

Understanding Your Prewriting Process and Freeing Yourself from Guilt

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Back in the 1970s, the community of writing teachers made a gallant effort to look at writing less as a product and more as a process. I think we gave up on that effort far too soon; but one of the topics that caught our eye for a while was the phenomenon that we chose to call “prewriting.” It is a helpful concept for all writers to understand. (You are a writer if you need to write to make your living.) Prewriting is all that you do as a writer before you start to pour forth the words themselves.

We all tend to be creatures of habit. What makes you comfortable enough to start tapping away at the keyboard? Do you clear off the desk to help your mind feel uncluttered? Or instead, do you bring within arm’s length absolutely everything you might need in the writing process, lest you be forced to stand up to get something at some point, ruining your sense of mental flow? Do you need to organize your background noise, either by fleeing from others as much as possible or by surrounding yourself with music that obliterates all other noise? At home, do you write with shoes on or off? Sneakers? Slippers? Arms covered in something comfortable? Sleeveless?

Often, in settling down to write, we find ourselves slipping into the guilt produced by procrastination. Does this soliloquy ring any bells for you? “Now it’s time for me to go write that report. *But first*, I’ll make the cup of coffee that I really need. . . . OK, the coffee’s done; *but first*, I’ll make that phone call and get it off my to-do list. . . . OK, that’s done; *but first*, I should check to see whether that deposit I made at the bank today has cleared

so that I can pay that bill tomorrow. . . . OK, that's done; *but first*, the coffee's gotten cold. Better make a fresh cup."

It can be so astonishingly hard to get yourself to sit down at the keyboard. And the more you delay that moment, the more you might assume that you are just procrastinating — a sure sign of a character weakness. "Thank goodness my colleagues can't see me now."

Well, cast off that sense of guilt. Free yourself by recognizing that you are busily engaging in the prewriting process. Much of the prewriting process has absolutely nothing to do with writing. Hemingway, it is said, used to sharpen precisely 20 pencils every day before writing — and he typed his rough drafts. Anything that carries you from the "I've got to write" moment to the "Here I am writing" moment can be part of the prewriting process — a necessary process. Allow yourself to go through it without the guilt. You'll find that you get down to writing far more easily.

You might find, when you give it some thought, that your prewriting process is far shorter when you are preparing to write an e-mail than it is when you have to write a report. All you may need to do is *read* the other person's e-mail, and off you go, writing. For the report? All sorts of things may be necessary, many of which have nothing to do with gathering the information or talking to the parties concerned.

Let me share my great guilt-freeing prewriting moment. Just by the act of recalling it, I become at first anxious and then remarkably soothed. There I was, in 1979, about to launch into writing my first book. As an assistant professor in Chicago, I was summering in Philadelphia because I was married to a Ph.D. student in neurobiology at the University of Pennsylvania. For my summery writing space, she set me up in a subterranean, beclubicled cinder-block room given over to the department's graduate students. Even they wouldn't use the place. It shared a wall with the medical school's morgue. Massive glass pipes ran overhead, through which the most devastating of acidic liquids

flowed. The antiquated typewriter (no computers yet) was one of the first electric models ever conceived. The place was cold. This was not the place for optimal writing comfort.

But there I sat, every morning at 9:00 a.m., trying to start writing my book. I sat there from 9:00 to 10:00, and then 10:30, and then, thanking goodness, to 11:45, when I could get up and join my wife for lunch at Kelly and Cohen's deli. Nothing written. Not a single word. The afternoon might or might not get a few sentences out of me. This went on for two gut-wrenching, guilt-inducing weeks. I was miserable.

Then, one sunny morning, with the hydrochloric acid flowing overhead, and the dead sleeping peacefully next door, I remembered the newly discovered phenomenon called prewriting. I spent much of that day contemplating this mind-assuaging concept. I reminded myself that I had no problem in "getting going" when I wrote a memo to my writing staff. (I was the director of my university's writing program.) I hardly wasted a moment. It took me longer to get going when I wrote a letter to the dean, but not much longer. However, if I had to write a proposal for a conference presentation, it could take me a good deal of time to get going; and for a publishable article, it might take a half hour or even an hour for me to set about writing.

Given all of this, why *shouldn't* it take me a very long time indeed to begin writing a whole book — whose length and depth I had never before attempted?

So the very next morning, I took my seat in that cinder-block dungeon with a smile on my face. I wasn't going to procrastinate, miserably; instead, I was going to sit there, unperturbed, in complete comfort, as my prewriting process proceeded at its own pace in the cryptlike silence. That day I started typing at 11:15. The next day it was 10:45. Eventually, I could expect that 9:45 would do the trick — 45 minutes of guilt-free calm and silence was all the prewriting I really needed. But insert guilt and exasperation into the waiting, and I might produce nothing all day long.

So be good to yourself. Be kind to yourself. Very few people “can’t wait” to start writing; for most of us, it’s a task that must be undertaken. And the more imposing the document seems to be, the more guilty we feel as we take longer and longer to begin writing. But remember, *not* writing is part of the writing process. Sit there and smile a bit. Enjoy the location. Enjoy the process. Once you get into the writing part, you are likely to float along for a good while. Don’t sweat the start.