novel—but it wouldn't have to be. It might appear in the middle, or be the final scene. Each different placement would make a very different book. Meanwhile, as the novel progressed, we would learn a lot more about the traveler, and a whole lot more about his promises. We would be drawn, through drama, into his troubled resolve to keep them. Moreover, the conflict's center of gravity would shift, probably quite emphatically, away from the traveler's purely internal debate. We would see the whole problem between him and those to whom he owes whatever he owes. The conflict would slip loose from the confines of a single image. The characters on both sides would be vivid and alive: We would see and hear them, like or dislike them, and feel that we know them, clearly grasping what they want, and why. We would be pulled into their problems, maybe even tempted to choose sides. We would certainly be asked to care about the outcome in a way that the poem does not ask us to care about the outcome—and which even a short story might easily shrug off as beside the point.

RULES FOR THE FIRST DRAFT

- Do it. Hemingway said that the only thing that really matters about a first draft is getting it done. You are looking for the sound and shape of a story, and this is the only place you can hope to find them. So get to it
- Do it quickly. Eloquence, according to Cicero, resides in "an uninterrupted movement of the mind," a motus animi continuus. Stephen King, admittedly a wildly prolific writer, claims that writing the first draft of a novel should never absorb more than a single season; three, maybe four, months. If you are writing a short story, write the entire first draft, if possible, in a single sitting. If something has to take up lots of time, let it be the second draft, and then proceed to a finishing draft in a single sustained push, following the rhythm Eudora Welty used to recommend: "My ideal way to write a short story is to write the whole first draft through in one sitting, then work as long as it takes on revisions, and then write the final version all in one, so that in the end the whole thing amounts to one long sustained effort."

You don't have time? Make that time. This is essential. Only you can make and defend the time you need for your work. Nobody is going to give it to you. I know, I know, it's horribly hard. Writing is outrageously time consuming. Of course, if you have an equally time-consuming job or heavy personal responsibilities, you'll be slowed down. But you must make the time or you will not write at all. Simple as that. And be warned: For every writer, at every level of fame and productivity, making and defending writing time is a lifelong battle. It's not just hard now. It will always be hard.

And for the moment, don't even think about perfection. Right now, perfection is your enemy, simply because it is the enemy of getting it down and done. You are going to have to tolerate imperfection, and lots of it. As Anne Lamott says: "Get it all down. Let it pour out of you onto the page. Write an incredibly shifty, self-indulgent, whiny, mewling first draft. Then take out as many of the excesses as you can." You are looking for movement, energy, and a preliminary sense of completion. "Write freely and as rapidly as possible," John Steinbeck advised, "and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is done. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with the flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material."

Let nothing stop you. If you get stuck, write through the prob-
lem, as Christopher Isherwood used to do: “If I get into some nonsense or digressions, I write it through to the end and come out on the other side. I’m not at all perfectionist at first. I do all the polishing in the final draft.” Or follow Steinbeck’s procedure and simply skip over it altogether. “If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it—bypass it and go on. When you have finished the whole, you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is because it didn’t belong there.” Or switch to the notebook and write your way back into the main text as quickly as possible.

In your first draft, simple speed may be the force behind that wholeness and eloquence about which Cicero spoke. But it has other advantages. Honesty is one. Ray Bradbury asks, “What can we writers learn from lizards, lift from birds? In quickness is truth. The faster you blurt, the more swiftly you write, the more honest you are. In hesitation is thought. In delay comes the effort for a style, instead of leaping upon truth which is the only style worth deadfalling or tiger-trapping.”

Speed can also help get you past a writer’s block. Tom Wolfe remembers freezing up over writing a magazine piece for Esquire under its then editor, Byron Dobell. But in the process, he made a breakthrough into his famous style. The piece was to be called “Kustom Kar Kommandoes.” “I suddenly realized I’d never written a magazine article before and I just felt I couldn’t do it. Well, Dobell somehow shamed me into writing down the notes that I had taken in my reporting on the car customizers so that some competent writer could convert them into a magazine piece. I sat down one night and started writing a memorandum to him as fast as I could, just to get the ordeal over with. It became very much like a letter that you write to a friend in which you’re not thinking about style, you’re just pouring it all out, and I churned it out all night long, forty typewritten, triple-spaced pages. I turned it in in the morning to Byron at Esquire; and then I went home to sleep. About four that afternoon I got a call from him telling me, ‘Well, we’re knocking the “Dear Byron” off the top of your memo, and we’re running the piece.’ That was a tremendous release for me.”

Russell Banks sees yet another advantage: “From the beginning I’ve found that I have to sneak past the internal censor who basically wants me to shut up and be silent, and the best way for me to get something said has been to move real fast. The faster I can write, the more likely I’ll get something worth saving down…”

Fast or slow, once your first draft is done, be ready for it to be bad. Some parts may give you a pleasant surprise over how good they are, and the whole may not turn out to be quite as horrible as you feared during your very worst moments. Even so, it’s going to be bad. Do not let that badness bother you. Use the badness. I once heard Philip Roth tell a crowded roomful of writing students that, when it came to sheer stinking lousiness, he would match his first drafts against those of any writer in the place. Your own first draft will probably be ragged, inarticulate, blundering, dull, and full of gaping holes and blank spots—a mortifying mess. Use every mistake. The inarticulate parts point to where you must make the words say exactly what you mean. The ragged parts point to what you must polish. The gaping holes tell you what has to be filled. The dull parts tell you unfailingly what must be cut. The blank spots show exactly what you must go out and find. These are infallible guides, and though they talk tough, they are your friends.

**TRANSGRESSION AND PERMISSION, IMITATION AND ORIGINALITY**

A beginner’s chief enemy, on the other hand, is usually lack of confidence, and almost all writers suffer from that lack, over and over, most of their lives. Some books on writing—Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, for example, or Dorothea Brande’s dated but excellent *Becoming a Writer*—face this psychological issue head-on.
and in depth, and they offer many useful ways of dealing with it. I recommend both. Remember that you are not alone: Every writer—well, almost every writer—has suffered from problems of confidence, and some of the greatest have endured nothing short of agony. If it is any reassurance, I can tell you that with experience and time, the problem does get a little better. Yet it never goes away. It can be handled, but not banished. The get-down truth is that to write, you have to develop a tolerance for anxiety. Steel yourself. Be brave. "Courage, first," says Maya Angelou, "... the most important of all the virtues. Without that virtue you can't practice any other virtue with consistency." Katherine Anne Porter would have agreed: "One of the marks of a gift is to have the courage of it. If they haven't got the courage, it's just too bad. They'll fail, just as people with lack of courage in other vocations and walks of life fail. Courage is the first essential."

Of course, courage is a gift, and some people have more of it than others. Yet, like talent itself, courage can be recognized, developed, and encouraged. How? Most writers feel a baffling, seemingly contradictory mix of petulant, almost blind self-will swimming in a pool of yearning need for permission. In truth, you will be needing both: both go-it-alone brashness and the consent of peers. Writers need both some kind of permission to go ahead, and the will to go forge ahead even without that permission. As Toni Morrison says, "When I read women's biographies and autobiographies, even accounts of how they got started writing, almost every one of them had a little anecdote which told about the moment someone gave them permission to do it. A mother, a husband, a teacher... somebody said, 'Okay, go ahead—you can do it.' Which is not to say that men have never needed that; frequently when they are very young, a mentor says, 'You're good,' and they take off."

Well, men and women writers both need some credible sign of consent and permission to produce. Both badly need to hear just that simple statement of faith: "Go ahead—you can do it." Getting and meriting that basic support—and avoiding situations that undermine it—should play no small role in how you arrange your life. You will need to find and trust people—teachers, mentors, friends, spouses, partners, and lovers—who are unequivocally on your side. Not stupidly on your side, not uncritically. Unequivocally. Blind or uncritical support can only damage you. But you must have support, and it must be unfeigned.

You will need mentors, and you will need to find them both in your daily life and in books. Hemingway pointed out that he had spent his youth learning from everyone he could, living or dead. Listen to how Gabriel García Márquez began: "One night at college a friend lent me a book of short stories by Franz Kafka. I went back to the pension where I was staying and began to read The Metamorphosis. The first line almost knocked me off the bed, I was so surprised. The first line reads, 'As Gregor Samsa awoke that morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect...'. When I read the line I thought to myself that I didn't know that anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago."

Note García Márquez's exact words: "I didn't know that anyone was allowed to write things like that..." I cannot tell you how many people have sat in my office astonished to discover that they were allowed to write the way they wanted to write. That it was okay to say what they had seen and thought and imagined. That it was okay to say it their way.

But even as you look for permission, you are unlikely to succeed as a writer unless you learn to cherish and exploit whatever in you is nervy and defiant—the rather transgressive you who insists that no matter what other people want, no matter what other people say you should think, you are going to say what you want to say, in your way or not at all. There are sure to be plenty of forces—some but not all of them internal—pushing you to
The wish to appear original is a form of vanity, and as treacherous a form of vanity as any other. It has wrecked many a talent. García Márquez’s first stories were frankly derivative of Kafka, yet they set their author on a path that made him one of the most strikingly original stylists of his era. The youthful Anton Chekhov taught himself by rewriting, in his own terms, whole stories by Tolstoy and Turgenev—transposing them, as it were, into his own language. Numerous writers—Somerset Maugham and Joan Didion come to mind—recall copying long passages verbatim from favorite writers, learning with every line. The result may be forthrightly aimed at the wastebasket, yet this kind of close encounter offers a wonderful intimacy with the prose.

Finally, let’s admit that this ambition of yours ought to make you a little anxious. Paul Johnson may exaggerate, but not by much: “Writing is a painful trade with a high casualty rate. Most writers end in partial or total failure. They must fight despair in youth, fear in maturity, and the cumulative evidence of declining powers in age.” Who wouldn’t be a little scared? So be daring. You are going to need all the daring you’ve got. You’ll need daring to lead a writer’s risky life. You’ll need daring to avoid the formulaic and the safe. You’ll need daring to keep your freshness and force, and you’ll need daring to say things your way and make yourself heard. Don’t let the butterflies and fears stop you. You are not alone: Whatever their gifts or level of success, most writers spend much of their lives managing the inner drama of confidence. Your business is spinning the dusty straw of your uncertainty and fear into the pure gold of clarity and conviction. It is the task of a lifetime.