

# Moving Away from Transcribing to Inventing

Consuelo C. Salas

---

When working with student writers, I try to communicate to them that it is really through the process of writing that we begin to know what it is that we want to say.

I am not the first person in the history of teaching writing to share this with students. Anne Lamont's piece "Shitty First Drafts" advocates that writers not worry about perfection at the drafting stage. She argues that what is most important is to get something written/typed onto the page.

Versions of this can be seen in free-writing and brainstorming activities where instructors attempt to facilitate a space where students get their ideas out, unencumbered by the need for their writing to be perfect and quieting the negative thoughts about the quality of their writing.

While these previous approaches are useful, I have found Jan Reiman's (2016) work to be most helpful. In her piece, she writes about the "paradox": the reality that writing isn't just mere transcription of our inner thoughts onto the paper, but that through the act of writing that we come to know what we want to say. In short, writing isn't a record of our thoughts, it is a way to clarify them for ourselves and therefore others.

This is a bit of a different approach to writing. Students are sometimes drilled into thinking that they should have a thesis before they begin to write, but I find this to be incredibly cruel and not at all reflective of the invention component of the writing process. Coming to the main points, what I have also called the little nuggets of our writing, is not something we may know of at the start of our writing. Instead, it is through the act of writing that we synergize ideas to uncover what are the main points and connections that we want to make.

## The Benefit of Writing "Out of Order"

With this in mind, it is sometimes shocking and a bit uncomfortable to students when I share that they should write the introduction last, but I follow this up with the idea that we can sit for hours, days, weeks at the introduction and never progress beyond that. It makes entirely too much sense that that would be the case. The introduction is meant to "introduce" the reader to the main points of the paper, but if you start with the introduction, you may not know what those are because you don't yet know what it is that you want to say.

Instead, I tell students to start writing somewhere in the middle. Start writing to uncover your audience and purpose: what do you want to say; what is the point, the "so what?"; who are you directing the message to? Answers to these questions will probably be

hazily known at the outset, but can be refined and clarified through the act of writing. For those who use an outline as part of their writing process, this can also work. When crafting your outline, see it as a general guide and don't feel compelled to adhere to it. As you write, be open to seeing where your thoughts and ideas take you.

A common comment I give students on drafts of their projects is taking what is in the conclusion and moving it towards the introduction because the conclusion can, most times, present the argument much more clearly. This is because it was through the act of writing the paper that students came to realize what they actually wanted to say.

This approach to writing is something I follow. Even in writing this, it wasn't until I'd written a rough "shitty first draft" to a colleague that I realized the purpose I wanted to convey in this piece. While I started with just wanting to convey the paradox of writing, as I wrote I realized that I also wanted to reiterate and reinforce that writing is a recursive process.

### **Taking the Time to Write**

Nonetheless, even writing while knowing that it is a recursive process takes time. It takes time to write what you want to say, and that aspect isn't wasted time. In a world where we are constantly being given messages about efficiency, moving through tasks quickly, my main concern is losing the time to think. Obviously, deadlines and multiple obligations are still a concern and persist in the world; however, if we can come to a place where we understand that part of the writing process is writing to what we want to say, we can build this in and give ourselves the time and space to do that— just as we would any other part of the writing process.

Even if you write and realize what you *don't* want to write, that isn't wasted time; that is still time well spent, as it still got you to the point you *DO* want to focus on. That is time needed to move forward. What can occur is stress and panic when we don't account for the time it takes to write to discover what we want to say. This can compound stress and feeling stuck in the infamous writer's block.

So, when working with students either in my undergraduate courses or in my graduate student thesis and projects, I share that we need to build in time to figure out what you want to say and also then revise projects to then reflect the core idea, purpose.

In short, thinking and generating ideas is hard. The invention process is hard. We are not mere transcriptionists. We write to understand what we want to say. Build in the space and time in your writing process to account for the mental work entailed in this aspect of the process.

## Works Cited

- Lamott, Anne. "Shitty First Drafts." *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*. Edited by Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark. 9th ed. Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005, pp. 93-96.
- Reiman, Jan. "Composing through Distraction: Yes, I Really Write this Way." *RE: Composing: A writing studies journal*. Edited by Julie Cook and Ashlyn Walden. *Fountainhead Press*, 2016, pp. 46–52.