

“The Maker’s Eye” by Donald Murray

When beginning writers complete their first draft, they usually read it through to correct typographical errors and consider the job of writing done. When professional writers complete their first draft, they usually feel they are at the start of the writing process. Now that they have a draft, they can begin writing.

That difference in attitude is the difference between amateur and professional, inexperience and experience, journeyman and craftsman. Most productive writers share the feeling that the first draft (and most of those that follow) is an opportunity to discover what they have to say and how they can best say it.

To produce a progression of drafts, each of which says more and says it better, writers have to develop a special reading skill. In school we are taught to read what is on the page. We try to comprehend what authors have said, what they meant, and what are the implications of their words.

The writers of such drafts must be their own best enemy. They must accept the criticism of others and be suspicious of it; they must accept the praise of others and be even more suspicious of it. They cannot depend on others. They must detach themselves from their own page so they can apply both their caring and their craft to their own work.

Detachment is not easy. It takes ego to write. I need to say, "I am here. Listen. I have something important to say." Then, after our egos have produced a draft, we must read when our judgment may be at its worst, when we are close to the euphoric moment of creation. Writers must learn to protect themselves from their own egos.

Just as dangerous as protective writers are do spairing ones, those who think everything they do is terrible, dreadful, awful. If they are to publish, they must save what is effective on the page while cutting away what doesn't work. Writers must hear and respect their own voice.

Remember how each craftsperson you have seen-the carpenter eyeing the level of a shelf, the mechanic listening to the motor-takes the instinctive step back. This is what writers have to do when they read their own work.

It is far easier for most beginning writers to understand the need for rereading and rewriting than it is to understand how to go about it. Published writers don't necessarily break down the various stages of rewriting and editing, they just go ahead and do it.

There is nothing virtuous in the rewriting process. It is simply an essential condition of life for most writers. There are writers who do very little rewriting, mostly because they have the

capacity and experience to create and review a large number of invisible drafts in their minds before they get to the page. And many writers perform all of the tasks of revision simultaneously, page by page, rather than draft by draft. But it is still possible to break down the process of rereading one's own work into the sequence most published writers follow and which beginning writers should follow as they study their own pages.

Seven elements

Many writers just scan their manuscript at first, reading as quickly as possible for problems of subject and form. They stand back from the more technical details of language so they can spot any weaknesses in content or in organization. Each writer works in an individual way, but I know from my studies of the writing process that most writers read their manuscripts as I do, paying close attention to seven key elements of effective writing. The first is subject. Do I have anything to say? If I am lucky, I will find that I do have something to say, often more than I expected. If the subject is not clear, or if it is not yet limited or defined enough for me to proceed, I step back and try to catch the focus of what I may say in a line that may become a title or the first sentence of the piece. If not, I write my way toward meaning with discovery drafts that usually make the subject come clear.

The next point I check is audience. Like most writers, I write first for myself, to explore and then share my world. But the aim of writing is communication, not just self-expression. I ask myself if there is an audience for what I am writing, if anyone will need or enjoy what I have to say.

Form is usually considered after audience. Form, or genre, is the vehicle that will carry what I have to say to my readers, and it should grow out of my subject. If I have a character, my subject may grow into a short story, a magazine profile, a novel, a biography, or a play. It depends on what I have to say and to whom I wish to say it. When I read my manuscript, I ask if the form is suitable, if it works, if it will carry my meaning to my reader.

Once I have the appropriate form, I survey the structure, the order of what I have to say. Every good piece of writing is built on a solid framework of logic or argument or narrative or motivation; it is a line that runs through the entire piece of writing and holds it together. If I read my manuscript and cannot spot this essential thread, I stop writing until I find something to weave my writing together.

The manuscript that has order must also have development. Each part of it must be built in a way that will prepare the reader for the next part. Description, documentation, action, dialogue, metaphor—these and many other devices flesh out the skeleton so that the reader will be able to understand what is written. How much development? That's like asking how much garlic.

It depends on the cook, the casserole, and to whom it is going to be served. This is the question that the writer will be answering as he reads his piece of writing through from beginning to end, and answering it will lead him to the sixth element.

The writer must be sure of his dimensions. This means that there should be something more than structure and development, that there should be a pleasing proportion among all of the parts. I cannot decide on a dimension without seeing all of the parts of writing together. I examine each section of the writing in its relationship to all of the other sections.

Finally, I listen for tone. Any piece of writing is held together by that invisible force, the writer's voice. Tone is my style, tone is all that is on the page and off the page, tone is grace, wit, anger, the spirit that drives a piece of writing forward.

Potentialities and alternatives

When I have a draft that has subject, audience, form, structure, development, dimension, and tone, then I am ready to begin the careful process of line-by-line editing. Each line, each word has to be right.

Now I read my copy with infinite care. I often read aloud, calling on my ear's experience with language. Does this sound right-or this? I read and listen and revise, back and forth from eye to page to ear to page. I find I must do this careful editing at short runs, fifteen or twenty minutes, or I become too kind to myself.

Slowly, I move from word to word, looking through the word to see the subject. Good writing is, in a sense, invisible. It should enable the reader to see the subject, not the writer. Every word should be true-true to what the writer has to say. And each word must be precise in its relation to the words that have gone before and the words that will follow.

This sounds tedious, but it isn't. Making something right is immensely satisfying, and the writer who once was lost in a swamp of potentialities now has the chance to work with the most technical skills of language. And even in the process of the most careful editing, there is the joy of language. Words have double meanings, even triple and quadruple meanings. Each word has its own tone, its opportunity for connotation and denotation and nuance. And when I connect words, there is always the chance of the sudden insight, the unexpected clarification.

The maker's eye moves back and forth from word to phrase to sentence to paragraph to sentence to phrase to word. I look at my sentences for variety and balance in form and structure, and at the interior of the paragraph for coherence, unity and emphasis. I play with figurative language, decide to repeat or not, to create a parallelism for emphasis. I work over my copy until

I achieve a manuscript that appears effortless to the reader.

I learned something about this process when I first wore bifocals. I thought that when I was editing I was working line by line. But I discovered that I had to order special editing glasses, even though the bottom section of my bifocals have a greater expanse of glass than ordinary glasses. While I am editing, my eyes are unconsciously licking back and forth across the whole page, or back to another page, or forward to another page. The limited bifocal view through the lower half of my glasses is not enough. Each line must be seen in its relationship to every other line.

When does this process end? The maker's eye is never satisfied, for he knows that each word in his copy is tentative. Writing, to the writer, is alive, something that is full of potential and alternative, something that can grow beyond its own dream. The writer reads to discover what he has said-and then to say it better.

A piece of writing is never finished. It is delivered to a deadline, torn out of the typewriter on demand, sent off with a sense of frustration and incompleteness. Just as writers know they must stop avoiding writing and write, they also know they must send their copy off to be published, although it is not quite right yet-if only they had another couple of days, just another run at it, perhaps....

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